

# 'War of the Worlds' borrows from modern-day calamities

By Kam Williams  
Sentinel-Voice

Before Steven Spielberg came along and started suggesting that Martians might be people, too, most alien invasion movies were high body-count affairs in which the humans suddenly found themselves swept up into a frightening fight for survival against an army of malevolent marauders. But then, his pictures, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)" and "E. T. (1982)" ushered in an era of understanding by presenting a peaceful variety of visitors from elsewhere in the galaxy.

Well, wouldn't you know it, now that he's sold us on the idea of warm and fuzzy extraterrestrials, Spielberg has decided to flip the script with "War of the Worlds," an old school sci-fi flick which reverts to the pulp fiction notion of aliens as the enemies of Earthlings. The film is based on the H. G. Wells classic novel from 1898 about a spaceship from Mars which lands in London.

The intelligent creatures aboard unload 100-foot tall, military machines which easily defeat the English army. However, rather than simply decimate the population, the conquerors proceed to herd people like cattle, in order to be able to suck human blood for sustenance.

Wells crafted his cautionary tale as a dire warning about the dangers of imperialism, implying that the British might not like it if they were to find themselves at the other end of the oppression equation, facing social, economic and cultural extermination

at the hands of a technologically-advanced civilization. For, at the time of the book's publication, England was enjoying the height of its influence around the globe.

When this literary classic was adapted to the radio airwaves on October 30, 1938, it triggered a nationwide panic during a live broadcast narrated by an animated Orson Welles who described widespread death and destruction due to Martians who had supposedly just landed in New Jersey. The 1953 Hollywood screen version, set in California, turned the morality play into an action-oriented extravaganza which would win its only Academy Award for its eye-popping special effects.

Here, Spielberg also opts to downplay the novel's heavy-handed, political message in favor of computer-generated imagery and a plotline which telescopes in on one man's desperate struggle to protect his two children during an extinction-level event. Tom Cruise stars as Ray Ferrier, a Jersey dockworker whose immaturity was ostensibly to blame for the divorce which broke up his now fractured family.

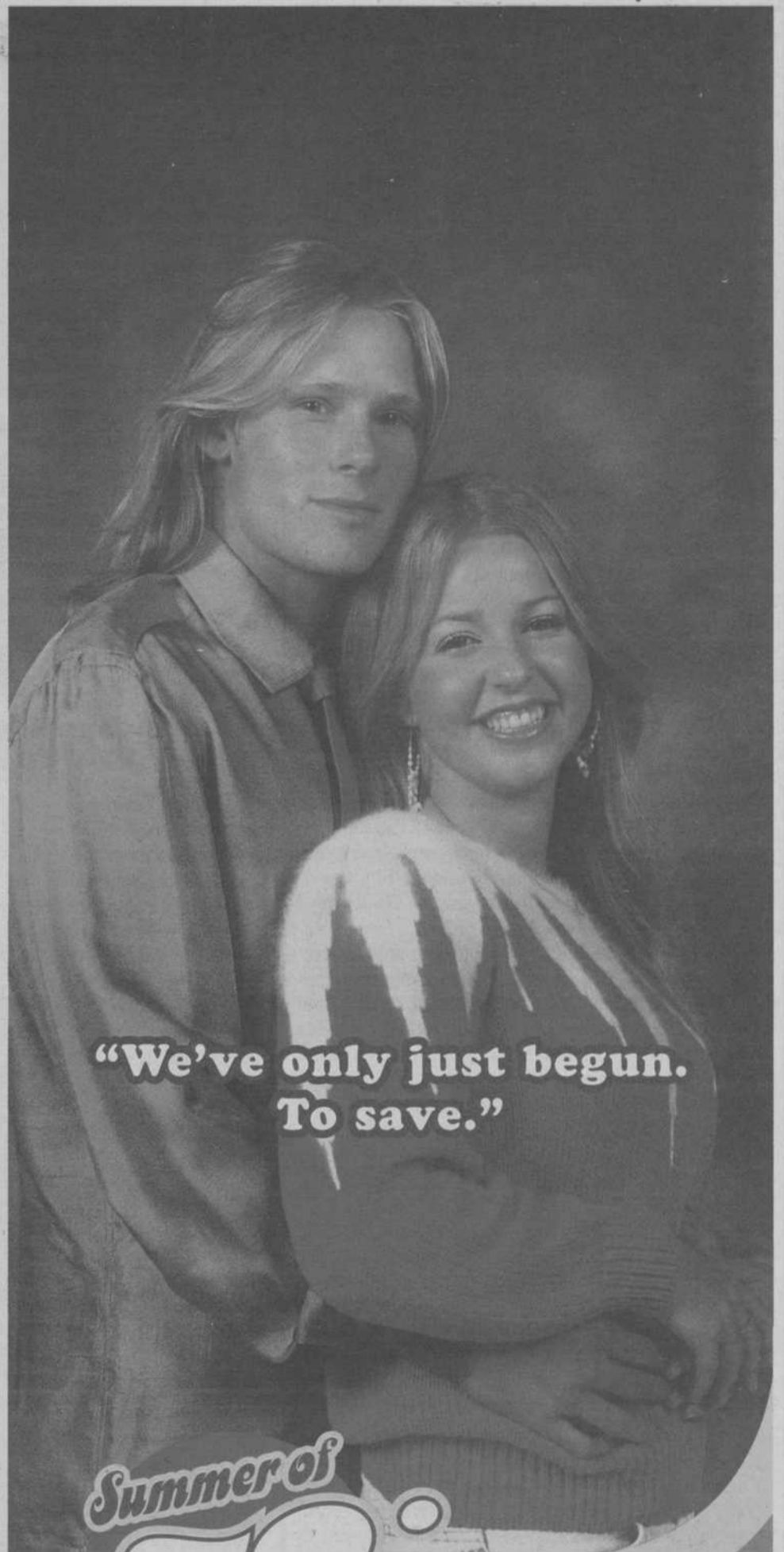
At the point of departure, we find Ray receiving his kids for a weekend visitation from his recently remarried ex-wife (Miranda Otto) who is off to Boston with her new husband. Though Rachel (Dakota Fanning), a precocious 10-year-old, has come to terms with her less-than-perfect father, rebellious teen Robbie (Justin Chatwin) exhibits little patience or respect for his absentee parent.

Even before the kids have much of a chance to get comfortable at Dad's pad, warning signs arrive in ominous clouds which form overhead, followed by magnetic lightning storms, which not only rip giant fissures in the pavement, but also knock out all electrical and battery-powered devices. Next, you guessed it, chaos ensues as out of the ground emerge towering tripods equipped with lasers to vaporize their prey in an instant.

Lucky for the Ferriers, Ray has uncanny survival instincts, understanding better than anyone in the hysterical hordes of humanity, just what is happening, where to find the only operable automobile, in what direction to head, and how to outsmart the invaders at every turn. Spielberg proves himself a master of pandemonium, conveying the utter sense of dread of those unfortunates caught up in the predicament, though most of the slaughter occurs off-screen.

Though "War of the Worlds" offers no agenda other than to scare the bejeezus out of you, it does that well, often evoking memories of such recent real-life tragedies as 9/11, Rwanda and the Tsunami. Plus, Spielberg is not above making allusions to "Titanic," "Signs" and a host of other disaster and sci-fi flicks in the course of making a stunning summer spectacular movie which ought to be remembered at Oscar time.

Excellent (4 stars). Rating: PG-13 for disturbing images and for frightening sequences of sci-fi violence.



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## SPIDERWOMAN

Sporting a spider web hairdo, this unidentified woman was one of many people sporting lavish hair styles during the 5th Annual Hair Extravaganza at the Texas Station last month. Salons and barber shops throughout the valley participated in the annual show, which is sponsored by Tiffany's Paradise of Hair.