Fact Sheet
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Media Studies
Film Review: War of the Worlds

Take Time Film Reviewer
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Today's movie is yet another re-make – so, because of this – I'm going to begin with a short trip down memory lane. Stay with me, because it's all relevant.

For some years, during the 1930's, well before I was born, my father was the licensee of the Majestic Hotel in Adelaide. This grand, three-storey hotel, with its two, wide, iron laced verandahs looking out over King William Street has, sadly, long since been swept away and replaced by the bland Commonwealth Bank tower.

The Majestic Hotel occupied the site of one of Adelaide's earliest theatres and, when the Hotel was built, a new theatre was incorporated in the design of the hotel, continuing a tradition of hotel-theatres reaching back hundreds of years.

The Majestic Theatre, as it was known, was a popular venue for stage shows and, eventually movies, until, from my recollection, its closure sometime in the 1960's.
By the time I was old enough to become obsessed by movies we were living in a different hotel – the Earl of Zetland in Flinders Street – and the Majestic Theatre was within blissfully easy reach, literally just around the corner.

As a picture theatre it became one of my favourite haunts. In the 1940's and 50's most City cinemas were the first-release outlets for particular production companies – the Metro in Hindley Street screened MGM productions; the Regent carried Twentieth Century Fox movies; and so on. The Majestic was the first-release outlet for Paramount movies which – during the 1950's – included the Cecil B. De Mille classics The Greatest Show on Earth and The Ten Commandments. Paramount also produced the Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis comedies – delightfully sophisticated entertainment for a kid like me.
One Saturday afternoon in 1954 I hurried around the corner to the Majestic bubbling with expectation of what I was going to see. I knew the movie wasn't going to be an easy ride for a kid because I had seen the trailer and it looked pretty scary. The movie was called The War of the Worlds. I loved the Sci Fi thrillers of the 50's but they were always in black and white and had their first screenings at the downmarket Rex Theatre in Rundle Street which specialised in RKO "B" pictures. The major difference about The War of the Worlds was that it was in colour and even a kid could see that a lot more trouble had been taken with making this movie than with the average Sci Fi flick. In fact, the special effects won an Oscar. The movie rated pretty highly on the scare factor but it wasn't the scariest example of the genre – that accolade is still held firmly, as far as I'm concerned

by the absolutely terrifying monster movie called The Thing From Another World which had me hiding under the seat around 1952. Of course I was younger then.

One of the intriguing production quirks of the Sci Fi thrillers was the "sting in the tail" conclusion which characterised many of them. One of them, whose title I can't recall, replaced the traditional concluding words of The End at the end of the movie with the enigmatic words The Beginning. In the case of The War of the Worlds the quirky conclusion was in the manner in which mankind ends up being saved from the apparently irresistible inter-planetary invaders. Just when we thought that all was lost, the evil ones begin breathing the Earth's atmosphere and are killed off by a bug that humans have evolved to live with – the common cold.

Now, much more recently, but driven by fond memories of 50's Sci Fi experiences, I hurried along expectantly to see Steven Spielberg's re-make of The War of the Worlds. Could the Master Director, with an array of computerised special effects at his disposal, conjure-up a better thrill for me than the one I experienced in the Majestic Theatre over fifty years ago? As it turned out – the answer was no.

That's not taking anything away from the special effects which are fantastic. And Tom Cruise who works hard at portraying a Joe Average sort of guy driven by an instinct for survival and a desire to protect his kids. And some of the movie's Big Moments – like the sequence early in the movie when the first monstrous alien war machine bursts out of the bowels of the Earth and begins vaporising people will-nilly with its lazers. But it all seemed to settle down too quickly into being more of the same. When you get past the gee whiz effects the central heart of the movie is empty. There's nothing to make the viewer really care about the characters or what's happening to them, or, for that matter, to care about the world and what's happening to it. Despite all of the stomping about by the alien war machines the movie rates very low on scare factor – and that is, after all what The War of the Worlds is supposed to be all about. Orson Welles managed to cause panic in the streets with his radio production of the story in the 1930's but I don't think Spielberg's version will cause too many people over the age of five to suffer nightmares. In the aftermath of 9/11, and the bombings in Bali, Madrid, London and Baghdad you'd have to conclude that a movie director has got to work pretty hard to construct an alien that is more terrifying than a fanatical human being can be.

I think that, for its time, the 1950's version of The War of the Worlds wins out over the latest version. But then, when I first saw it, I was a whole lot younger.

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