

Worst-case scenario: Bad TV show is 'better'

By Salvatore Caputo
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They've ruined the worst show on TV.

Before we go any further, you've got to understand that calling *War of the Worlds* "the worst show on TV" is not an insult. It's pointing out its most endearing quality.

After all, something has to be the worst show on TV. Why confer a superlative honor on something that is just plain bad, like *Superboy*?

TV cranks out mountains of bad stuff. And against this background, it takes real talent to turn out "El Stinko Supremo."

They come along rarely: series so mind-bogglingly bad that you have to admire the minds that created them.

Could any but a demented genius have created *Gilligan's Island*? (The same goes for its impossible-to-get-out-of-your-mind theme song.)

War of the Worlds was this type of gem. I tuned it in every Friday (at 9 p.m. on KNXV-TV, Channel 15) without fail.

What made it so bad?

Gosh, where to begin. It had terrible special effects, wooden acting, hackneyed plots and a ridiculously elaborate premise designed to pre-sell it as a sequel to the movie version of *War of the Worlds*, which was based on H.G. Wells' novel of the same name. It looked like a seminar in how not to put together a TV show, yet it was never boring.

Last year, the show was interesting because of the polarized tension between pacifist wacko scientist Harrison Blackwood (played by Jared Martin) and Lt. Col. Paul Ironhorse (Richard Chaves), an aggressive and straight-laced yet thoroughly honorable Vietnam vet.

The Martians of Wells' book were transformed to short guys in rubber suits from the planet Mortex (a morbid vortex?), who took over bodies by mysteriously melding into them. They supposedly had three arms, but nobody bothered to tell the guy who designed the rubber suits.

The only time the third arm came into play was when one burst out of the thoracic cavity of an inhabited host, *Alien*-style, and plunged its claws into a new victim's eyes. Since this was one of the few special effects that worked, it was done often.

For some unexplained reason, when these aliens died they dissolved into slime, another special effect that sort of worked.

These effects were so transparent and unconvincing that it was impossible to be grossed out, except by the thought that the person who thought up this stuff was running around loose.

Sometimes the aliens talked to each other in a subtitled alien tongue that sounded like Tarzan gargling. Other times they spoke in English; switching for no apparent reason, often in the



Jared Martin /
Plays a wacko
scientist who has
given up pacifist
ideals for guns.



Adrian Paul /
Portrays a
mercenary on
*War of the
Worlds*.

same episode.

The show varied wildly in tone. Some episodes were dark satires. Some were as grim and humorless as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Others were almost surreal.

But through all the carnage (the aliens were as ruthless as Wells' originals), Blackwood, Ironhorse and their pals — computer expert Norton Drake (Phil Akin) and microbiologist Suzanne McCullough (Lynda Mason Green) — remained invulnerable in a safe house.

It was weird and unrealistic that they could live a semblance of normalcy while witnessing this awful guerrilla war the aliens were waging, bent on eradicating humans to take over the planet.

But that's what was fun about it. It had no redeeming social value.

Paramount must have realized it was putting out the worst show on TV but, for some reason, didn't appreciate the honor. This year, new producers have been brought on board.

The new producers have killed off Ironhorse, the show's most popular character (according to *Starlog*, a fan magazine that says there is much displeasure among the show's followers over that act), and Drake.

This would be a laudable, even brave, move for a TV executive to have made. But in the same magazine, new producer Frank Mancuso Jr. admitted that he made the move before he knew who the show's most popular characters were.

Ironhorse has been replaced by a renegade mercenary, John Kincaid (Adrian Paul). Blackwood has become grim, leaving behind his pacifism and picking up guns to fight off the aliens. There now is no difference between the two.

In an effort to give the show tone and meaning, Mancuso has opted to copy the atmospherics of *Max Headroom* without the humor. Everything is grim, grim, grim and dull, dull, dull. Sure, the production values are better. (No more aliens in rubber suits.) It's no longer the worst show on TV.

But it's no fun any longer, either.