

The aliens return! And they're properly repulsive

By Clifford Terry
Television critic

Herbert George Wells started it all with his 1898 novel, then that darn Orson Welles pulled out his on-air joy buzzer with the 1938 radio play that set off rumors on the East Coast of scaly creatures landing in New Jersey, near Hackensack and Parsippany.

Fifteen years later came George Pal/Byron Haskin's film version of "The War of the Worlds," featuring Gene Barry (as a square-shooting astronuclear physicist), Ann Robinson (as a meddlesome, whiny library science professor), a simplistic script and terrific special effects (including seemingly invincible spaceships with a cobra-headed firing mechanism that looked like the turn signal on a '53 Buick).

Mean-spirited and single-minded, the invaders from Mars touched down around the world and proceeded to survive U.S. Army intelligence and an atomic bomb and after annihilating Los Angeles—proving once and for all that there is intelligent life out there—finally succumbed to what were said to be ordinary bacteria but what undoubtedly was domestic smog.

Now comes the syndicated TV series, created and written by Greg Strangis and bowing with a two-hour premiere (7 p.m. Friday, on WPWR-Ch. 50) before settling into hourlong episodes on Oct. 14. It picks up the story 35 years later, when the hostile invaders, now generic aliens instead of Martians,

Premiere

'The War of the Worlds'

Created and written by Greg Strangis, directed by Colin Chilvers and produced by Jonathan Hackett. With Jared Martin, Lynda Mason Green, Philip Akin and Richard Chaves. Premieres at 7 p.m. Friday on WPWR-Ch. 50.

have been "resurrected" through exposure to radioactive waste and, if this means what we think it means, once more are aiming to put an end to civilization as we know it.

As the intergalactic fiends prepare the way for colonization, those standing in their way include the idiosyncratic astrophysicist Harrison Blackwood (Jared Martin, formerly of "Dallas"); microbiologist/single parent Suzanne McCullough (Lynda Mason Green); computer genius Norton Drake (Philip Akin), working out of a voice-activated wheelchair; and Lt. Col. Paul Ironhorse (Richard Chaves), a Cherokee, West Point alumnus and high-tech weapons expert.

In the theatrical feature, the audience only got glimpses of the single-eyed aliens, which seemed to resemble E.T.'s forefathers and had appendages as spindly as resurrected king crab legs in a cheap seafood restaurant.

This time out, they also are seen fleetingly—repulsive fingers, gloppy arms, gross-out eyeballs—although they now have the ability to merge with human forms in a Body Snatcher-ish manner. For openers, they assume the guise of terrorists,

ending up with Charles Addams-style faces that progress from the scabby to the pustular.

Filmed in Toronto and directed by Colin Chilvers, who won a special-effects Oscar for "Superman—The Movie," the series seems to be good-enough sci-fi stuff, complete with shadowy menace, a plethora of firepower and military knuckleheads, lines such as "Who are these people?" and even a touch of "Alien"-like stomach splatter.

'Empty Nest'

In "Empty Nest" (8:30 p.m. Saturday on NBC-Ch. 5), widowed pediatrician Harry Weston (Richard Mulligan) lives in the same Miami neighborhood that is home to "The Golden Girls," which is not surprising because both series have the same creator, Susan Harris.

What is surprising—well, maybe not—is that "Empty Nest" isn't nearly as funny. In fact, it's quite undistinguished. In Olympic-medal terms, the running mate to "Golden" appears to have settled for the bronze.

Displaying the same exasperated demeanor shown in such vehicles as "Soap" and "S.O.B.," Mulligan portrays a doctor who obsessively hates germs and complains that he hasn't had a good cigar since the Cuban missile crisis.

The father of three daughters, he is beset by the two who live close by: a policewoman (played, sorry to say, by Kristy McNichol) and a health addict (Dinah Manoff), who

isn't real happy that her husband left her for "a slut named Rita."

Also on hand is the bachelor's Disney-type dog named Dreyfus, an obnoxious neighbor (David Leisure, the Isuzu commercial liar), a marriage-seeking virologist (Grace Zabriskie) and a drawling nurse from Arkansas named La Verne (Park Overall).

The nurse gets the best line:

"In my town," La Verne explains, "we didn't have datin'. You washed your hair on Saturday night, and then when you were 14, you married your cousin."

Liberace 2

The Clash of the Candelabra continues this weekend as CBS unleashes "Liberace: Behind the Music" (8 p.m. Sunday on Channel 2), which has been endorsed by Seymour Heller, Mr. Showmanship's personal manager, as contrasted with last week's opus from ABC, which had the cooperation of Liberace's estate.

The main problem with the CBS version is that Victor Garber not only doesn't resemble the Barnum of the Baldwin, unlike ABC's look-alike Andrew Robinson, but also fails to capture the goofy smile and, above all, that voice. (Again, where are you, George McGovern, now that we need you?) And while the other network's version was junk, at least it was camped-up junk; this is merely flat and disconnected.

For the record, the supporting players include Maureen Stapleton as the smother mother and Saul Rubinek as the saintlike manager.