

Forbidden Planet

By Ian Olney

Visually stunning and thematically rich, Fred M. Wilcox's "Forbidden Planet" is a landmark film in science-fiction cinema. Set in the twenty-third century, it tells the story of a United Planets space cruiser sent to the distant world of Altair IV to investigate the fate of a group of colonists with whom Earth has lost contact. Upon landing, the ship's commander, J.J. Adams (Leslie Nielsen), and his crew learn that most of the colonists are dead, the victims of a mysterious planetary force. The sole survivors are a scientist, Dr. Edward Morbius (Walter Pidgeon), and his teenage daughter Altaira (Anne Francis), who live comfortably in a fortified home, their needs tended to by a mechanical servant, Robby the Robot. Morbius insists that he and Altaira are perfectly safe and demands that their would-be rescuers leave them in peace.

That night, however, the space cruiser is sabotaged, temporarily stranding the commander and his crew on Altair IV. Adams eventually discovers that Morbius is responsible. Shortly after the colonists' arrival, the scientist discovered ancient technology left behind by the Krell, an advanced alien race that once ruled the planet but destroyed themselves with a machine that gave form to their thoughts, including their subconscious fears and desires. Activating the machine, he unwittingly unleashed his own "monsters from the Id," killing the other colonists, who, unlike him, wanted to return to Earth. Since Adams is again attempting to remove Morbius from Altair IV, the scientist's "evil self"—a gigantic, invisible beast—has targeted the commander and his crew. Ultimately, confronted with his guilt and fearful of the Krells' technology falling into the wrong hands, a stricken Morbius sends Altaira back to Earth with Adams and programs the machine to self-destruct, blowing himself up along with the rest of the planet.

"Forbidden Planet" was not the first science-fiction film to emerge from Hollywood in the 1950s, a decade that saw an explosion in the genre's popularity. It was preceded by a number of key pictures, including monster movies like Gordon Douglas's "Them!" (1954) and alien invasion films like "The Thing from Another World" (1951), ghost-directed by Howard Hawks. Its release, however, represented a watershed moment in the history of sci-fi cinema. At the time, science fiction was generally considered "B" movie fare, matinee fodder for juvenile audiences. "Forbidden Planet" changed that. Produced by Hollywood's most glamorous studio, MGM, on a then-extravagant budget of almost two million dol-



Anne Francis might have captivated adult males, but younger audiences thought Robby the Robot was the true star of the picture. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

lars, it catapulted the genre to mainstream respectability, paving the way for the blockbuster sci-fi films of today.

That "Forbidden Planet" aspires to be something more than a "B" movie is evident, in the first place, from its writing. The script, which evolved over several years and two separate drafts—the first by Irving Block and Allen Adler, and the second by Cyril Hume—is modelled after a classic work of dramatic literature: William Shakespeare's "The Tempest," the tale of a shipwreck that maroons a party of Italian aristocrats on an island inhabited by a sorcerer, his daughter, and his enchanted servants. Shakespeare's characters have clear analogues in the film. The sorcerer Prospero is Morbius, who has harnessed the magic of advanced technology; the daughter Miranda is Altaira; the loyal sprite Ariel is Robby the Robot; and the mutinous native Caliban is Morbius's "evil self." The movie broadly follows the play's plot, too. Commander Adams and his crew are stranded in a remote location, just like Shakespeare's sailors; a romance develops between Adams and Altaira, as it does between Shakespeare's lovers, Ferdinand and Miranda; and Morbius finally overcomes his de-

mons and destroys the Krells' machine, a climax that recalls Shakespeare's own, in which Prospero defeats the rebellious Caliban and renounces his magical powers. This literary pedigree sets the film apart from other, less narratively-sophisticated sci-fi movies of the period. The script is also unique in its generally liberal outlook and serious treatment of adult themes. Among other things, the film can be read as a cautionary tale about the dangers posed by technological advancements during the Cold War: the Krells' machine (which is powered by a giant thermonuclear reactor) works as a potent metaphor for the hydrogen bomb, a marvel of modern scientific engineering that nevertheless, because of the darker impulses of human nature, threatened the future of the entire planet in the fifties.

"Forbidden Planet" also distinguishes itself from its "B" movie predecessors with regard to its lavish production values. Shot in CinemaScope and Eastman-color, it is arguably the first science-fiction spectacular, pulling out all the stops to wow its audience with visual excess. Cedric Gibbons's imaginative art direction makes the most of the film's novel setting (it was the first movie of its genre to take place entirely in interstellar space, on another world), conjuring an utterly alien landscape with a combination of finely-detailed sets, evocative matte paintings, and inventive props. The movie's special effects, cutting-edge in the 1950s, are still impressive today: stop-motion animation and optical printing, among other techniques, are used to create convincing images of flying saucers and laser battles. For the film's most famous effects sequence, when the monster from Morbius's subconscious attacks Adams's ship and is rendered visible by the crew's electrical defenses, Walt Disney (in a rare instance of artistic collaboration) loaned MGM a team of animators headed by Joshua Meador to bring the creature to life on screen. The picture's soundtrack is groundbreaking as well, boasting the first totally electronic score. Its eerie tonalities, composed by avant-garde musicians Bebe and Louis Barron, contribute immeasurably to the film's otherworldly atmosphere.

In all of these ways, "Forbidden Planet" elevated science fiction as a Hollywood genre, effectively reintroducing it to audiences as a brand of cinema capable of stimulating the intellect as well as the imagination. Its influence did not end there. The film's central concept—the idea of a space navy tasked by an interplanetary federation with exploring the distant reaches of the galaxy and helping out alien worlds in need—was a major source of inspiration for Gene Roddenberry's classic sci-fi television series "Star Trek" (1966-1969), which also drew on the movie's production design and effects for the look of its phasers and transporters. And the film's most memorable prop, the glass-domed, bubble-limbed Robby the Robot, which later appeared in Herman Hoffman's "The Invisible Boy" (1957) and on a number of television shows from "The Twilight Zone" (1959-1964) to "Lost in Space" (1965-1968), clearly shaped George Lucas's vision for the android servants C-3PO and R2-D2 in "Star Wars" (1977) and its sequels. But the most important contribution the picture made to science-fiction cinema was rescuing the genre from the "B" movie ghetto. It is difficult to imagine recent sci-fi blockbusters like James Cameron's "Avatar" (2009) and Ridley Scott's "Prometheus" (2012)—indeed, it is difficult to imagine science fiction as a cornerstone of contemporary Hollywood cinema—without "Forbidden Planet."

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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