

WAR OF THE WORLDS

THEY'RE COMING....

"We are to them as cockroaches are to us"

- Herbert Wright, executive producer

"If you look at history, man always seems to be just totally delighted to destroy himself"

- Jared Martin, lead actor

"Man's complacent assumption of the future is too confident... In the case of every predominant animal the world has seen, the hour of its complete ascendance has been the eve of its entire overthrow"

- H G Wells

DARK WORDS indeed, and with series such as **The X-Files**, **Millennium** and **Dark Skies** offering a variety of grim scenarios, the dark and gruesome **War of the Worlds** series may just have been ahead of its time. One of the first in the recent boom of syndicated Fantasy and Sci-Fi shows, **War of the Worlds** was, with its partner in production **Friday the 13th**, finally put into production as a tv series following Paramount's success with its première syndicated offering **Star Trek: The Next Generation**. Greedily looking for other properties to turn into viable series, Paramount plundered its archives and found the superb 1953 film based on H G Wells's novel.

War of the Worlds as a series has about as much to do with the 1953 movie as that film had to do with the novel – but as the film was one of the best alien invasion movies ever made, that doesn't have to be a bad thing. **War of the Worlds** had already been a novel, a notorious radio play, a film, a rock album and a comic strip series, and now it was going to be an ongoing tv series and video release. The first problem was – how to do it? The answer was in the syndication market that had granted **Star Trek** a second lease of life.

The second problem was how to do it on a syndicated series' lower budget.

Conception

One can only wonder just how good **War of the Worlds** might have been had the producers enjoyed network money and quality production values. Conceived and put into production during the late 1988



writers strike, **War of the Worlds** made its début under the guidance of father and son team Sam and Greg Strangis, with father Sam producing and son Greg writing. At the same time, a series exploiting the **Friday the 13th** title (but completely unrelated to those films) was also put into production at the same offices, overseen by Frank Mancuso. When **Friday the 13th** performed better than **War of the Worlds**, Mancuso was put in charge of completely revamping the latter series for its second season, but the effects of the cure were worse than the symptoms and, as usual, the few good things were thrown out with the bad.

Both series had their good points and bad. Undoubtedly, the dumbest aspect of the first year had been the pointless and ludicrous assertion that although the 1953 film invasion had indeed happened – the opening episode uses it as a starting point – the entire world has apparently undergone a form of collective and selective amnesia about it. There's not being sarcas-



Bad things are happening as the aliens prepare for their second invasion...



Harrison and Suzanne discover more about the perilous situation



The hideous aliens gather...

tic — this was the actual explanation offered up by the producers and in the series. However, with the tv budget dictating the traditional and low-cost path of a covert aliens-in-human-form strategy by the aliens, the producers felt the need to dismiss the events of the film by having the whole world in denial (gee, what happened to those buildings and all those people we used to know?) It would perhaps have been more sinister for the Martians (now called 'Morthren') to be sneaking back quietly, and would have given the series an interesting backstory.

Return Appearance

War of the Worlds is more Horror than Sci-Fi as it proceeds. Most television Sci-Fi deals out salvation to the good and justice to the bad, whereas Horror material like **The X-Files** and **Millennium** deals in

random misfortune meted out to innocents, with no guarantee of a satisfying resolution. *Thy Kingdom Come*, written by Herbert Wright and directed by Winriche Kolbe, brings Sylvia Van Buren, who experienced the original 1953 invasion with Blackwood's former teacher, Doctor Forrester, into the picture. In keeping with the dark, downbeat tone of the series, she has spent her post-invasion life in a sanitarium under the 'delusion' that Earth was invaded by Mars, and now claims to have a psychic link with the aliens. Meanwhile, the aliens have stolen the bodies of an unfortunate vacationing family...

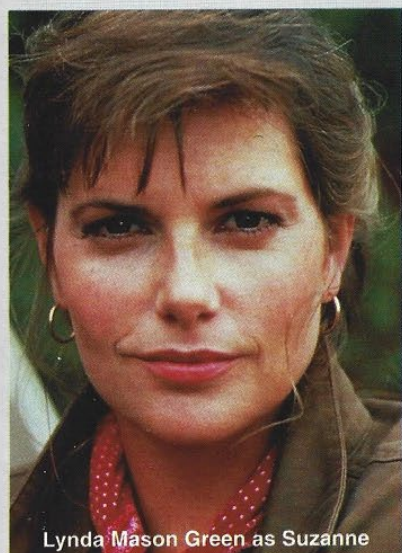
This episode features some classic memorable moments, including the young boy glimpsed twice during the story flashing 'help me' cards (he never gets it), and the bodysnatched football players whose decaying bodies are literally pulled apart in the

violent match that follows! Ann Robinson, who played the Van Buren role in the original movie ("I was treated like royalty!" she beamed), returns in the episodes *To Heal the Leper* and *The Meek Shall Inherit*. Herbert Wright came to **War of the Worlds** directly from the troubled early days of **Star Trek: The Next Generation**, while Kolbe, a regular director for **TNG** and a veteran of Fantasy and many other tv genres, recently did some fabulous work on the Howard Hughes episode of **Dark Skies**.

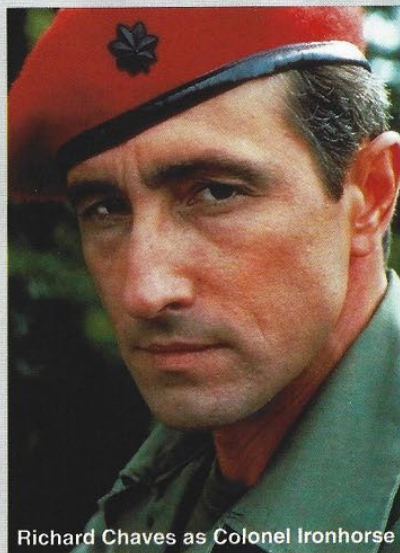
Eye for an Eye, written by Tom Lazarus and directed by Mark Sobel, offers a yarn to rival the wildest fantasies of **Dark Skies**, as it is revealed that Orson Welles's famous 1938 radio broadcast was a disinformation campaign organized to conceal a real alien scout force's activities in a town where a Martian saucer is buried. *The Prodigal Son* stars John Colicos (of **Star Trek, Mission: Impossible** and **Battlestar Galactica** fame) as an alien that has survived in human form since the 1953 invasion, now being hunted by his Morthren brethren for study and dissection, while in *To Heal the Leper*, the Morthren go on a human brain hunt (nicking 23 in one go!). *Goliath is My Name* has a group of role-players taken over and playing for real when the aliens try to test a killer virus on a college campus.

Clunker Time

The episode everyone remembers with a grimace is *Unto Us a Child is Born*, written by David Braff (of **V**), and directed by George Bloomfield. It's a bleak, unrelentingly morbid episode in which an alien takes over the body of a pregnant woman, and brings on her labour so his comrades



Lynda Mason Green as Suzanne



Richard Chaves as Colonel Ironhorse



Those 'mean-faced regular adversaries' gather for a happy snap

can seize the baby for experimentation. Kidnapped by our heroes, the baby grows into a young boy within a matter of hours, kills his nurse and returns to the hospital to find his alien mother. Our heroes kill the aliens and the boy is passed on to his grandparents for as happy a resolution as possible... but as the car pulls away from the hospital we discover that the Morthren have killed and taken over the bodies of the grandparents! *He Feedeth Among the Lillies* is the alien abduction fantasy to end them all, while the pre-BSE *The Good Samaritan* has four young friends being fed poisoned fast food by diner staff taken over by Morthren conducting a test run for a mass poisoning of the Earth's food.

Gore and Decay

Interestingly, *War of the Worlds* went the gore route, hiring special effects man Bill Sturgeon, fresh off the remake of *The Blob*, to come up with a variety of repulsive images based on the notion that the human bodies appropriated by the aliens start decaying as soon as the aliens occupy them. Like *The Invaders*, the bodies dissolve when the aliens are killed, but into goo rather than dust. The following season replaced these faceless aliens with some typical mean-faced regular adversaries – Denis Forest (as Malzor), Catherine Disher (as Mana), and Julian Richings (as Ardix). These humanoid aliens, the eponymous *Second Wave* of the second season's opening episode, have conquered the deterioration problem and clone rather than bodysnatch.

All Change

The second season (1989-90) did away with the more innovative aspects of the first (including the Biblical titles) for a more familiar, if not seriously over-used, scenario set in a near-future where society is falling apart (see also *V*, *Max Headroom*, *RoboCop* and countless post-*Blade Runner* movies).

One of the most prominent second season changes was the restructuring of the cast. In the first series, it consisted of Jared Martin as maverick eccentric scientist Harrison Blackwood, Lynda Mason Green (formerly a cast member of Canada's *Night Heat*) as microbiologist and psychologist Suzanne McCullough, Richard Chaves as absurdly named military man Lt Colonel Paul Ironhorse and Philip Akin as disabled computer genius Norton Drake. Blackwood and McCullough have an almost Mulder/Scully relationship, with Black-



The first season cast



Always on their guard against alien danger...

wood being an irritating off-the-wall know-it-all and McCullough the by-the-textbook scientist. However, it was Richard Chaves, who had chalked up appearances in *Hill Street Blues*, *St Elsewhere*, *Dallas*, *MacGyver* and the film *Predator*, who had turned out to have the show's most popular character – a 'minor' detail that might have been considered during the revamp that dropped his character. First season guest stars included John Vernon, Michelle Scarabelli, John Ireland, Jeff Corey, Greg Morris, Alex Cord, Deborah Wakeham, Patrick McNee, Peter Boretski, James Hong and John Colicos.

For the second season, Martin and Mason Green got physical makeovers (Blackwood was sporting a beard, Mason Green a new do), and they were joined by future *Highlander* lead Adrian Paul as tough guy John Kincaid. Also retained was Rachel Blanchard as McCullough's teenage daughter.

The one thing that can be said in the revamp's favour is that Mancuso did at least

take the trouble of clearing up the first season's story-line (if not all the minor details) in the second season's opening episode, wiping out the first invasion force (grimly executed by their replacements), killing off Ironhorse and Drake onscreen rather than between seasons, and destroying the first season's base of operations.

Familiarity Breeds...

Despite a guest appearance by Invader-fighter Roy Thinnes (in *Video Messiah*), the second season featured few, if any, familiar faces in the guest casts, but compensated by using familiar plots. One tired story-line turns up in both seasons – the old chestnut of using pop music to brainwash the masses (*Choirs of Angels* and *Terminal Rock*). Other old faves included doubles of the heroes, the safe haven that isn't, the 'good' alien, the traitorous human, the millionaire seeking the secret of immortality, the cyborg impersonator, and two romances with individuals who aren't what they seem. Some well-worn ideas were more welcome than others – *Time to Reap* was an interesting time travel story (is there any other kind?) in which the aliens travel back through time to 1953 to give a helping hand to the original invasion force. All the usual clichés were in evidence, but these sorts of stories are always fun.

Although tame by Horror film standards, *War of the Worlds* remains tv's most dark and gruesome Sci-Fi series, with many gory and unpleasant deaths, numerous shock scenes and a few memorable episodes in which nobody wins and everybody suffers. It was a brave attempt at a syndicated drama, lasting longer than most and achieving perhaps more than could be expected.

Jon Abbott

Possession is 9/10ths of the law



US SYNDICATION A BRIEF EXPLANATION

Although a few American tv series are 'in-house' productions of the networks, most are commissioned from studios or independent producers and co-financed by the networks. Usually, the network gets two runs of this new series – a first run and a repeat run – after which the rights to the series revert to the producer and/or distributor. At this point, the series goes into syndication – that is to say, it is sold to stations across America for re-broadcasts outside prime-time, which is when the rights-holders hope to actually make some money from the show (syndication afterlife is where *Star Trek* first started getting noticed). If you have over 100 episodes before cancellation, you're rich; around 40 to 70, you might break even; 13 episodes is loose change; six episodes and you've taken a bath.

A straight-to-syndication series bypasses the networks and the threat of losing your money if the show is cancelled in the ratings war – but the downside is that without the financial input of the networks, you're working with a much lower budget. That's why a lot of syndicated series are disappointments and some of them – *The Munsters Today*, *Out of this World*, the new *Untouchables*, *Airwolf II* – are downright awful.

To a certain extent, the success of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* changed this. Initially conceived as a way to exploit the *Star Trek* phenomenon, the series became a monster hit and successful title in its own right, opening the door for further remakes of such perennials as *Lassie*, *The Lone Ranger* and *Tarzan*. Other 'off-network' shows, as they are now called, include *Renegade*, *Young Indiana Jones*, *Highlander*, *The Outer Limits*, *Baywatch* and *Hercules*. As straight-to-syndication series became increasingly successful, with many local stations actually bumping network series to put them in prime-time slots, the money being spent on these series upfront to make them hits has been gradually increasing.



Awakening...