

H.G. WELLS'
THINGS TO COME
an ALEXANDER KORDA Production

Directed by
WILLIAM CAMERON MENZIES

RAYMOND MASSEY · RALPH RICHARDSON
CEDRIC HARDWICKE · MARGARETTA SCOTT
JOHN CLEMENTS

Re-released by British Lion

British Lion Film Corporation Ltd, 75-78 Wurdour St., London, W.1.



THINGS TO COME

Feature by Leone Edwards

Ever since Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) astounded filmgoers around the world with its displays of large-scale special effects, other countries have attempted to duplicate its majesty and breadth of vision, in both physical appearance and profundity of message. The USA forgot the message and brought out *Just Imagine* (1930), an absurdist futuristic musical melodrama, which despite some effects rivalling those of *Metropolis*, gave itself over to sub-Vaudevillian humour. Germany tried to capture an international market with *FP1 Does Not Answer* (1932)

about a floating mid-Atlantic city.

Alexander Korda began making films in Budapest during World War I, and by the age of twenty-five was considered the star producer of Hungary. He soon moved to Vienna and then in 1926 went to Hollywood. There his affairs went sadly awry, his marriage collapsed and he lost his savings in the Wall Street crash. He returned to Europe where his career took a turn for the better, and in 1931 moved to London where he formed London Films.

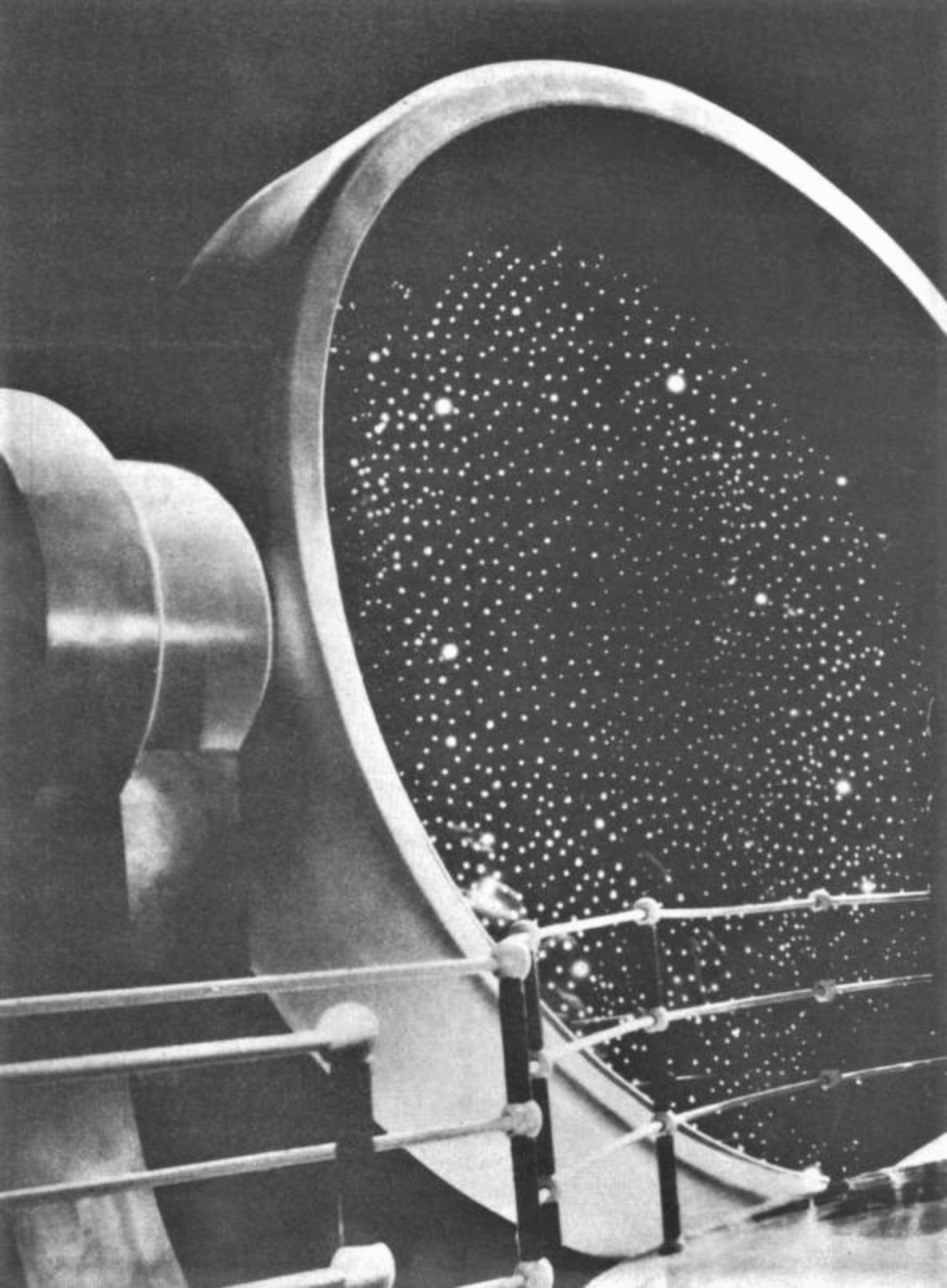
Two years later he was presented with his golden opportunity to move into the

international science fiction market when H. G. Wells published his latest fantasy novel, *The Shape of Things to Come*. The film rights were immediately snapped up by Korda, who saw it as a prestige product to show the rest of the world what a British studio could produce. Part of the deal stipulated that Wells himself would write the screenplay which created many problems during production.

The story opens in Everytown (a thinly-disguised London), on Christmas Eve 1940. Mingled with the festivities are rumours of war. An unexpected air attack initiates a



Top left: The building of a new world. The miniatures were designed by Korda and Menzies and executed by Ned Mann. Top right: Director of *Things to Come*, William Cameron Menzies. Opposite below: The British poster for the film. Left: Vincent Korda and the father of science fiction, H. G. Wells (right), discuss *Things to Come* production sketches. Above: The table-top miniature of the fabulous space gun. The tiny figures are mounted on separate moving walkways.





war which lasts for thirty years. As a result the ruined world is reduced to barbarism and banditry and the Wandering Sickness, which turns its victims into near zombies, runs rampant. The scene shifts to Everytown 1970 which is ruled by the tyrannical Boss (Ralph Richardson), who urges his subjects on to further wars for the

honour of their land. An envoy, John Cabal (Raymond Massey), arrives from out of the East in an aeroplane. He is the leader of World Communications, "a Brotherhood of Scientists and a Freemasonry of Efficiency", with its headquarters at Basra. Its task is to end brigandage, destroy independent states and create a New World State. Cabal is taken prisoner by the Boss but a young mechanic he meets escapes Everytown and flies to Basra. He alerts the World Airmen who make an aerial attack on Everytown, bombing it with the Gas of Peace, which puts people to sleep, apparently harmlessly, and renders those who breathe it completely docile when they wake up.

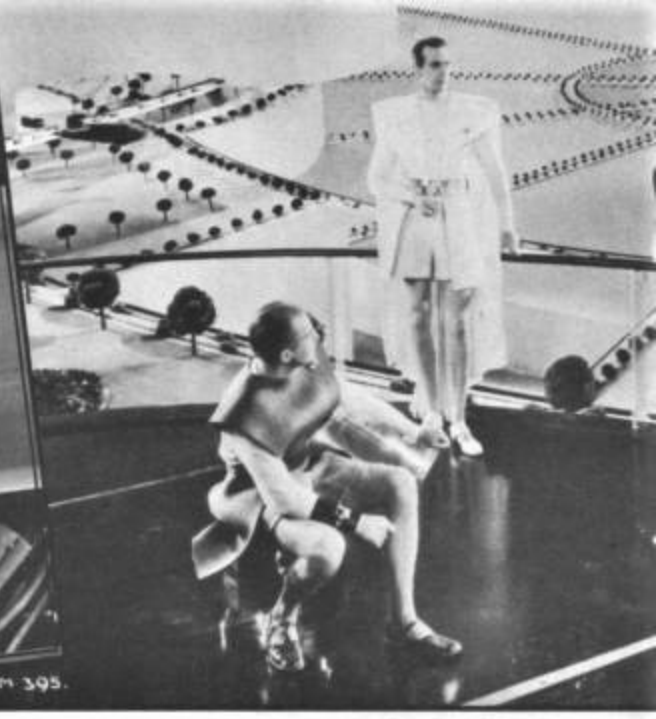
The scene then shifts 66 years into Everytown's future, a silent white underground future of glass, steel and electricity, air-conditioned and artificially sunlit, where helicopters and television are commonplace. This new Everytown is ruled by Oswald Cabal (John's grandson, again played by Massey). All the economic, social and political problems of old seem to have been resolved and work, as the old world knew it, has disappeared. All interest is centred on technology and the Space Gun, which is designed to fire passenger-carrying projectiles at the moon. A rebellious attack led by a sculptor, Theotocopulos (Cedric Hardwicke), attempts to thwart the lunar expedition,

but the attack fails and the Space Gun is fired, carrying two young volunteers. The film ends with Cabal exhorting his New World to ever greater progress and adventure. For mankind, he says, it must be "the Universe or nothing".

The film went into production in 1934, with a budget of £350,000, at that time the highest budget of any film produced in Britain. Along with *Metropolis* and *Just Imagine*, it is one of the best examples of filmic art deco. It is, in effect, a movie to be enjoyed for its look rather than for its heavy-handed message of what may befall mankind should we forget about the individual and concentrate on scientific achievement.

The director of *Things to Come*, William Cameron Menzies, began his film career in New Jersey in 1917 at the age of nineteen, through a chance meeting with director, George Fitzmaurice. After designing for a Mary Pickford film he met Douglas Fairbanks, and between 1921 and 1924 worked closely with Fairbanks on *The Three Musketeers*, *Robin Hood* and *Thief of Bagdad* at United Artists. His career blossomed and in 1928 he won the newly-formed Academy of Motion Pictures' first award for art direction for *The Dove* and *The Tempest*. A visually-attuned man, Menzies was disturbed by the practice in

In the exciting finale of the movie Things to Come, John Cabal (played by Raymond Massey) follows the progress of the first manned craft in space as it makes its way across the galaxy. "For Mankind," says Cabal, "it must be the Universe or nothing."



early sound films of using very few sets and concentrating on the spoken word. He therefore elaborated the early production of **Bulldog Drummond** (1929), producing sixty sets and over three hundred drawings. His first film as director, the semi-supernatural **The Spider** (1931), was criticised as having too much emphasis on physical production rather than plot development. Most of the other fantastic films he would go on to direct received the same criticism. In 1932 he directed **Chandu the Magician** but it was difficult for him to find time to direct other films, so besieged was he with design assignments, such as Joseph Mankiewicz' **Alice in Wonderland** (1933). He later worked as Associate Producer on **Thief of Bagdad** (1940) and directed and designed **Invaders from Mars** and **The Maze** (both 1953).

In 1934 he was assigned to direct **Things to Come** for which H. G. Wells was to adapt his own novel. Wells was a perceptive man—a romanticist with a vital interest in science, but a humanitarian and moralist first of all. All these aspects of his character can be seen in **Things to Come**, and indeed, any of his other stories. Wells was nearing seventy when he scripted the film and the pressures of continual writing and re-writing his first realised screen adaptation proved tiring and confusing for the old man. His first script proved unfilmable and had to be rewritten twice (under the titles **Whither Mankind** and **One Hundred Years to Come**) before it was accepted. The final script was written with the aid of a Hungarian writer, Lajos Biro, who had worked in Hollywood in the twenties and

would later script the Korda production of **Thief of Bagdad**.

Despite his problems with the script, Wells found no difficulty in making suggestions for the final production and Menzies, a quiet and diplomatic man, was forced to contend with continual interruptions and insistences from Wells that the film was not what he had envisaged. He frequently sent notes to Menzies giving his views on how the picture should be designed and directed. A typical note from Wells to Menzies ran:

"All these Cecil B. de Mille effects of crowds milling about and so on that you are spending so much thought and time and money upon do not matter a rip in comparison with the effective handling of this mental drama. They are very effective in their way but they are not this film. I pray you take heed of these points, Menzies. . . . The great danger of the film is to make Massey a preachy prig. He must not intone and shout. Yours in affectionate admiration (but the author of the film, mind you), H. G. Wells."

Wells also sent him drawings and notes on how he could "improve" the design of the film, commenting in this instance on production drawings Menzies had submitted of the great building machines:

"This is all wrong. Get it in better perspective. This is an H. G. Wells film and your highest best is needed for the complete realisation of my treatment. Bless you."

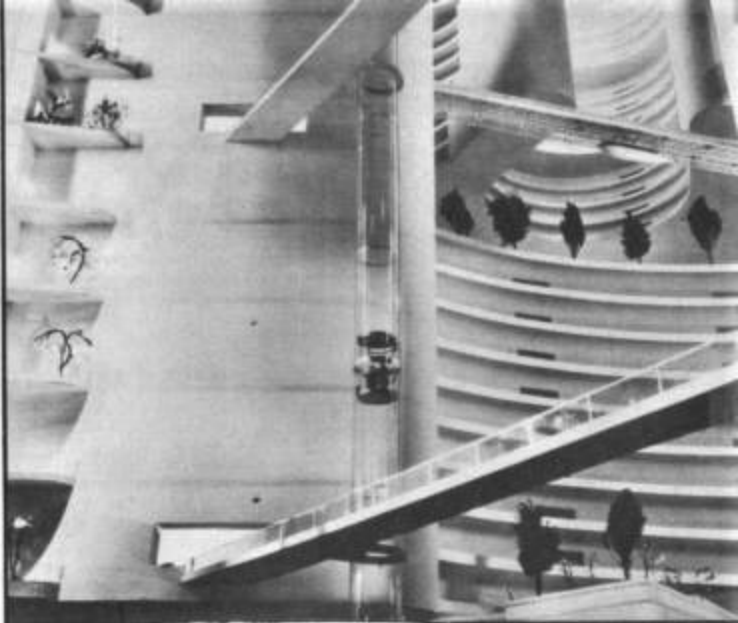
Wells also felt compelled to comment in great detail on the costumes, suggesting broad shoulders for the men, long skirts for the women and cloaks for everyone, all in

fine but "dignified" materials, and unobtrusive accessories (radio telephones, gauntlets, identification discs, torches, etc). A man of contradictions, however, he then urged the designers to "let themselves go".

Menzies carried on regardless, aware that the film's faults lay in cardboard characterisations, and of the necessity to compensate with design and special effects. Vincent Korda (Alexander's brother) was given the job of Art Director and John Armstrong, Rene Hubert and the Marchioness of Queensberry were responsible for costumes. However the overall design belongs to Menzies, with breathtaking shots of the ruined Everytown, unending columns of aeroplanes, underground skyscrapers and huge sterile machines.

Filming took place at the Old London Studios and the Everytown of 1940 was represented by a London composite, complete with St Paul's dome and Oxford Circus. Leading effects technician, Ned Mann, brought together a team of two hundred people to work on special effects alone. A one-time professional roller-skater, Mann entered films in 1920. He worked on other fantasy movies in association with Alexander Korda, such as **The Man Who Could Work Miracles** (1935), **The Ghost Goes West** (1936), **Thief of Bagdad** (1940) and Mike Todd's **Around the World in Eighty Days** (1956). A master at his craft, he trained most of the top special effects men working in England today.

Dozens of beautifully conceived minia-



Far left: Special effects supervisor Ned Mann of the set of *Things to Come*. Centre: A good example of Wells' concept for simple but tasteful costumes, a blend of Grecian and Art Deco. The background is another Ned Mann miniature. Above: *Everystown 2036*. The foreground is a hanging miniature aligned in perspective with actors in the background to complete the image.

ture sets were used to recreate the building of the New World. These were combined with live action sequences on tiny back-projection screens inserted into the models, a process similar to that used by Douglas Trumbull and Stanley Kubrick for the landing of the lunar pod in the Moon Base in 2001, *A Space Odyssey*.

Ross Jacklin, another of the team's major effects contributors, created hanging miniatures, to be suspended in perspective to match the full-sized sets. This is similar to the process of glass shots, much used in the silent era, which consisted of hanging a painted sheet of glass between the camera and the scene, matching the two together in perfect alignment in the finished shot.

In other scenes, miniature figures, attached to separate moving walkways gave an illusion of great crowds surging towards the Space Gun.

The camera work was shared by Georges Perinal, a French cinematographer who began his career in 1913 and later worked on the Korda *Thief of Bagdad*, and Eddie Cohen, an effects photographer.

As well as being a major achievement in special effects, *Things to Come* was an important event in the history of film music. Written by Arthur Bliss (a classical composer who became President of the London Symphony Orchestra Music Club in 1954), and recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Muir Mathieson, it was the first symphonic score written specifically for a movie. Closely interwoven with the visuals the score reflects and complements the various moods of the film perfectly. It was hailed

as bringing film music to the attention of all "serious" music lovers. The suite is currently available on Decca Phase 4 Concert Series (PFS4363) featuring the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Bernard Herrmann.

In 1935 Wells wrote a novelisation of the film based on his own screenplay, published by the Cresset Press. The book also contains some information on the making of the film. It has become a collector's item among both Wells fans and film and art collectors. Its beautiful jacket was designed by E. McKnight Kauffer, artist and posterist of the period.

Eighteen months after production began, *Things to Come* premiered at the Leicester Square Theatre on Friday, 21st February, 1936 at 8.45 pm. The British critics were enthralled, and superlatives reigned.

"Never has a film been produced with greater technical efficiency. . . . The personal scenes are finely and sincerely depicted free from the sentimentality and affectation which is the curse of the screen. . . . not merely entertainment but a religious ceremony, it purges the mind with terror and wonder." *The Enquirer*.

"For sheer immensity and daring *Things to Come* dwarfs all the pictures of the week." *Daily Telegraph*.

"After today, no one will be able to point a slightly supercilious finger at the screen and say that a film has never been produced that would make people think." *The Star*.

"The film's most mature and forward-looking manifestation." *The Observer*.

"The message of Mr Wells' film,

emphatic as it is, may well pass unnoticed at the time, before so imposing, one might almost say, so beautiful, a spectacle." *The Times*.

The American press were not so kind, however, and *Variety* expressed the opinion: "Dialogue intolerably bad . . . characters make long, meaningless speeches. At the final fade out, one of the characters, who has already said far too much, is still speech-making about humanity and the future of invention."

But whichever way we decide to look at *Things to Come* it is a milestone in the history of British cinema.

Things to Come (1934)

Raymond Massey (as John Cabal), Ralph Richardson (The Boss), Maurice Braddell (Doctor Harding), Edward Chapman (Pippa Passworthy), Sophie Stewart (Mrs Cabal), Derrick de Marney (Richard Gordon), Margarette Scott (Roxanna Black), Alan Jeaves (Grandfather Cabal), Pickles Livingstone (Horrie Passworthy), Anthony Holles (Simon Burton), Pearl Argyll (Catherine Cabal), Patricia Hillard (Janet Gordon), Cedric Hardwick (Theotocopulos).

Directed by William Cameron Menzies, Sets designed by Vincent Korda, Photographed by Georges Perinal, Special effects directed by Ned Mann, Music composed by Arthur Bliss, Musical director Muir Mathieson, Edited by Charles Crichton and Francis Lyon. Special effects directed by Edward Cohen, Costumes designed by John Armstrong, Rene Hubert and The Marchioness of Queensbury, Production manager David Cunyngnam, Assistant director Geoffrey Boothby, Produced by Alexander Korda.

Time: 92 mins