







## SECRET SPINE-CHILLER: THE OTHER SIDE OF ROBERT WISE

by Peter Tonguette

What do you do if you are the man who edited *Citizen Kane* (1941)? You go on to make B-movies, of course.

Despite having been chosen to be the cutting-room collaborator of Orson Welles on the greatest film of all time, Robert Wise first called "action" on low-budget exercises in genre filmmaking. He was launched as a director thanks to a trio of films for producer Val Lewton, including the undisputed classics of horror *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) — codirected by Gunther von Fritsch but completed by Wise — and *The Body Snatcher* (1945). As his career progressed, Wise was again and again assigned to modest but effective films that operated within the parameters of their genres, including the chilling film noir *Born to Kill* (1947), the dramatic boxing tale *The Set-Up* (1949), and the powerful science fiction fable *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951).

Yet, after establishing himself with these agile, relatively unassuming entertainments, Wise found himself at the helm of increasingly self-serious, sometimes turgid projects – films that seemed to belong less to his own B-movie heritage than to what French film critics might have termed "the tradition of quality": Executive Suite (1954), Helen of Troy (1956), or I Want to Live! (1958). These films – along with Wise's subsequent super-sized epics West Side Story (1961), The Sound of Music (1965), and The Sand Pebbles (1966) – led to the director's banishment to the category of "strained seriousness" in Andrew Sarris's 1968 book The American Cinema. "His temperament is vaguely liberal, his style vaguely realistic; but after The Sound of Music and The Sand Pebbles, the stylistic signature of Robert Wise is indistinct to the point of invisibility." Sarris glumly concluded.

More than five decades have passed since the publication of *The American Cinema*, but many film buffs continue to regard Wise – who died in 2005 at the age of 91 – as Sarris did: a director of handsome but hopelessly bland films. Yet such an assessment overlooks not only Wise's early accomplishments as an editor and a director – after all, talents as diverse as Orson Welles and Val Lewton both saw something in him – but his own tendencies later in his career. In fact, Wise often seemed like a B-list moviemaker trapped in the body of an A-list impresario. A self-effacing man, when I interviewed him in late 2004 for my book



Orson Welles Remembered, he demurred when I asked if Welles had an influence on his work as a director: "I think probably a little bit, yeah. But how much, I couldn't tell you."

As if intuiting that he had been miscast as a maker of epics, Wise fell into a pattern: after an overstuffed misfire — and, sometimes, after an overstuffed success — the director unfailingly turned to a quieter but more expressive genre film. Thus, the failed play-on-film *Two for the Seesaw* (1962) was followed by the eerily effective haunted house tale *The Haunting* (1963); the not-entirely-convincing true-life disaster drama *The Hindenburg* (1975) was followed by the atmospheric reincarnation yarn *Audrey Rose* (1977); and, most notably, the famously unsuccessful Gertrude Lawrence biopic *Star!* (1969) was followed by one of the most impressive science-fiction films ever produced — *The Andromeda Strain*, which was released by Universal Pictures in March of 1971.

Drawn from a 1969 novel by Michael Crichton, *The Andromeda Strain* revolves around the panic that ensues when a U.S. satellite descends from the sky and crashes in the village of Piedmont, New Mexico, which is transformed overnight into a veritable ghost town. The satellite has apparently become tainted with a lethal alien organism, resulting in the deaths of close to the entire population of Piedmont. Rounded up to investigate the organism, as well as determine the steps necessary to mitigate its damage, are four scientists who together form a team: Dr. Jeremy Stone (Arthur Hill); Dr. Mark Hall, a surgeon (James Olson); Dr. Charles Dutton (David Wayne); and Dr. Ruth Leavitt (Kate Reid). To carry out their work, the quartet is shuttled off to a hush-hush subterranean compound known as the Wildfire Laboratory.

As the director of *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*, Wise had spent the better part of the sixties surrounded by show tunes, but for this altogether different project, Wise commissioned a score that could hardly be described as tuneful. Heard over the opening titles are the sounds of early computers: buzzing, beeping, and whirring. It may be music of sorts, but it's a long way from Rodgers and Hammerstein. "I wanted it to be almost like sound effects," Wise said in Sergio Leemann's book *Robert Wise on His Films*. "I listened to a number of people who were doing electronic music at the time and settled on Gil Mellé." In crafting a soundtrack for the film, Wise instructed Mellé to avoid any sounds that called to mind actual instruments. "I would stop, call Gil, and say, 'That little passage in there sounds almost like music.' He'd go back and rework those bars and take out the musical sound," Wise recalled in the book.

Wise may have opted for trendiness in the film's soundscape, but – working with the great cinematographer Richard H. Kline – the director devised a cool, restrained visual style that contrasts with the urgency of the storyline. After entering Piedmont to track down the

satellite, a team communicates via radio with Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, but Wise and Kline only show us one side of the conversation. As the servicemen at the base listen – first casually, then more attentively – the increasingly frenetic dispatches from the team in Piedmont are represented visually as audio waves on a monitor: "The signals from the satellite are getting very strong"; "We see bodies – lots of them"; "It's sort of like they just dropped in their tracks, sir." A scream follows and then silence, hauntingly visualized as a straight green line.

Drawing on his decades of experience in the director's chair, Wise devised elegant solutions for bringing each of the scientists into the flow of the film. For example, before we are introduced to Dr. Stone, we see his wife, Mrs. Stone, who is hosting a swanky dinner party when she goes to the front door to find a pair of Air Force officers (and two other military men outside carrying rifles). "Please call Dr. Stone to the door," one of the officers says. "Otherwise, we'll go get him, ma'am," the other adds, emphatically. When his wife goes to fetch Dr. Stone, the camera mimics her movement, creeping up behind him. She informs him that "some army types" have been sent for him, prompting him to depart the party and head for parts unknown. Wise perpetuates the overall mood of mystery moments later, when a panicked Mrs. Stone attempts to make a call in her bedroom. "You tell the senator it's his daughter," she says in a line that efficiently conveys the information that the character is well-connected: her father is in Congress. Yet, when Mrs. Stone reaches her father and tries to express her concern, the call is interrupted by some beeps and a message: "This communication is being monitored. The connection has been broken for reasons of national security."

Equally effective is the first scene featuring Dr. Leavitt, who had been a male character in Crichton's novel. The gifted screenwriter Nelson Gidding – a frequent Wise collaborator whose credits included *The Haunting* and *The Hindenburg* – thought the character would be more intriguing if reimagined as a woman. Wise initially resisted the idea, fearing comparisons to Raquel Welch's superficial presence in Richard Fleischer's *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), but Gidding proved persuasive. "He said, 'It's going to enrich the whole film. She's not Raquel Welch, she's an older woman with a biting, sarcastic sense of humour," the director recounted in *Robert Wise on His Films*. "As played by Kate Reid, she turned out to be the most interesting character in the film."

When ordered to join the team, Dr. Leavitt is delightfully recalcitrant as she puffs on a cigarette and pops pills (with a glass of water helpfully provided by a lab assistant). "My experiment is at the critical stage," she says, insisting that she is too absorbed in her own work to do her civic duty. "I'm working around the clock. I can't just leave *now*." As portrayed by Reid, we have the sense that Dr. Leavitt relents only out of a grudging sense

of professionalism – among other things, *The Andromeda Strain* takes a kind of Hawksian delight in portraying a group of characters united in a common mission.

When Dr. Stone and Dr. Hill are helicoptered by the Air Force to Piedmont, the film's tone shifts from darkly comic to downright apocalyptic. Fearful of buzzards disseminating the organism after poking at the scattered corpses, the chopper drops a noxious mist of greenyellow gas — a sight as frightening to the environmentally conscious among us as any little green man. While the two scientists examine the scene, Wise and Kline conjure a series of unforgettable images, including a low-angle shot of a deceased man lying on his back on the ground. Because of his position, the man's face appears upside-down on the screen. In a striking move, the camera tilts up as Dr. Stone and Dr. Hill walk over and stand above him — as the helicopter that brought them to Piedmont hovers above them. In a rare stylistic misstep, Wise and his editors, Stuart Gilmore and John W. Homes, make use of overly fancy split-screen effects to show shots of the assorted victims as the scientists discover them. Such excesses intrude upon Wise's otherwise classical mise-en-scène.

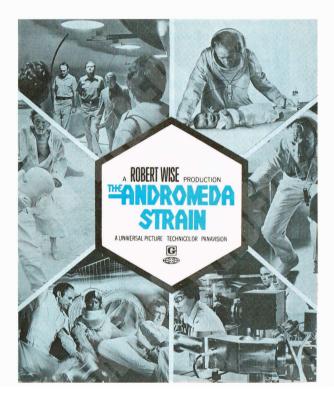
Having made the key finding that the organism acts to change blood into powder — and having happened upon two survivors in Piedmont, a constantly crying infant and a bewildered old man — the scientists proceed to Wildfire in Flatrock County, Nevada. Evoking a sort of nightmarish Area 51, production designer Boris Leven created a sleek complex consisting of all-red curving corridors and circular rooms, many flashing with geometrically patterned buttons and panels, but the look of the place is not half as frightening as its rules: split into five levels, the scientists must be continually cleansed — scanned, prodded, and irradiated — to assure a fully sterile environment. Even worse, if the organism contaminates the larger complex, Wildfire will automatically destroy itself via a nuclear detonation, unless Dr. Hill — charged with carrying a key to stop the process — finds a substation in time to intervene. With its suspicion of government, *The Andromeda Strain* anticipates such conspiracy films of the seventies as *The Parallax View* (1974) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), with a dose of *Dr. Strangelove*'s Doomsday Machine thrown in for good measure.

Wise milks the drama for all its worth, but the film is at its most pleasing when the scientists put their heads together to unfurl the mystery of the satellite and the organism that accompanied it to Earth. In one of the film's signature images, the four watch intently – arms crossed, hands on hips – behind glass as a series of lab animals, including a monkey, are exposed to the organism; the scientists are as frightened as the audience as each animal quickly expires upon exposure. "Whatever killed them in Piedmont is still there and still as potent as ever," Dr. Stone says. Yet, in depicting their efforts to determine the organism's structure and method of attack, Wise never overlooks the scientists' fundamental humanity, evidenced in Dr. Hill's genuine concern for his two living patients

(the infant and the old man), as well as the unexpected fragility of Dr. Reid, who has a seizure at a most inopportune moment.

Without ever foregoing its sense of fun, *The Andromeda Strain* progresses through a series of riveting revelations (including how the government might marshal the organism, eventually known as Andromeda). The pleasure of the film derives from coming within inches, or seconds, of disaster but being pulled back each time, especially when Dr. Hill, impaired by laser wounds, must actually use that key. Let us, then, give Robert Wise his proper due. The next time someone dismisses the director for such staid efforts as *The Sand Pebbles or Starl*, remind them that his directorial career began with a film called *The Curse of the Cat People* and peaked, perhaps, with the spine-chilling effects of *The Andromeda Strain*.

Peter Tonguette is the author of The Films of James Bridges and the editor of Peter Bogdanovich: Interviews. His articles on film have appeared in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Sight & Sound, CineMontage, American Cinematographer, and many other publications.



**STUDY GUIDE** 

By TOM ANDREWS

- Director of Dramatics
Kent School Kent, Connecticut
THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN

# A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

by Tom Andrews

As part of the original publicity campaign for the film's release in 1971, an educational "study guide" was commissioned by Universal and distributed to high schools across the United States. The following text is attributed on the front cover to Tom Andrews, the Director of Dramatics at Kent School in Kent. Connecticut.

#### INTRODUCTION

"6-0-1." Interpretation: "Computer overloaded."

The three numbers spewing out of a confused computer filling the screen at the end of *The Andromeda Strain* grimly remind us that what caused the overload is a very real question: "What do we do in the event of another biological crisis in the future?"

Robert Wise's screen science thriller, taken from J. Michael Crichton's bestselling novel, doesn't provide the answer. It simply poses the question, after it has brought us chillingly through Earth's first biological crisis.

In urgent, news-like computerized fashion, Wise dramatically tells the story of a living organism from the outer regions of space that has hitchhiked its way to Earth aboard an Earth-launched satellite, attacked and destroyed an entire community — except for two survivors — and is threatening to divide and mutate into a deadly super-colony with unlimited destructive force. Project "Wildfire" — established for precisely such a catastrophic emergency — wheels into action. In a top-secret underground research laboratory, a team of four hand-picked scientists (portrayed by Arthur Hill, David Wayne, James Olson and Kate Reid) face an almost impossible task: within 96 hours, isolate, identify and find a method of controlling the deadly invader.

In documenting the havoc created by this extraterrestial microorganism, director Wise has employed highly sophisticated cinematic techniques to define the intricate plot.

The research laboratory, patterned after NASA's receiving lunar lab at Houston, Texas, is a five level super-sterile underground facility, one of the most intricate and elaborate sets ever assembled for a motion picture. Within the set, Wise uses such visual aids as illustrations, diagrams, schema technique, computerized animations, multi-screen effects, printouts and psychedelic montage sequences.

In filming *The Andromeda Strain*, Wise tells a story that is very much "now." Indeed, the film becomes more frighteningly "now" with each new scientific accomplishment in space. Among the many questions it asks, three stand out: 1. Does outer space pose a threat to man's survival? 2. Can living organisms from another galaxy invade Earth? 3. Can mankind defend itself against such a possibility?

The Andromeda Strain is a fascinating story, one which makes a positive statement about biological and chemical warfare.

#### BEFORE SEEING THE FILM

Before either reading the novel or seeing the film, students and teachers might enhance their appreciation of *The Andromeda Strain* by considering some of the recent scientific accomplishments in space.

Man has walked on the moon and has brought back samples of its surface to Earth. The moon is a quarter of a million miles away. Tens of millions of miles from Earth, a Russian satellite, Venera 7, has landed on the surface of Venus, and has radioed information back ffrom its surface to Earth.

The significance of these facts, particularly that of the Soviet Union, is heightened when we realize that a Russian unmanned rocket landed on the moon, scooped up a few ounces of lunar dirt, and returned it to Earth. Another vehicle, Lunohold I, is at this moment inching its way over the surface of the moon. The Russians fully expect to have satellites return samples of the surface of Mars and Venus in the near future.

There is always the possibility that the Andromeda Strain in the film could possibly be similar to a living organism on the surface of Venus, if indeed a living organism can survive its 1000 degree fahrenheit temperatures, and its atmospheric pressure of 100 times that of the surface of the earth.

Dr. Wernher Von Braun, the one man perhaps most responsible for landing men on the moon, holds that science cannot rule out the presence of living microorganisms or viable spores existing elsewhere in space. "What if they survived," Von Braun says, "and hitchhiked to earth, took to its more benign climate and multiplied at a runaway rate?"

What if indeed!

The Andromeda Strain is not science fiction.

Another way to prepare students to read and see *The Andromeda Strain* is to have them research and report on some basic scientific terms they will meet in the story. 1. strain, 2. Andromeda (both in astronomy and Greek mythology) 3. mutation, 4. PH factor, 5. alkalosis, 6. acidosis, 7. respiratory alkalosis, 8. epithelial tissue.

Now have your students read the book and see the film.

#### AFTER VIEWING THE FILM

Science, English, humanities, ecology, theology and film studies classes all have a stake in *The Andromeda Strain*. One of the significant aspects of this film is that it can be a part of so many school courses. Teachers are finding that inter-disciplinary projects may be the most valid approach to educating today's media-saturated youth. Teachers may discover that a well-organized cooperative effort on *The Andromeda Strain* will prove valuable in many ways. It can serve as the catalyst for future cross-discipline projects.

Whatever the approach, some of the topics below might serve in kicking off a discussion of *The Andromeda Strain*.

#### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1. Early in the film, Dr. Jeremy Stone berates one of his associates for not having done his reading homework for such a critical assignment as "Wildfire." As the helicopter they are riding in swerves over the destroyed village of Piedmont, New Mexico, Dr. Mark Hall replies, "Sorry I don't go in for science fiction." Stone replies tersely, "Neither do I." The tone of this science-thriller is set. Wise begins creating this tone even before this event. He juxtaposes scenes of science adventure with scenes of domestic tranquility. Cite these scenes and consider dramatic and thematic effect.
- 2. Dr. Leavitt is an epileptic (In the movie a female; in the novel a male; why the change?). Her epilepsy raises some questions: For example, what is the author's attitude towards epileptics in a highly classified job? How is it that Leavitt's epilepsy went unnoticed by the experts who had apparently checked very thoroughly on the backgrounds of the "Wildfire" team? What does the epilepsy subject do for the plot? Are all three motives for the epilepsy element dramatically and thematically valid in *The Andromeda Strain*?
- 3. Explain the nature of the deaths in Piedmont.
- 4. Explain how Jackson and the baby survived the Andromeda attack. What obvious clue in their acidity disparity did Hall continually overlook?
- 5. The President of the United States delayed ordering a 7-12, an order to explode an atomic bomb over the Piedmont area. He was ultimately proven to have made the correct decision. What plot crises occurred in creating contradictory orders in regard to the explosion?
- 6. What did Stone learn about Andromeda from the experiments on the animals? In what different ways do Wise and Crichton handle Dutton's responsibilities to the animal experiments? What clues do the animals give in solving the Andromeda mystery? (The animals in this film did not die. Their oxygen was briefly cut off during the shooting, and a team of physicians hurriedly revived them after each "take.").
- 7. What is respiratory alkalosis? How did respiratory alkalosis save Dutton? Explain how this crisis helped Hall discover the clue to Jackson's and the baby surviving the attack of Andromeda.



- 8. What event activated the automatic self-destruct? What event negated the reason for self-destruct? What were the obstacles Hall had to overcome in reaching a key station to disengage the self-destruct? Explain the "Odd Man" theory. Why is Hall chosen "Odd Man"?
- 9. Explain the organism mutating to a nonlethal form. Ironically, this mutation causes the contamination and the automatic self-destruct to begin its countdown. Was all this a "deux-ex-machina" or a valid and credible way of bringing the story to its conclusion?
- 10. Students might appreciate the roles of each "Wildfire" team member if they knew the nature of each scientist's job. Dr. Stone is a biologist. Dr. Leavitt, a microbiologist. Dr. Dutton, a pathologist. Dr. Hall, a surgeon. Research the nature of their individual avocations. Then relate their contributions to "Wildfire."
- 11. A lavishly mounted set plays an important role in helping to create the mood and drama in this story. Recall some of the details which Wise employs in the set. How do the scientific tools add to the story? Compare the use of these tools with the use of space equipment in other recent science fiction films.
- 12. Consider the unbilled "star" of *The Andromeda Strain*, the microorganism itself, code named Andromeda. By the end of the film, what have we learned about it?

#### SOME FILM NOTES

Many of *The Andromeda Strain* sequences were filmed at the near-ghost town of Shafter in the southwestern rangelands of Texas. Shafter represents Piedmont, New Mexico, where the space capsule descends to Earth. Its present population is 26.

The research laboratory for the Wildfire team was constructed on the grounds of Universal City Studios. The elaborate set is the work of Boris Leven, an Academy Award winner for his set work in *West Side Story*.

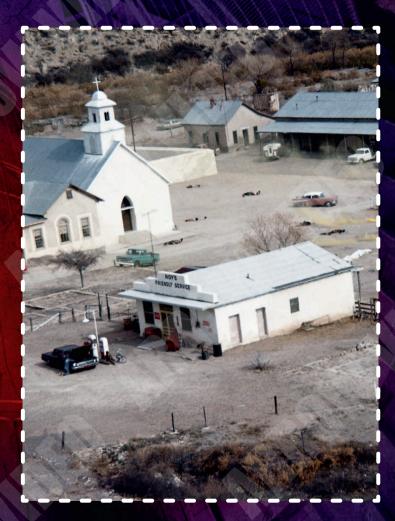
#### THE CAST OF THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN

Arthur Hill (Dr. Jeremy Stone) created the role of George in the original Broadway production Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf. He made his screen debut with Marlon Brando in The Ugly American.

David Wayne (Dr. Charles Dutton) first achieved Broadway success as America's favorite leprechaun in *Finian's Rainbow*. He later created the role of Ensign Pulver in *Mister Roberts*, as well as the wily Sakini in *Teahouse of the August Moon*.

James Olson (Dr. Mark Hall) was Joanne Woodward's faithless lover in the film *Rachel*, *Rachel*. His stage appearances include roles in Elia Kazan's *J.B.*, *Romulus*, *The Chinese Prime Minister*, *Breakfast at Tiffany*'s, and the Actors Studio revival of *The Three Sisters*.

Kate Reid (Dr. Ruth Leavitt) has received Tony Award nominations for her performances in the Broadway productions *Dylan*, and Tennessee Williams' *Slapstick Tragedy*. She also





received an Emmy nomination for her portrayal of Queen Victoria in the award-winning television production *The Invincible Mr. Disraeli.* 

The nurse-technician in *The Andromeda Strain* is played by Paula Kelly who made her film bow co-starring with Shirley MacLaine in *Sweet Charity*. A very talented dancer, she has appeared on several television specials.

## THE AUTHOR J. MICHAEL CRICHTON

J. Michael Crichton (rhymes with frighten) is a Renaissance-style talent, a graduate physician whose self-prescription for the full life includes dashing off a novel whenever time hangs heavy on his hands.

He wrote *The Andromeda Strain* while completing his final year at Harvard Medical School. It was his ninth full length novel, but the first under his real name. He has written seven thrillers under the pseudonym of John Lange and another book, *A Case of Need*, under the name of Jeffery Hudson. Another non-fiction work, *Five Patients*, is now on the stands, and an additional property *Dealing*, written in collaboration with his younger brother, Douglas, has just been published. He has also written a screenplay, *Lucifer Harkness in Concert*, which deals with marijuana use among college students.

He entered Harvard Medical School in 1965 and received his MD Degree in June 1969. He is currently serving as a post-doctoral fellow at Salk Institute for Biological Studies at La Jolla, California.

He reports that people who have read the novel are obsessed with attempting to find out how much of this story is true. Adding to the confusion was Crichton's citing imaginary authorities and the inclusion of an impressive reference bibliography – fictional from beginning to end.

### THE DIRECTOR ROBERT WISE

Among Robert Wise's 34 films are *West Side Story, Sand Pebbles, Star* and the biggest money-making film in motion picture history. *The Sound of Music.* 

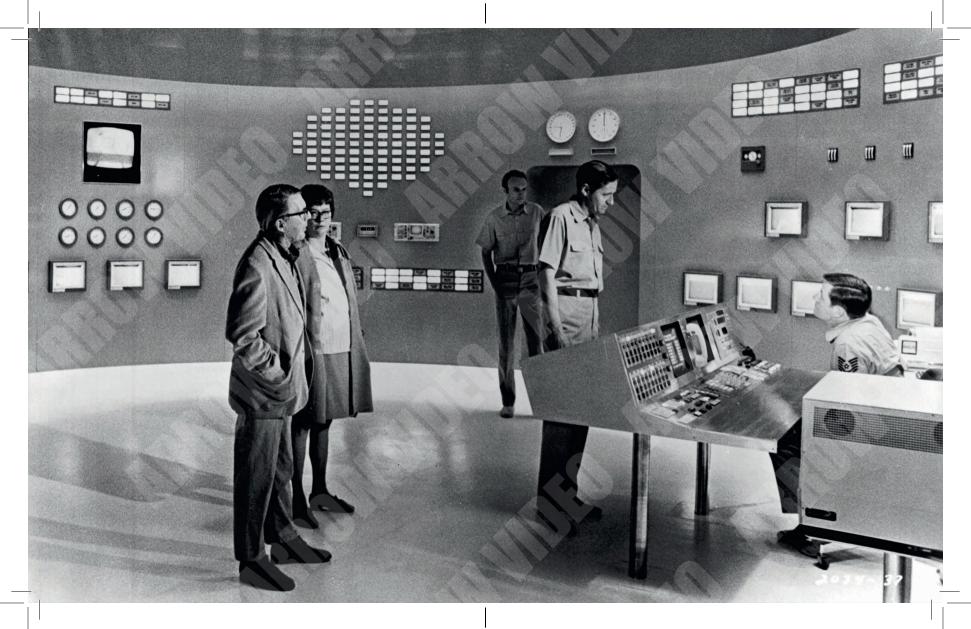
He deliberately chose *The Andromeda Strain*, because he wanted to get away from period pieces and make a contemporary film. *The Andromeda Strain*, Wise says, "is about as contemporary as you can get."

Wise's first directorial effort came in 1943, when the director of *The Curse of the Cat People* was dismissed for being behind schedule. Wise, who was editing the film, also became its director.

His films since then have included *The Set Up, The Desert Rats, Executive Suite, Tribute to a Bad Man; Somebody Up There Likes Me; Run Silent, Run Deep,* and *I Want to Live!.* 

Wise has won four Academy Awards, two each as producer-director of West Side Story and The Sound of Music. He was won the Irving Thalberg Award and has been nominated for "Oscars" as a director on I Want to Livel, and as an editor for Citizen Kane.





## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

The Andromeda Strain has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with mono audio.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a Lasergraphics Director at EFilm, Burbank. The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London.

The original mono mix was remastered from the optical negatives at Deluxe Audio Services, Hollywood.

All materials for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

R3Store Studios:

Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Nathan Leaman-Hill, Rich Watson, Jenny Collins

EFilm:

**David Morales** 

**NBC Universal:** 

Peter Schade, Tim Naderski, Jefferson Root, John Edell

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Michael Mackenzie, James Flower
Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer James White
QC Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons
Production Assistant Nick Mastrini
Blu-ray Mastering Fidelity in Motion
Subtitling The Engine House Media Services
Artist Corey Brickley
Design Obviously Creative

## SPECIAL THANKS

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