

As cockroaches are to man, so is humanity to the invaders when begins

WAR OF THE WORLDS™

By PETER BLOCH-HANSEN

As a companion piece to their two hit series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Friday the 13th: The Series*, Paramount has now brought H.G. Wells' classic, *War of the Worlds* to the screen, placing it squarely on the battlefield between creativity and television.

"I hope it doesn't become a comic book," states series executive producer, Greg Strangis, sitting in his sparsely decorated office, full of restless energy. In fact, both he and creative consultant Herbert (Star Trek: The Next Generation) Wright confess that they're very concerned that the show should have serious social relevance. "The aliens could make a pretty good case," observes Strangis, "that we are lousy managers of this planet, and their position is that they could do a better job." Adds Herbert Wright, "We are to them as cockroaches are to us."

Since the aliens lack the advanced technological hardware of the 1953 movie (as outlined in a preview of the TV series in STARLOG #133), they have to fight a hidden, guerilla type warfare.

Strangis elucidates. "There's the obvious tactic of blowing something up. There's the less obvious one of trying to incite a nuclear war. There are a number of approaches they can use. If we wanted our aliens to pollute the New York water supply, we could take out a nice section of the city. In subtle ways, they'll try to infiltrate governments, but we're not going to have aliens trying to take over the presidency.

"They could, through their technology, increase the danger of acid rain. Through civil unrest or ecological disaster, they could upset the balance, weakening mankind's ability to resist their main invasion, which is only a few years distant." Through this device, Strangis intends to deal with a wide range of contemporary problems and issues.

Wright takes up the theme. "We've been moving into this new age in a blind and narrow fashion. We have to do things to allow us to survive on this planet. My biggest nightmare is that we're going to wake up 15 years from now and the planet will shake us off. We'll be but a faint memory in some bacteria's mind of the worst parasite that Earth has ever seen."

They may have accepted our revitalizing nuclear radiation, but don't look for the invaders to take any other handouts.





If they can survive their battles with each other, Lt. Col. Ironhorse (Richard Chavez), Harrison Blackwood (Jared Martin), Norton Drake (Phil Akin) and Suzanne McCullough (Lynda Mason Green) just might be able to win the *War of the Worlds*.

The TV series is also intended to inform the public about less obvious trends and developments. "Physicists," Wright points out, "have now arrived at the same place that yogis, gurus and great Zen masters reached 2,000 years ago, namely knowing that Earth is *one* living organism. Just a short five years ago, this idea was considered ridiculous. For me, this is a blending of the scientific and the spiritual."

In part, what this means in practical terms is that the series' characters will be portrayed as being in the vanguard of modern science, technology and philosophy. "Everything," continues Wright, "from using cellular phones right up to accepting certain principles about life, creation and how the mind and body work. I want to make people think, rather than just add fluff in the dialogue and characterization between action sequences."

The Warriors

The characters who have to carry this weighty freight were cast only a few weeks before shooting began in Toronto in April. Jared (*Fantastic Journey*) Martin, who plays Dr. Harrison Blackwood, was almost literally catapulted from New York into the role. "I got one of those hurry-up phone calls saying, 'Can you be in Toronto tonight and screen test tomorrow?'" he says.

"This series exists in the present," he notes. "We're using present-day technology, the cutting edge of new stuff. There are many factoids that come out in the show, many lines built around science fact. We're dealing with New Age concepts

that the audience can absorb as we go along. A small example is a scene in which I explain to Suzanne [McCullough, another character] why I'm standing on my head. It's because the pull of gravity on the internal organs is reversed, which helps to restore their isostatic balance. It's very healthy."

Strangis feels that quality in episodic television depends less upon having big-name stars than upon interesting characters, situations and subject matter. Accordingly, he and Wright have designed an ensemble of characters which they believe will fully enlist their audience, primarily males age 18 to 48, in the weekly battle with the alien invaders.

Jared Martin's character, Dr. Harrison Blackwood, is the team leader. "He's a wonderful character," Martin enthuses, "because he's many-faceted. He's intelligent, charming, sexy, athletic and adventuresome. He has a wonderful sense of humor. He's a leading man. He's a scientist, an astrophysicist. Blackwood's eccentric, in that he doesn't use the so-called scientific method. He's highly intuitive, given to spur-of-the-moment, instinctive things—great leaps of faith and reason. His office is a shambles, like a kid's place, full of toys and odd things."

At this early stage of production (according to Strangis, only *three* episodes had been filmed at presstime), Martin admits that he's still getting to know the character. "It's like: 'Hello, meet someone who's going to be very important in your life, and it's you.'"

Playing opposite Martin is Canadian Lynda (*Amerika*) Mason Green as Dr. Suzanne McCullough. "She has a fairly privileged

The first step in the enemy's invasion? Getting their hands back on their old weapons, of course.

background," says Green. "She rides horses when she can. She's an extremely highly educated woman, out of the larger schools, MIT and so on. She has a tremendous amount of integrity and loyalty and she's very, very determined."

Unlike Blackwood, Dr. McCullough is firmly, almost rigidly dedicated to the scientific method. "She's committed to the discipline and its regimen, very, very precise about her process, moreso than she might be in another environment," Green explains. "As a woman in a male-dominated profession, there's a certain amount of the over-compensating, over-achiever in her."

"She's a little bit more easily flustered than I am by things that aren't in their proper order and under complete control," Green says thoughtfully, then adds with a laugh, "She's a little more anal-retentive than me."

A working mother, Dr. McCullough has a 12-year-old daughter named Debbie, played by Rachel Blanchard. "Debbie," reveals Green, "is probably the main motivating reason why Suzanne decides that



she's going to overcome her discomfort at working with this crazy Dr. Blackwood and confronting the alien threat. She's protecting the world for her daughter's future.

"Besides that, she'll be in the front lines of identifying, analyzing and understanding as much as possible about an alien creature. Also, of course, they're out to save the world. That's a big project."

Asked to comment on the reversal of the male-female pairing traditional to SF and horror stories, namely that of the cool, rational male and the emotional, intuitive female, Green observes, "It's a social evolution going on, allowing men to explore their more intuitive sides and to be not necessarily so logical.

"Being very cool, calculating and withdrawn is sometimes how women are perceived in the workplace, in their efforts to be accepted. As women have come into the marketplace in any profession, I think they've had to prove that they're *not* going to emote all over the floor every time something goes wrong.

"Hopefully," she adds, "there'll be times

when they'll both be able to trade off on each other, so they won't be locked into behavior patterns too terribly. We teach each other as characters, we put burrs under each other from time to time."

The Wizards

Backing up this team of adventuring scientists is Norton Drake, played by another Canadian actor, Phil (Iceman) Akin. Drake, an invalid computer wizard and communications expert, locates alien activity by using very hi-tech equipment to pinpoint their communications. He also ferrets out other useful information only available to those familiar with the most esoteric levels of computer behavior.

"The character started out being a West Indian guy. Then, they changed their minds, so I had to go back and change all of it. So, I'm really in the process of re-developing him. I'm trying to find ways to make his sense of humor come out and to make his expertise part of a warm human being to whom people can relate. This character has a burden on him, being the only black or

ethnic character, in a wheelchair, with all the technical jargon to handle, too.

"I'm trying to get away from the image of the nerd computer freak, like on *Riptide*. I want a more active image. He wears T-shirts and cut-offs, for example. He doesn't let his disability get him down. He has his own van, what I call the 'shaggin' wagon,' carpeted and stuffed with computer and communications equipment so he gets around and does stuff. He's not stuck in a lab all the time."

In line with the producers' intent to expose audiences to the cutting edge of actual and nearly-here hi-tech, Drake also has a voice-activated, motorized wheelchair called Gertrude. "It causes many technical problems on the set," Atkin admits, "but I think it *does* work. It's not much beyond what really exists."

In their secret battle against the aliens, the band of heroes work, with quasi-official

PETER BLOCH-HANSEN, *STARLOG's* Canadian correspondent, interviewed Kenneth Johnson in issue #134.



McCullough and Blackwood (Martin) will "teach each other as characters," promises Lynda Mason Green. "They won't be locked into behavior patterns."

All War of the Worlds Photos Copyright 1988 Paramount Pictures TV

military backing, out of a special compound, a secret government installation they call "the Cottage." Military liaison is provided by half-Cherokee Lt.-Colonel Paul Ironhorse. Vietnam veteran Richard (Predator) Chavez, who plays Ironhorse, explains that his character is different from the others. "Ironhorse is a graduate of West Point," he states. "He usually wants to go in and shoot the aliens up, or call an air strike. The scientists are always saying, 'No, we can't do that.'"

"He's very straightforward as far as his military bearing is concerned. He can fly anything that flies, drive anything that drives, shoot anything that shoots, and handle any edged weapon," but he also has an underlying hidden element, this Cherokee background. At first, this comes out very little, but eventually, he'll have to tap into his mystical Indian heritage to help him, not only as a warrior, but in the conflict between himself and the scientists. He's like a combination of Spock and Kirk."

The War

The Cottage is located on the U.S. West Coast, although the team's skirmishes with the aliens take them farther afield. Story settings in Oregon, Montana and Regina,

Canada (where a cannister of sleeping aliens waits to be revived by the invaders) are mentioned by Strangis.

The series is being shot in Toronto, partly to take advantage of the favorable exchange rate on the Canadian dollar, and partly for the convenience of sharing office and studio facilities with *Friday, the 13th*, also being produced for Paramount syndication by Triumph Entertainment.

"For years," observes Strangis, "Los Angeles was every location in the world. Hollywood never left Hollywood." He is confident that in "Hollywood North," he'll find the locations needed for the show. "Toronto lends itself to many different looks," he asserts, "if you're willing to use your imagination."

A small sidlight to the Toronto location is that Canadian laws governing film and TV production by foreign companies require that definite quotas of Canadians be hired at every level of staffing. Consequently, Herb Wright, who would otherwise have a co-producer's title, and functions as such, is officially listed as creative consultant, generally understood to be a writing credit.

The show, which takes about seven days to prep and another seven to shoot, not counting second unit work (about average for a primetime TV show), is budgeted at about \$680,000 per episode. "We don't have as big a cast as many shows have," Strangis points out. "*L.A. Law* has tons, but they don't have special FX. We're spending a lot of money on FX. We have on-stage effects with mechanical apparatus, alien parts, matte paintings, blue screen, front projection, with your obligatory explosions, car chases and gun shots."

The man responsible for the makeup and prosthetic effects is Bill (The Blob) Sturgeon. In his small effects shop, he talks while standing at his workbench. A grisly

alien head sits on the bench, as if listening in. The cramped room reeks of drying latex. Alien body parts lie everywhere, and propped up in one corner stands a convincing mock-up of a man with the lower half of his face torn away. Photographs of an exploding head sequence stand on a paint can-laden shelf. On the floor, a life-sized mold of a horribly distorted human figure is being prepared.

"We have a week at most to prep the effects," Sturgeon explains, "which is incredibly hard, when you think about it. We had four weeks to get everything ready for the season opener, all the suits, and 200 appliances for the meltings, many other things. There are just three of us doing everything, and a runner who helps. The most challenging part is keeping the aliens looking good every week. They keep writing more of them into the script. In an episode, we usually see the aliens in the caves, so we have to keep the suits up, then there's usually a couple of rotting makeups—people's faces and so on, and one or two dissolves that happen when aliens in human form are killed. It's challenging to come up with a new way of melting people every week."

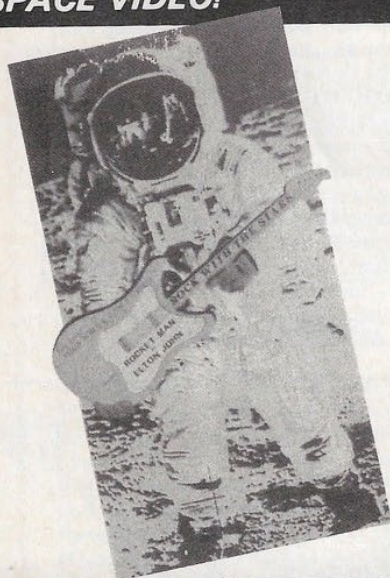
Working in the FX crew's favor is the fact that they rarely have to make time-consuming castings of guest actors' faces. "People the aliens have taken over mostly wear zombie makeups. We designed appliances that we can fit on just about anybody. Most of them are latex, but we're using a lot of gelatin because it's quick. Sometimes, we have clothes with mechanics underneath so they actually melt down. There's usually a lot of boiling and smoking going on, too. One week, we used a high-speed camera and melted an arm made out of gelatin. This week, though, we had to make a body cast of a woman so we can have an alien third arm come out of her abdomen. Sometimes though, we use gelatin chests, so you can actually see the arm stretching out through the skin."

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War Radio

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listeners were accustomed to having musical programs, dramas and other broadcasts interrupted when a news bulletin came on reporting some crisis or emergency.

People frightened or disturbed by the news may have telephoned others who most likely tuned in immediately and also became alarmed. The domino effect could have infected those who didn't even listen to the program. Watching friends, neighbors and relatives visibly shaken by what they heard could have easily caused many non-listeners to feel likewise.

The broadcast also followed closely on the heels of a European war crisis. "The coming of World War II—which was in people's minds—did add to it," says Koch. "But I also think that there are so many uncertainties and dangers just in ordinary life. People have their own personal fears, and I think that when a thing like this happens, all of those fears coalesce and come to the surface. As a result, I don't think that the panic was due to any one factor, but due to the fact that life in general is a precarious business."

The Aftermath

The question of whether such mass hysteria as experienced in 1938 could occur again from a similar event has often been discussed. Has the arrival of television as the dominant form of mass media made such a possibility obsolete? Howard Koch doesn't think so.

"I would guess that yes, such a thing *could* happen again and that the effect would be *much* worse," he argues. "People today are living under the cloud of nuclear war and dreading the nuclear winter which physicists point to as an absolute occurrence that would follow. If today you did a program in which you replaced the Martians with Russians, it would be pandemonium."

Could it happen again? What would be the outcome? How would today's public react?

Eleven years after the original Orson Welles broadcast, radio station HCQRX in Quito, Ecuador, ran its own version of the same program. During this 1949 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, the listeners reacted much like their North American counterparts except for one major difference. When the people learned that it was all a hoax, an enraged mob stormed the three-story El Comercio Building that housed the radio station and burned it down, killing 15 people in the process.

More recently, *Special Bulletin*, a 1983 TV movie, simulated (via videotape) news coverage of the city of Charleston being held hostage by terrorists armed with a nuclear weapon. Despite constant disclaimers, TV stations were *still* flooded with frenzied calls from people who, like those who listened to *The War of the Worlds* 50 years ago, thought that what they heard and saw... was real. ☆

War TV

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Due to the time constraints on production, Sturgeon confesses that there will be few, if any, real innovations in effects design on *War of the Worlds*, but adds, "There are so many things we're doing, that it's like an encyclopedia of effects. It's a new thing every week."

Strangis is adamant that the effects are not meant to horrify. "I don't even want to say 'gore,'" he insists, "though we occasionally get graphic. How much of the violence do you show? How much do you suggest? That's always a question."

"We're trying to find a balance between dark humor, science fiction, horror and good storytelling. It's difficult. The humor has to be appropriate to the moment, and it has to be character-driven, but the biggest challenge is the giant chess game. In every episode, each side has a goal. There is a strategy and a counter-strategy and a counter to the counter-strategy."

The World

One of the biggest contests in the series was the extended writers' strike. Strangis, himself a member of the WGA, stopped work on the series during the strike, while his father and co-producer, Sam Strangis, did not. Naturally, rumors of tension between them surfaced.

"We had to weather the storm," Strangis confides. "Dad is a member of the Directors' Guild. He's a strong production company man, and I was equally strong for the Writers' Guild. There was probably a little posturing, a little anxiety. I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do. I saw my baby being ripped from my arms and he wasn't able to get the support that he needed with the strike going on. That's a natural environment for tension, but it's old news. Our family is too strong."

"The reason we get along so well," he adds with a laugh, "is that we're the only ones who can really go nose to nose with each other."

In the studio, a huge standing set fills most of the space. One entire wall is taken up with a huge, 38-foot-high construction of concrete, wire mesh and foam representing a vast, underground cavern used by the aliens as a base. Directly across from it is Dr. Blackwood's Cottage office set, crowded with papers, computer printouts, star charts, and a wide assortment of whimsical bric-a-brac. Nearby stands a large sophisticated underground microbiology lab entered directly from an elevator. Next to the lab stands a layout of spacious living quarters and offices, for the characters, tastefully and expensively furnished.

Meanwhile as the camera grinds, Dr. Blackwood stands wearily in his office. Suzanne and Norton Drake are arguing about whether his wheeled, nocturnal excursions, which have been keeping her awake, constitute nervous pacing: a little touch of the human side of *War of the Worlds*. ☆