

ForbiddenPlanetFredMWilcoxWalterPidgeon1956TextTVS

by Tim Van Schmidt

Forbidden Planet \*\*\*\*

Buried deep under the surface of the planet Altair 4 is the remnants of an ancient civilization- a huge labyrinth of machinery and technology, far outliving its creators. The complex has been discovered by a scientist from an exploration mission, and while the rest of the crew from the mission perished- except for his daughter- he has survived and dedicated decades to its study. His regimen is interrupted when another mission- a military-run operation- comes to the planet to check up on the fate of the previous explorers.

Such is the set-up for the 1956 science fiction classic "Forbidden Planet." It's a classic because even though the movie was released in 1956, it outshines most later efforts in creativity and execution. This movie is a total package of supposition and fantasy, interesting visually and mentally.

The acting in "Forbidden Planet" is not too bad- it comes off at first like a battleship movie- with a captain and crew interacting as if they're fresh out of World War II. The military men adopt a dispassionate dedication to their mission- even when their comrades die. But the action in the movie takes them into situations far beyond normal military experience, challenging the characters to think beyond what they actually know. Anne Francis' turn as Alta, the only female in the movie, is refreshing compared to the stock military characters that pour out of the space ship.

The sets in "Forbidden Planet" are not just servicable backdrops, but art works in themselves. The spaceship scenes in the beginning, for example, are conceptual masterpieces. The commanding bridge of the spaceship does not look anything like any kind of World War II ship. Upon landing, the barren landscape of Altaira 4 is desolate and plenty alien-looking, the back drops offering a sense of vast distances. Added to this is Morbius' home- a futuristically designed residence with odd plants, mechanisms and strangely shaped doorways.

But the sets used while Morbius takes the captain and the Doc for a tour of the alien complex are those that make the concepts of "Forbidden Planet" come to fruition. The hugeness of the machinery dwarfs

the characters, indicating power and scale far beyond the human experience. The mechanisms in the laboratory Morbius has been using to study the Krell are designed purposefully to fit non-human technicians, completing the illusion.

There are instances of cool special effects throughout the production- bright streaks of color- probably hand-applied- flash across the screen whenever the military men use their blasters. The attack of the monster is riveting for the crackling brightness of the color. This tends to be in sharp contrast to the filmed footage and very effective, even spooky.

All of this is underscored by the soundtrack, filled with the "electronic tonalities" of Louis and Bebe Barron. There's a scene where Morbius drops a disk into a machine and sounds come out he claims is music recorded 500,000 years before. That's a mindbending concept in itself and the Barrons respond by making a kind of bubbling and burbling of tones, the sound coming out in bursts and dashes. The Barrons' otherworldly work accompanies the rest of the movie with as much exotic power, heightening the tension of the action.

Of course, one of the things that made "Forbidden Planet" a hit was the robot named Robby- a big, thick, clunky machine that can do anything it is ordered to do, except harm a human being. While the robot becomes a distinctive element of the movie, it is also used for comic relief- perhaps the weakest parts of the movie. Robby interacts with the cook of the space ship over Kentucky bourbon- bringing the production down to much more common, gutteral level. Robby is a clear inspiration for talking robot characters and scenes that occur in many movies since.

But in the end it's the ideas and philosophical questions the movie brings up that gives it so much weight. It's been said that "Forbidden Planet" is based on the Shakespeare play "The Tempest," but even Shakespeare didn't have the imagination it took to create this production. Just the scope of time involved in the story- "2,000 centuries"- is a challenge in itself. To imagine a source of knowledge and power just as big is to also ask questions about who is fit to be in control of such power.

The most compelling moment of "Forbidden Planet" is the change that occurs in Morbius' character. Pidgeon's dramatic outburst just prior to Morbius' death is compelling in its raw, desperate passion. He has become a man with super intellect thanks to the ancient machinery, but his intellect is not enough to prepare him for the awful truth. There is still plenty of human being left in Morbius and the tortured anguish he expresses in his final moments is gripping indeed.

Directed by Fred M. Wilcox...1956...Walter Pidgeon (Morbius)...Anne Francis (as Alta)...Leslie Nielsen (as Commander Adams)...Warren Stevens (as Doc)...Earl Holliman (as Cook)...Robby the Robot...98 minutes...electronic soundtrack by Bebe and Louis Barron.