

Forbidden Planet

US, 1956 – 96 mins

Fred McLeod Wilcox

The headline over the *Evening Standard's* review, 'Shakespeare takes a journey into space', neatly sums up this hugely enjoyable and influential picture, with critic Alan Brien praising Cyril Hume for writing 'the most rumbustiously enjoyable of all Hollywood planetary melodramas, apparently by dressing *The Tempest* in space suits.'

Shakespeare and Hume both drew on contemporary exploration. Just as the discovery of America and the wreck of several ships in the Bermudas in 1609 inspired Shakespeare, so the space race ignited the 1950s' sci-fi boom in which *Forbidden Planet* played a significant role. *The Tempest* snugly fits this genre mould, as play and film transport audiences to a remote island/planet, where mankind encounters strange and sometimes hostile creatures.

In AD 2257, a Universal Planets cruiser skippered by unflappable Commander J. J. Adams (Leslie Nielsen) lands on planet Altair-4 to search for survivors from the Beleraphon, a spaceship that lost contact with Earth twenty years earlier. Adams and his senior officers, Lt Farman and 'Doc' Ostrow, meet the Beleraphon's sole survivor (and the film's Prospero), the bearded, refined Dr Morbius (Walter Pidgeon). He lives happily with his beautiful daughter, Altaira (mini-skirted Anne Francis), who, like Miranda, has 'never known any human being except her father'. The pair's Ariel is Robby the Robot, an electronic Jeeves who speaks 187 languages and can manufacture everything from hors-d'oeuvres to emeralds ('It's the housewife's dream,' quips Adams).

Adams and Farman instantly follow Ferdinand's lead by falling for Altaira, who flirts innocently in crassly written exchanges. Back at the cruiser, the bourbon-swilling cook (Earl Hollimann) takes on Stephano and Trinculo's low-life comedy roles, dismissing Altair-4 as 'another one of them new worlds. No beer, no women, no pool parlours' and when Robby samples his Kentucky bourbon the robot fleetingly becomes Caliban.

Cheesy romance and humour are then pushed aside by the return of a 'terrible, incomprehensible force', which Morbius claims wiped out the Beleraphon's crew. A vast, invisible monster, immune to laser blasts, twice attacks the ship, killing Farman and three other crewmen. Morbius reluctantly shows Adams and Doc the vast machine created 500,000 years earlier by the planet's original inhabitants, the Krell, a race infinitely superior to man. Doc takes a Krell 'brain boost', realises the invisible foe is a 'monster from the Id', then dies, leaving Adams to convince Morbius that the monstrous creature was the product of his own subconscious, and is now attacking again – an inventive variation on Prospero's motivation, albeit wrapped up in sci-fi psycho-hokum. The exiled Duke wants to punish the men who drove him from Naples to the island; Morbius killed off his Beleraphon shipmates when they tried to return from Altair-4 to Earth. Prospero tells Miranda: 'I to my state grew stranger, being transported and rapt in secret studies.' When Morbius had been on the planet for some time with his wife, he felt 'a boundless longing to make a home here, far from the scurry and strife of human kind.' His Id took over to such an extent that he was prepared to kill to fulfil that longing, but now, as the monster bashes its way into the Krell lab to attack Adams and Altaira, Morbius – like Prospero –renounces vengeance, killing off his 'evil self' at the cost of his own life. The film ends with Altair-4 blown to smithereens by a Krell chain reaction, as Adams, Altaira and Robby fly back to Earth.

Forbidden Planet's \$1m-plus budget made it, at the time, the most expensive sci-fi movie ever made, and MGM were not going to jeopardise that investment by allowing dusty old Shakespeare's name to feature in its marketing or the credits. That million dollars paid for Louis and Bebe Barron's 'electronic tonalities', which provide an atmospheric undercurrent of beeping, whirring and screeching, standing in for the

(*Opposite page*) Altaira (Anne Francis), left, and Robby the Robot watch Commander Adams (Leslie Nielsen) cradle the dying Doc (Warren Stevens) in Fred McLeod Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet*



'sounds and sweet airs' of Prospero's island. The matte-painted planetary backdrops and Oscar-nominated special effects now look primitive; the expansive sets still impress (the cavernous Krell lab anticipates the vertiginous footbridges of the Death Star in *Star Wars*).

There are disappointingly flat performances by Pidgeon, Baxter and, especially, Nielsen, whose unvarying, deadpan style points the way to his appearances in the *Naked Gun* films. Robby remains a terrific creation. Built like a steel Michelin Man, with the staid voice of a 1950s' radio announcer, he was the first movie robot to become a hero in his own right, appearing again in *The Invisible Boy* in 1957. It is fascinating to think of Ariel inspiring Robby, and Robby becoming godfather to C-3PO and Robocop, and to consider how Farman's dalliance with Altaira pointed the way for Captain Kirk's numerous *Star Trek* romances with conveniently humanoid alien women. These are fascinating, Shakespearean connections: *The Tempest* influences *Forbidden Planet*, which then exerts its own lasting influence on the science-fiction genre.

Dir: Fred McLeod Wilcox; **Prod:** Nicholas Nayfack; **Scr:** Cyril Hume; **DOP:** George Folsey; **Editor:** Ferris Webster; **Score:** Louis and Bebe Barron; **Main Cast:** Walter Pidgeon (Dr Morbius), Anne Francis (Altaira), Leslie Nielsen (Commander Adams), Warren Stevens (Lt 'Doc' Ostrow), Jack Kelly (Lt Farman), Earl Hollimann (Cook), Robby the Robot.