



MAKING MAGIC: 100 YEARS OF DISNEY

The Black Hole

Lifted

Director: Gary Rydstrom
USA 2007
5 mins

The Black Hole

Director: Gary Nelson
Production Companies: Walt Disney Productions
Producer: Ron Miller
Unit Production Manager: Christopher Seiter
Production Manager: John Bloss
Production Assistant (Miniatures): Stephen McEveety
Assistant Directors: Tom McCrory, Christopher D. Miller, Joseph P. Moore
Screenplay: Jeb Rosebrook, Gerry Day
Original Story: Jeb Rosebrook, Bob Barbash, Richard Landau
Director of Photography: Frank Phillips
Miniature Photography: Art Cruickshank
Composite Optical Photography: Eustace Lycett, Robert Broughton
Camera Operator: Lloyd N. Ahern
Camera Operators (Miniatures): Bill Kilduff, Robert R. Wilson
Matte Photography (Miniatures): Ed Sekac, Arthur Miller
Matte Artist and Supervisor: Harrison Ellenshaw
Mechanical Effects Supervised by: Danny Lee, George F. McGinnis, Tommy McLoughlin
Miniature Effects Created/Supervised by: Peter Ellenshaw
Miniature Mechanical Effects/Models: Terence Saunders
Animated Special Effects Supervisor: Joe Hale
Animated Special Effects: Dorse A. Lanpher, Ted C. Kierscey
Editor: Gregg McLaughlin
Production Designer: Peter Ellenshaw
Art Directors: John B. Mansbridge, Al Roelofs, Robert T. McCall
Set Decorators: Frank R. McKelvy, Roger M. Shook, Art Dudley
Production Illustrators: Fred Lucky, Gene Johnson, Robert Ayres, Leon R. Harris
Costume Designer: Bill Thomas
Costume Supervisor: Chuck Keehne
Make-up Supervisor: Robert J. Schiffer, Nadia
Music Composed and Conducted by: John Barry
Orchestrations: Al Woodbury
Sound Supervisor: Herb Taylor
Sound Recording: Henry A. Maffett
Sound Re-recording: John Van Frey, Frank C. Regula, Nick Alphin, Bob Hathaway
Sound Effects: Ben F. Hendricks, William J. Wylie, James MacDonald, Stephen Katz
Sound Effects Editors: George Fredrick, Wayne Allwine, Joseph Parker, Louis Terrusa, John J. Jolliffe
Cast:
Maximilian Schell (*Dr Hans Reinhardt*)
Anthony Perkins (*Dr Alex Durant*)
Robert Forster (*Captain Dan Holland*)
Joseph Bottoms (*Lieutenant Charles Pizer*)
Yvette Mimieux (*Dr Kate McCrae*)
Ernest Borgnine (*Harry Booth*)
Tommy McLoughlin (*Captain S.T.A.R.*)
Uncredited voice cast:
Roddy McDowall (*V.I.N.CENT*)
Slim Pickens (*B.O.B.*)
USA 1979
98 mins

For much of the 1970s the studio would struggle to forge a path in the wake of Walt's death in 1966, and Roy O. Disney's just five years later. The new company president, Ron Miller, repeatedly clashed with other executives while insisting that Disney's core audience was too young to bring in lucrative box office receipts. Following the triumph of *Star Wars* (1977) at 20th Century Fox, long-gestating sci-fi project *The Black Hole* finally went into production.

Featuring a star-studded cast, an impressive John Barry score and a newly automated camera effects system, *The Black Hole* was the most expensive film produced by Disney at the time and is notable for being the studio's first PG rated picture. While a few 'damns' are sprinkled in the dialogue, the film surprises with the gruesome death of one beloved A-lister and some genuinely nightmarish imagery, which surely inspired later sci-fi favourites. Directly targeting an older audience, it would in part prompt the creation of a brand-new subdivision for such titles – Touchstone Pictures.

Richard Pickard, bfi.org.uk, 29 June 2023

Walt Disney Studios was in an identity crisis when it entered the space movie race with the ambitious live-action production *The Black Hole* in 1979. Disney's family features were losing ground and producer (and soon to be Walt Disney Company CEO) Ron Miller was trying to make the studio relevant in the contemporary filmmaking culture of blockbuster hits. In the wake of the success of *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), Miller turned to a project that had been in development at Disney for years, a science-fiction adventure titled *Space Probe One*. After numerous rewrites and conceptual overhauls from a parade of writers, the renamed *The Black Hole* went before the cameras in late 1978 under the direction of Gary Nelson, a TV veteran with a handful of feature film credits to his name, among them Disney's *Freaky Friday* (1976). It was a bold experiment for the studio: a budget that ultimately climbed to \$20 million, a cast of name actors (if not quite major stars), and (most radically) the first PG-rated release in Disney history.

A space probe captained by the quietly authoritative Robert Forster (*Jackie Brown*, 1997) stumbles across the black hole and finds a seemingly derelict ship floating on the fringes of the gravitational well. The massive haunted house of a spaceship suddenly lights up into a stunning vision of glass and latticework, glowing like an ember in the night. The crew finds the long-lost Dr Hans Reinhardt (Maximilian Schell in a wild-man beard), a quite literally mad scientist who has created an army of robots to run the otherwise abandoned craft and now plans to ride it into the black hole. Anything for science.

The impressive production is hampered by a clumsy story, a murky metaphysical ending, and some of the most stilted dialogue ever to emerge from a film screen. The script suggests a space-age *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, with Schell (*Judgment at Nuremberg*, 1961) as an interstellar Captain Nemo with a Hitler complex. In keeping with the Disney references, his robot bodyguard, Maximilian, a satanic-looking behemoth in crimson and black, was modelled after the devil in the final segment of the animated classic *Fantasia* (1940).

Anthony Perkins has the designated Spock role as Dr Alex Durant, an emotionally closed-off intellectual fascinated by Reinhardt's maverick ideas and impressed by his achievements. The rest of the probe's crew – Yvette Mimieux's telepathic scientist and empathetic balance to Perkins' prickly logical

MAKING MAGIC: 100 YEARS OF DISNEY

Dinosaur + Get a Horse!

Sat 1 Jul 15:20; Sun 23 Jul 18:15

Tangled + Tangled ever After

Sat 1 Jul 17:50; Sun 23 Jul 13:10

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs + Thru the Mirror

Sun 2 Jul 13:20; Sat 22 Jul 17:45; Mon 24 Jul 14:20

Who Framed Roger Rabbit + Tummy Trouble + Rollercoaster Rabbit

Sun 2 Jul 15:40; Sat 22 Jul 20:30

Splash + Sea Scouts

Wed 5 Jul 20:30; Mon 10 Jul 18:00

UK premiere of 4K Restoration: Cinderella + Trailer Horn

Thu 6 Jul 20:30 + intro by season curator Justin Johnson; Sun 9 Jul 12:20; Tue 25 Jul 14:20

The Black Hole + Lifted

Fri 7 Jul 20:50; Sat 15 Jul 13:00

Sleeping Beauty + Magician Mickey

Sat 8 Jul 12:20; Sun 16 Jul 16:00; Wed 26 Jul 14:20

The Princess and the Frog + Babes in the Woods

Sat 8 Jul 12:30; Thus 18 Jul 18:00

Fantasia + Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom

Sat 8 Jul 15:00; Thu 27 Jul 17:50

Fantasia 2000

Sat 8 Jul 18:10; Sun 30 Jul 10:30

Dead Poet Society + Geri's Game

Sat 8 Jul 20:20; Thu 20 Jul 17:50

Alice in Wonderland + Pluto's Party

Sun 9 Jul 15:30; Thu 13 Jul 18:10

Frozen + Frozen Fever

Fri 14 Jul 20:45; Sun 30 Jul 12:40

TRON + Smash and Grab

Sat 15 Jul 15:10; Fri 21 Jul 18:00

TRON: Legacy + Sanjay's Super Team

Sat 15 Jul 17:45; Fri 28 Jul 20:20

WALL-E + BURN-E

Sat 15 Jul 20:45; Sat 29 Jul 12:30

Funday Workshop: Encanto Sing-along

Sun 16 Jul 11:00

Funday: Encanto Sing-along

Sun 16 Jul 12:30

Hocus Pocus

Sun 16 Jul 18:10; Wed 26 Jul 20:40

Moana + Inner Workings

Mon 17 Jul 18:00; Sat 29 Jul 13:00; Mon 31 Jul 14:20

Beauty and the Beast + Tick Tock Tale

Sat 22 Jul 11:50; Mon 24 Jul 18:05; Thu 27 Jul 14:20

Once Upon a Time: A Disney Day

Sat 22 Jul 12:00-17:00

Toy Story + The Adventures of Andre & Wally B. + Luxo Jr. + Red's Dream

Sun 23 Jul 12:50; Sat 29 Jul 16:00

Toy Story 2 + Tin Toy + Knick Knack

Sun 23 Jul 15:30

Pocahontas + Lava

Sun 23 Jul 15:40; Fri 28 Jul 14:20; Sat 29 Jul 20:40

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character, Joseph Bottoms' junior pilot and impulsive young crewman, Ernest Borgnine's crusty reporter, and the roly-poly floating robot V.I.N.CENT, resembling a Fisher-Price toy take on R2-D2 and voiced in decidedly C-3PO tones by Roddy McDowall – is more suspicious, and rightly so. The rest of the film delves into the secret of the silent robot drones – viewed by Forster conducting a funeral in space in one haunting scene – and the real story behind the mutiny of Reinhardt's 'abandoned' ship.

The science of this fiction is as hokey as the drama, but the imaginative art design and excellent special effects are magnificent. Peter Ellenshaw, the acclaimed matte artist and Disney effects veteran who won an Oscar for his work on *Mary Poppins* (1964), was lured out of retirement to oversee the production. (His son and heir apparent, Harrison Ellenshaw, painted the amazing spacescapes and richly detailed mattes for the production). After failing to come to terms with Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic to use the Dykstraflex camera system used in *Star Wars*, Disney engineers created an even more technologically advanced computer controlled system, A.C.E.S. The film's crew rose to the challenge with special effects even more elaborate and richly complex (if not as visually dynamic) than the pioneering effects work of *Star Wars*. The science is pure fantasy but the scale and intensity of the imagery is breathtaking, from the ominous first sighting of the ghost ship eerily floating in space to the stunning image of a fiery meteor rolling through the ship's enormous hull while the human occupants flee to safety.

John Barry's gorgeous score, with the bass ominously carrying much of the melody, provides a lyricism missing from so many bombastic sci-fi scores and sets a tone of unease that the drama never manages to match. The cast loses the battle with the stilted dialogue and Nelson's direction is more successful in showing off the elaborate and lovingly detailed sets than in creating dramatic tension. Critics were not kind to *The Black Hole* and audiences failed to respond, giving Disney its most expensive commercial failure to date. Yet the imaginative production design and layered special effects have given the film a minor cult status among sci-fi movie fans. For all the advances in digital effects in the succeeding decades, the craft and care and creative ingenuity of the deep-space spectacle is still impressive.

Sean Axmaker, tcm.com

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