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Review of Forbidden Planet

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Forbidden Planet (Blu-ray)

(Warner Home Video, 9.7.2010)

Commentators in the extras for *Forbidden Planet* make clear why the 1956 film is a science fiction classic. It works both as a parable of the decade's fears of nuclear annihilation and mistrust of science and as a rousing entertainment, blending elements of science fiction, westerns, war movies, the military service comedies so prevalent in the 50s, and even romantic comedies. Despite a cast of mostly second-line stars and conservative direction by Fred McLeod Wilcox, *Forbidden Planet* remains a solid entertainment.

Around 2200 a spaceship commanded by J. J. Adams (Leslie Nielsen) arrives on the remote planet Altair IV to investigate what happened to a scientific expedition unheard from for twenty years. The only survivor of the expedition is Dr. Edward Morbius (Walter Pidgeon), whose daughter, Altaira (Anne Francis), was born on her namesake planet. Everything seems peachy keen, with the crew members, especially Jerry Farman (Jack Kelly), lusting after the leggy Altaira. Then one is murdered by an invisible monster, and all hell breaks loose. Identifying and destroying this evil force becomes the focus of the mission.

As with William Wellman's wonderful western [Yellow Sky](#), the inspiration for *Forbidden Planet* is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with Morbius standing in for the magician Prospero and the film's real star, Robby the Robot, a mechanical version of his attendant spirit Ariel. Familiarity with *The Tempest* adds to the film's piquancy but is not essential. *Forbidden Planet* entertains because of how well it balances its various components. There is just enough romance and just enough comic relief, with Farman teaching the naive Altaira how to kiss and the mission's cook (Earl Holliman) showing Robby how to make bourbon.

Wilcox is best known for such films as *Lassie Come Home* and *The Secret Garden*, and on one level *Forbidden Planet* is a children's film. It is, however, much more than this because of the naughty bits related to Altaira, whose outfits prefigure the miniskirt, and the genuine terror of the unknown force. When the explanation of the monster arrives, it's a doozy, with Freudian psychology joining forces with Shakespeare and Hollywood genre conventions.

Though not one of my favorites, Pidgeon gives arguably his best performance here, ably capturing Morbius' arrogance and guilt. Pidgeon's pompous speaking manner is perfect for a mad scientist. Francis conveys Altaira's mixture of innocence and sexuality quite well. With the exception of the goofiness offered by Holliman, his stereotyped role during this period, the rest of the cast is composed of stiffs, with Richard Anderson and Warren Stevens joining Nielsen and Kelly. As Nielsen says in one of the extras, before he evolved into a comic genius, he was "a stalwart, disciplined, strong leading man," a euphemism for stolid.

Forbidden Planet has remarkable special effects for its era. From the realistic robot to the planet's desert terrain to the imaginative monster, everything works. Wilcox's direction is unimaginative, perhaps because the reliance on the mattes necessary for adding the effects made camera movement and lots of setups impossible. *Forbidden Planet* has an aquamarine and orange color scheme, familiar to most in its original audience from countless westerns. The cinematography of George J. Folsey, veteran of several MGM musicals, including *Meet Me in St. Louis*, lacks its usual clarity, again because such would make the effects seem more artificial. As a result this Blu-ray edition lacks the definition of the transfers of other MGM films from the 50s, notably the brilliant colors of *An American in Paris* and *North by Northwest*.

Some aspects of *Forbidden Planet* are unintentionally funny. Will the spacecrafts of 2200, should such even exist, really look like flying saucers? Morbius' glass-and-steel house is clearly an example of mid-twentieth-century California modern, telling us more about the past than the future. But I love its style, including the surrounding landscaping with rusty red plants and the beautiful fish sculpture at the front of the house.

The extras are holdovers from the 2006 two-disc special edition. "Amazing: Exploring the Far Reaches of *Forbidden Planet*" includes comments from surviving cast members Nielsen, Francis, Holliman, Stevens, and Anderson, others who worked on the film, special effects artists, science fiction experts, and director fans such as John Carpenter, Joe Dante, and John Landis. The most interesting portion involves Bebe Barron, who created with her husband, Louis, what the credits refer to as "Electronic Tonalities." Barron, who says that only about a half dozen people were composing electronic music at the time, describes how her husband had to invent the technology to make the film's distinctively ominous soundtrack. Robert Kinoshita, not even mentioned in the credits, says he designed Robby "so he could do practically anything."

There's much more about Kinoshita and his creation in "Robby the Robot: Engineering a Sci-Fi Icon." Dante talks about using Robby in three films, including *Gremlins*. Included in the extras are Robby's star turn in the 1957 *The Invisible Boy*, with Richard Eyer, a particularly obnoxious child actor, and his 1958 guest appearance on the television version of *The Thin Man*. The 2005 Turner Classic Movies documentary *Watch the Skies!: Science Fiction, the 1950s and Us* is aimed at those who know nothing about the subject, with the slightly condescending likes of James Cameron, George Lucas, Ridley Scott, and Steven Spielberg pointing out the obvious. There are also deleted scenes and so-called "lost footage" of negligible interest.

Overall the extras do a fairly good job of placing the achievement of *Forbidden Planet* in context. Its influence is clear in innumerable films, including *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Alien*.—Michael Adams