

SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS

WAR of the WORLDS

Feature by Phil Edwards

The novel, *War of the Worlds*, first saw publication in Pearson's Magazine, April to December, 1897, in serial form and went into hardcovers in 1898, being published by Heinemann. It has virtually been in print ever since and has long been considered as the classic of alien invasion novels. Its author, H. G. Wells, was already considered a master of the then-new Science Fiction/Fantasy novel with the previously published *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* to his credit.

Originally bought for filming by that master of the low-taste, high-camp spectacle, Cecil B. DeMille in 1925, the property lay gathering dust on the Paramount shelf until 1951 when George Pal made preparations to at last bring the classic to the screen. However, during the period between DeMille's purchase of the rights, other producers had shown intermittent interest in the project. In 1930, during Russian director Sergei Eisenstein's Hollywood period, the story was offered to him, and although a script was actually prepared, the film never went any further. Eisenstein preferring to go to Mexico to start (but never finish) his *Que Viva Mexico* project.

In 1932 the project was again revised by Robert Fellows of Paramount. But once more it was shelved when Fellows left Paramount to join Warner Brothers.

A young Alfred Hitchcock even tried to convince H. G. Wells that he himself should produce a version of the story, but this offer was declined.

Alexander Korda next showed interest in the story but, with Paramount still owning the rights he, preferred to purchase Wells' latest Science Fiction novel, *The Shape of Things to Come*, for production. It is probably just as well that circumstances prevented Korda's production of *War of the Worlds* for, despite the beautiful and

lavish design of *Things to Come*, it is without a doubt one of the dullest of Science Fiction movies.

In early 1938, when theatrical whizz-kid Orson Welles purchased the radio rights of *War of the Worlds*, he was doubtless unaware of the horror he was about to unleash on the listeners of his Mercury Theatre Group radio series. Scripted by Howard Koch (later to write many screenplays, including *Casablanca*) the adaptation took the form of a series of radio broadcasts, and in the second part as a tour de force monologue by Welles the play threw thousands of people into panic. Listeners who tuned in late actually thought they were hearing a blow-by-blow report on the invasion of the Earth by Mars. Even people who heard the regular introduction to the CBS production believed it to be true. Few seemed to question that within forty-five minutes of "real" time, the Martians had left Mars, arrived on Earth, obliterated the entire US Armed Forces, and had finally been defeated by the common cold! Highways were jammed with people trying to escape the "invasion", attempted suicides were reported, and a legend of radio broadcasting was born. City leaders were outraged, Orson Welles was delighted—his "trick or treat" a success. The broadcast had been made on October 30th—the eve of Halloween.

Hungarian puppeteer George Pal arrived in Hollywood in 1940, and in the next few years produced a series of charming short films known as the Puppets. Through these he won a Special Academy Award for "the development of novel methods and techniques" in 1943. It was to be the first of many awards, including one for the special effects in *War of the Worlds*.

After producing the successful *Destination Moon* for Universal in 1950, Pal signed with Paramount Pictures to produce *When Worlds Collide* in 1951. Both films won Academy Awards for Special Effects in their respective years. To follow these highly successful films and to capitalise on the UFO interest of that time, Pal chose

A stop-frame sequence showing the effect of the Martian's Heat Ray on an unfortunate victim.



the long-dormant *War of the Worlds* property as his next subject.

Wells' original had, of course, been set in England in the 1890s, but, to give the movie version immediacy, Pal decided to update the story to contemporary America. It is also highly likely that the expense involved in producing a period piece was a big factor in this decision.

The film, budgeted at \$2 million, went into production in January, 1952, with a forty-day schedule for the live action scenes and a further six months allotted to the filming of miniature, mechanical, and optical effects.

Playwright Barré Lyndon was assigned to write a new screenplay, and did so in close collaboration with Pal. When director Byron Haskin joined the project, he too contributed to the script, though only Lyndon receives a credit in the finished film.

In the original novel, the Martians had employed three different machines: the cylinders which had blasted off from Mars, "building" machines, and the actual "war" machines, which dealt out destruction to mankind. The latter had been 100 feet tall machines supported on three spindly legs and capable of incredibly fast movement, and equipped with death-dealing tentacles. The Martian contained in each war machine was described as ". . . a big greyish, rounded bulk, the size of a bear . . . it had, one might say, a face . . . a V-shaped mouth with its pointed upper lip, absence of brow bridges, absence of a chin beneath the wedge-like lower lip . . . Gorgon groups of tentacles . . ." They are vampires, feeding on the blood of humans, and a particularly ghoulish aspect of the original novel suggests that Martians were breeding humans with the express purpose of having a ready supply of blood. Pal decided against using such a long time-span, deleted the "building" machines and changed the scuttling, three legged giants to sleek, copper-coloured, manta ray shaped flying machines. These were designed by the brilliant Japanese art director, Al Nozaki, who had also designed **When Worlds Collide** for Pal. These beautifully engineered models made a brief reappearance in Byron Haskin's own 1964 production, **Robinson Crusoe on Mars**. For this appearance, their shape was slightly altered, and they were white in colour, with a glowing red crystal on their underside. Also altered was their movement. In **War of the Worlds** they had a slow, unstoppable forward motion. For **Robinson Crusoe on Mars** they zipped in and out of frame with deadly speed. Pal's machines were equipped with a snakelike arm that emerged from the top of the machines and sprayed all within their path with a disintegrating death-ray.

The film opens with black and white



Above: The Martian war machines deal out death and destruction. **Below:** A Martian's tentacle is positioned for a shot from the finale.



newsreel footage showing man's inhumanity to man while Paul Frees delivers a voice-over narration describing the horrors, finishing with the hysterical pronouncement, "And now comes—the War of the Worlds!"—at which point the screen explodes into the Technicolor credits and a quick trip around Space, showing the various planets, via some beautiful space paintings by Chesley Bonestell. Accompanying this, the imperious voice of Sir Cedric Hardwicke intones an adaptation of Wells' opening to the original novel. For pure effect, this opening could not prepare us better for the forthcoming events of the film. We seen the first of the Martian cylinders land in the gully and Pal then quickly cuts to his introduction of the principals. At this point, the film takes a brief nosedive into the standard Science Fiction boy-meets-girl situation.

A wooden Gene Barry plays the hero, astro-nuclear physicist, Clayton Forrester, a name to conjure with! Barry was a Paramount contract player whose previous credits were *The Atomic City* (not an SF film, despite the title) and the youth-market programmer *Girls of Pleasure Island*. He later made a name for himself as TV's *Bat Masterson* and as Amos Burke in

the fondly remembered *Burke's Law*.

The heroine, Sylvia Van Buren, was in reality starlet Ann Robinson, who had previously played bit parts in *A Place in the Sun* and *Cimarron Kid*. After completing *War of the Worlds*, Ms Robinson married a bullfighter and spent the next few years touring the bullfight circuit with her new husband. Yet when the 25th Anniversary screening of *War of the Worlds* was held in Hollywood, Ms Robinson miraculously reappeared for the screening, seemingly unchanged after 25 years!

As though aware of the limitations of his principals, Pal surrounded them with tried-and-true character actors, like Les Tremayne, as leader of the armed forces fighting a losing battle against the Martian invaders, and Lew Martin as Pastor Mathew Collins, who approaches the oncoming war-machines with a cross and the Word of God, only to be obliterated for his trouble. Tremayne remembers his part as Army General Mann, "I played the character as hard and fast as I could make him. The mouthfuls I had to say were really something to get through . . . and as I was just out from Broadway I took the picture business very seriously, as I still do."

However, *The War of the Worlds* is not

an "actor's" film so much as a stunning display of what Hollywood technicians and effects wizards can achieve. In fact, approximately 70 per cent of the movie's running time consists of either mechanical or optical effects, or a combination of the two. To duplicate Wells' original walking war machines would have required expensive and time consuming stop-motion animation, and the effect of dynamic movement would have been greatly limited.

Pal's first option was to give the machines three ray-like legs through the use of a high voltage electrical discharge, fed down wires to give the machines their apparent mobility. This method was tried but soon rejected—as it could easily lead to on-set fires and even electrocution of the technicians!

Al Nozaki recalls: "After the completion of the machine on paper, I had the prop man make a small model that was about 15 or 16 inches across. We used that for the basis of the three machines used in the film. These large models were formed in clay and then refined down to what we thought they should look like. We then made a wooden armature, and formed copper over that. They were quite complicated inside with all sorts of mechanisms, lights and gears to operate the cobra neck."

Each completed machine was approximately 40 inches wide and was supported by fine wires, through which electricity was fed to operate the various mechanics and lights. In some scenes the wires are plainly visible, but this hardly detracts from the overall effect of the sequences in which the machines appear, so riveted are we by the lighting, sound effects (originally two-track stereo) and sharp, clever cutting from cause to effect.

The sound of the death-ray emitted from the snakelike ray gun was achieved through the use of electric guitar feedback, over-recorded and played backwards at various speeds. A similar technique was used in the original *King Kong*, utilising various animal cries treated in a similar fashion. The sound of the one Martian scream we hear was also achieved in this way, but this time using a *female* scream slowed down, edited, and played backwards.

To achieve the physical effects of the death-ray, each frame was individually painted to firstly give the impression of making the victim a blank, then transparent (we see a vague outline of the skeleton), then to finalise the horrific effect we see a human outline as an almost atomic-like smudge on the ground. Assorted weaponry, tanks, guns, etc., are matted out in a similar way.

Three other sequences also deserve a special mention. The first is when the army use their ultimate weapon, the atomic bomb. This striking effect was achieved by filming, at high speed, an explosion of different coloured flash powders on an empty sound stage, and the result matted into the necessary sequence.

The destruction of Los Angeles City Hall was engineered by using a six foot high plaster model of the building, planted with small explosive charges. The explosions were filmed at high speed and lit to give the effect of the presence of the war machine.

What is possibly the most effective sequence used a minimum of optical effects, and demonstrates how mechanical effects can work as well as, if not better than, opticals. Barry and Robinson find themselves trapped in the ruins of a farmhouse, literally in the centre of a war machine nest. A machine hovers over the house and from its underside emerges a long snakelike antenna with a three-lensed "eye" at its end. It snakes its way into the ruins, observing all around it, only to be snapped off by Barry. As Robinson backs into the shadows, a reddish three-suckered arm touches her on the shoulder, she jumps and spins to see a Martian jiggle across in front of her. This is the classic BEM (bug-eyed monster) of the Hollywood SF cycle of the fifties. The Martian was played by makeup artist Charles Gemora, who spent months designing his costume from rubber and tubing, and its three-part eye is a replica of the antenna-like probe discussed earlier. The Martian is only on-screen for a few seconds, just enough to register with the audience and give a sharp, sudden shock-effect.

Director Byron Haskins originally envisioned a "Goblin Dance" of several creatures (an idea surprisingly close to a scene in Wells' original novel). Haskin recalls "I'd originally intended to use many more of these creatures, but Charlie Gemora had tied up more than sufficient time and expense with his one Martian. We called him Louis Lump-Lump. He worked him from the inside and could handle any number of movements, including veins that pulsed and eyes that flickered". It's probably as well that this sequence wasn't included, as that brief glimpse we *do* get is a good shock-effect, the only one of its kind in the film. The problem of creating a realistic alien must also have presented itself to Steven Spielberg in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, something he overcame by flooding the screen with blinding backlighting to give his aliens a slightly nebulous effect.

With the current boom in Science Fiction, and with the genre at last receiving the respect it deserves, it is surprising that *War of the Worlds* has not been given a major reissue in the U.K., for despite a couple of TV screenings, the film has not been widely seen for several years.

In the US, *The War of the Worlds* is regarded as a classic with various magazines covering it in depth (without which many facts in this feature could not have been included) and it is now, surely, time that the film's distributor in this country realised the potential of a major reissue of this film and others of the great 1950s Science Fiction cycle.



War of the Worlds (1953)

Gene Barry (as Dr Clayton Forrester), Ann Robinson (Sylvia Van Buren), Les Tremayne (General Mann), Robert Cornthwaite (Dr Pryor), Sandro Giglio (Dr Bilderbeck), Lewis Martin (Pator Matthew Collins), Paul Frees (Narrator) Bill Phipps (Wash Perry), Charles Gemora (The Martian) Directed by Byron Haskin, Screenplay by

Barre Lyndon from the novel by H.G.Wells, Music by Leith Stevens, Director of Photography George Barnes, Costumes by Edith Head, Sets Designer Sam Comer and Emile Kuri, Makeup by Wally Westmore, Special Photographic Effects Directed by Gordon Jennings, Colour by Technicolour. Produced by George Pal. A Paramount Picture. Time: 85 mins



Above: Gordon Jennings (right foreground) directs the setting up of the Martian War Machines for filming. Below: Technician Chester Pate (left) assists Jennings (right) with the assembly of a War Machine.