

WAR OF THE WORLDS™



TV pilot should let sleeping aliens lie

BY GORDON WALEK
Daily Herald TV critic

Fifty years ago this month, Orson Welles' pseudo-documentary radio program about a Martian invasion in Groves Mill, N.J., scared the be-jabbers out of thousands of Americans who thought they were hearing **THE REAL THING.**

Welles' sly adaptation of H.G. Wells' 1898 science-fiction novel, in addition to terrifying a surprising number of unsuspecting radio listeners, unleashed a torrent of interest in outer space.

In 1953, the feature film "War of the Worlds" was distinguished by its state-of-the-art special effects. Now, the syndicated television series of the same name, beginning with a two-hour presentation tonight, carries on the long and sometimes noble attempt by storytellers to make their audiences squirm.

Unlike Orson Welles' radio program, however, the new TV show won't send you running to the cellar for safety. The special effects — supervised by Bill Sturgeon — are so

sophisticated but not frightening.

The TV series picks up 35 years after the end of the 1953 film. Despite their resistance to atomic weapons, the aliens of the 1950s were powerless against ordinary bacteria. Their remains were stuffed into steel drums, which were then stored in a radioactive waste dump maintained by the army.

As the TV series opens, a terrorist group has taken control of the waste dump and inadvertently opens some of the drums. The aliens, apparently cleansed of bacteria by the radioactive waste, spring back to life and the story, in effect, begins all over again.

Dr. Harrison Blackwood (Jared Martin), whose parents were killed in the earlier invasion and who was reared by Dr. Forrester (a principal player in the movie) is enlisted by the government to combat the beasts. He hires a lovely microbiologist, Suzanne McCullough (Lynda Mason Green), to help him get a bead on the little devils. Is romance in the air? You betcha.

As a two-hour movie, tonight's presentation is mildly entertaining,



Astrophysicist Harrison Blackwood (Jared Martin) and microbiologist Suzanne McCullough (Lynda Mason Green) draw on their scientific know-how to battle aliens in "War of the Worlds," a new syndicated series based on H.G. Wells' thriller.

as the introduction to most science-fiction TV series are. Consider "V" from a few years ago or last season's "Something Is Out There."

But usually, the big-budget special effects displayed in the pilots don't subsequently show up in the series. Or the scripts degenerate into predictable good guy/bad guy

confrontations or self-righteous morality plays.

By merely entering the arena of sci-fi TV, "War of the Worlds" is treading on thin ice.

The pilot comes off as a combination of last year's "Amerika"

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miniseries (about a Soviet invasion of the U.S.) and ABC's "MacGyver," in which an unorthodox and very handsome scientist cleverly solves crimes.

As Dr. Blackwood, Jared Martin is sophisticated, cool and self-effacing, which, of course, is just the opposite of what you would expect from a journeyman astrophysicist. Ditto for the perky Ms. McCullough. She, incidentally, has a child, the father of whom gets short shrift in tonight's episode.

Check out the writing.

"This is weird stuff we're dealing with here, Blackwood," says an army officer after he watches his men transformed from humans to aliens.

Weird, but not discouraging.

"We'll track them down," he says later. "We'll make alien sushi out of them."

It should be noted that humans who are routinely converted to aliens (it isn't clear exactly how this happens) experience dramatic voice and dermatological changes. And when they die (no, they're not immortal) their bodies melt. Their remains aren't anyone's idea of sushi.

Indeed, the melting process is probably the most sophisticated spe-

TV review

"War of the Worlds"

Mini-review: Technically fine — but it's not scary

Written by Greg Strangis. Directed by Colin Chilvers. Sam and Greg Strangis are the executive producers. At 7 p.m. today on WPWR-TV Channel 50.

Cast:

Harrison Blackwood..... Jared Martin
Suzanne McCullough Lynda Mason

Norton Drake..... Philip Akin
Lt. Col. Paul Ironhorse... Richard Chaves

cial effect in the program. But it happens after the creatures are dead and no longer pose a threat to anyone. Consequently, there's nothing to be afraid of. Very disappointing. There's something to be said for being frightened by television. There's something to be said for being moved in any way by television.

"War of the Worlds" is the latest in an increasingly long line of syndicated blood-and-guts TV series. "Friday the 13th: The Series" is entering its second year. And at midnight Saturday on WMAQ-TV Channel 5, "Freddy's Nightmares," an anthology based on Freddy Krueger's hit movies, will debut.

Because the TV series "War of the

Worlds" is at least an indirect offshoot of Welles' radio program, one wonders what Welles himself would make of the craze he spawned. Probably not much. Welles frightened people simply by talking to them on the radio. Whatever images the audience created were figments of each listener's imagination.

The television show has plenty of visuals, of course. But there's not enough going on between the images to put you in a different state of mind. You watch the show, you look around, and you don't get the feeling anyone or anything is going to pop out of the screen and take you, kicking and screaming, to another planet. So what's the point?

For the real McCoy, tune to WBBM Radio (780-AM) at 8 p.m. Oct. 29 for a presentation of Welles' original radio show. Chuck Schaden will interview Howard Koch, who wrote the radio script, during the evening.

And on Oct. 30, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the broadcast, WBEZ (91.5-FM) will air an updated version, also written by Koch. While the names, places and events of the original script will remain, military references, slang and news coverage style have been changed to match the style of today.

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