



BACK IN TIME

When I was nine years old," says documentary filmmaker Clyde Lucas, "my aunt and uncle had this drive-in theater. Every weekend, my mom and dad would take us out to see movies, and one night *The Time Machine* was playing."

Lucas (no relation to that *other* Lucas) fell in love not just with the movie *The Time Machine*, but with the Machine itself, and now, more than 30 years later, is paying tribute to the magic of the Machine and to George Pal in a new documentary. "I don't know why, but that Machine was so believable to me. I think it was the simplicity of it that made it totally realistic. I just knew if you could get inside that machine, you could go through time."

Some people say the Golden Age of Science Fiction Impression is 15 (the number varies, but it's always below 18.) And there are some movies that have to be seen before you reach that certain age in order for them to work their special magic on you, before you get cynical and realistic. Hammer Films, Abbott & Costello movies, Ray Harryhausen adventures—and the films of George Pal.

Clyde Lucas saw *The Time Machine* at the right age—nine—and it never left him. In the mid-1970s, Lucas visited the home of Bob Burns who, after a long chase, had finally tracked down the original prop built

Remembering George Pal, Rod Taylor & Alan Young return to H.G. Wells' laboratory.

By BILL WARREN



Alan Young and Rod Taylor team once more in what is almost a sequel to George Pal's *The Time Machine*.

for the movie. Now, he and Burns are working together in the production of this documentary, narrated by the Time Traveler himself, Rod Taylor, and featuring appearances by Alan Young and Whit Bissell, veterans of the George Pal movie. The documentary, however, is actually *more* than a documentary.

Lucas began in movies in 1984, "when I became partners with Yakima Canutt, the stuntman. I wrote a song about him, and ended up doing a short film on his career, *Yak's Best Ride*, with the song, that ran for two years on Showtime and The Movie Channel." Lucas also did a documentary on Hank Worden, the tall, bald actor with the enormous adams' apple, who appeared in so many John Ford films. This was called *Thank Ya, Thank Ya Kindly*—Worden's best-known lines from *The Searchers*. Lucas has plans to further explore this area with a documentary about the friendship between Harry Carey Sr. and Ford.

"When I met Bob Burns again last year," Lucas explains, "he started to tell me about the places the Machine had been, and that's how we came up with the concept of making the show. The prop fascinated me, especially the way it was destroyed when they found it. There's probably only one other prop that has been around like the Time Machine, and that's Robby the Robot." The travels of the

Time Machine are interesting, and so is the man who now owns it.

In many ways, Bob Burns is as extraordinary as Forrest J Ackerman, but not as well-known outside special FX circles. A friendly, even jolly man, with a quick wit and a facility at imitation, the now-retired Burns lives in Burbank with his wife Cathy. He worked with Paul Blaisdell back in the late 1950s—Burns is inside the Cucumber Creature in *It Conquered the World*—and later ended up editing films for CBS, occasionally taking time out to do appearances here and there in his elaborate gorilla suit. He played Tracy the Gorilla in the live-action Saturday morning series, *Ghostbusters* (no relation to the film). All along, he encouraged aspiring makeup artists, such as Rick Baker, whom Burns has known since Baker was in his early teens.

Props Past

When he was a boy, Burns was given the cane-head Claude Rains beat Lon Chaney Jr. to death with in *The Wolf Man*, a gift of Ellis Burman Sr. "I guess I didn't realize," Burns laughs, "but that really started my collection bug. Had I known what it would lead to, I might have thrown the thing away."

It wasn't until 1965 that Burns started collecting props, masks and costumes in earnest. He rebuilt his home into a museum housing much of his collection. His museum, which is *not* open to the public, is a glorious, unique place.

There are the huge models from George Pal's *Conquest of Space*, as well as the Space Ark from Pal's earlier *When Worlds Collide*. There are costumes from serials, three stages of the *American Werewolf in London*, the Chesley Bonestell backdrop from *Destination Moon*, some Gremlins, a huge critter from *Tremors*, the head of the creature from *The Fly II*, space helmets from *ALIEN*, *Outland* and, charmingly enough, *Robot Monster*. Big props and small from *Terminator 2* and *ALIENS*. There's the head of Gort from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and a collection of life masks that includes genre favorites like Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, John Carradine and Lon Chaney Jr., as well as some peculiar anomalies like Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, Abraham Lincoln and Beethoven.

And, of course, there's the Time Machine itself, that wonderful rococo creation, designed by Pal (with William Ferrari) and built by the MGM prop department. Pal assured Burns that someday, Burns would own the Machine, and Pal lived to see his prediction come true. During the famous, melancholy MGM prop auction in the early 1970s, the Time Machine came under the auctioneer's gavel, and Burns was there, with a thousand dollars he had scraped together from various sources.

"It finally came up—it was one of those things that seemed to take days while you're waiting for it to happen," Burns says. "But the price immediately shot to \$4,000, and my heart was broken. I told Cathy that I didn't want to know how much it would go for, and we went home. Later on, I heard it



Knowing Young's Filby will die in WWI, Taylor's George tries to convince his friend to time trip with him.

went for somewhere between \$8,000 and \$10,000. It was bought by a guy with a traveling show that went across the country in a big semi truck. You would walk in one door, look at the stuff, then go out the other. But he didn't take very good care of his exhibits, or so I heard.

"George [Pal] called me once to say that he had heard the Machine had been destroyed a fire in Florida. It just disappeared from sight for five years. Then one day, a friend of [prop builder] Tom Scherman's was in Orange, California, looking in a thrift store for props and things, and saw the big dish of the machine in the back of the store. It was in pretty bad condition, the pods in the back [the glowing nacelles below and behind the chair] were there, but broken and smashed."

This time Burns bought the Machine. "George must have been right; it was meant to be." The store owner had purchased the Machine because he thought the chair in it was an authentic 19th-century barber's chair, but Burns suspects the one in the Machine was built by MGM. In any event, the chair was gone, "but I wasn't really too concerned about that, because we had the blueprints," a gift from Pal.

From 1962 until just a few years ago, when the addition of the museum removed

the space he had used, every year Burns staged increasingly-elaborate Halloween shows for trick-or-treaters. He was assisted in these amazing projects by friends and family, including Oscar winners. He and his Gang, as he calls the group, often did shows relating to movies, complete with sets, costumes and special FX, including *War of the Worlds*, *ALIEN*, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*—and *The Time Machine*.

But the Machine itself needed to be completely rebuilt. And the Gang pitched in, workers including Dennis Muren, Tom Scherman, the late Mike Minor, Dorothy (D.C.) Fontana, and others. Over four weekends, everyone worked hard. Scherman, Fontana and Lyn Barker rebuilt the chair; TV producer Mark Richards reupholstered it. The rails were polished, the melted heat-formed pods were reheat-formed, and the broken parts rotated out of sight. "We practically took the whole thing apart," sighs Burns. In exchange for getting to play the Time Traveler, David Gerrold wrote the script for Burns' hit Halloween presentation (STARLOG #18).

Since then, the Machine has appeared here and there. You can see it in the background in *Gremlins*; it was used in Carl Sagan's TV series *Cosmos*, in a promotional film for *Back to the Future*, and in the origi-

nal Mike Jittlov short, *The Wizard of Speed and Time*. But mostly it's there in Burns' home, the pride of his museum.

Visits Future

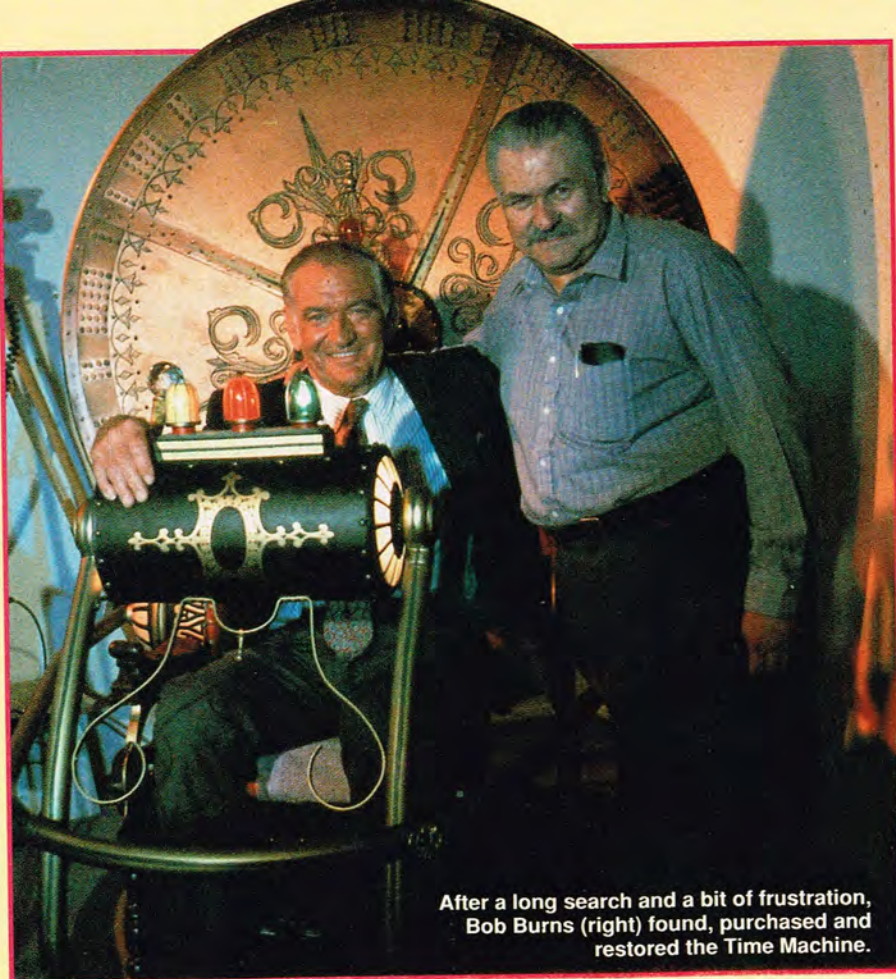
Which brings us back to Clyde Lucas and his documentary, *The Time Machine: The Way Back* (expected to air on cable, due shortly on video). Part of the documentary depicts the travels through space of the Time Machine, and part will be about how the movie was made, but eight minutes of the documentary will be a sequel to George Pal's *The Time Machine*.

First, Lucas approached actor Whit Bissell, now essentially retired, to again play his character from the original movie. "He's sitting in a chair," Lucas describes, "saying 'It was 33 years ago that I last saw George.' Whit was ecstatic about being able to do it, and he was *fantastic*." Though Bissell is elderly now, and has been ill, "when we started shooting, he really got into the character. When Rod Taylor saw this scene on videotape, he was impressed."

Lucas also found now-retired *Time Machine* screenwriter David Duncan living in Everett, Washington, and convinced him to script the scene, set in 1915, when Filby (Alan Young), about to leave for World War I, returns briefly to the lab of his time-traveling friend, George. And then *The Time Machine*, bearing George, arrives. The set is a good reproduction of the original lab set, and, according to Young, is even larger than the original.

In the scene, George tries to convince Filby—whom he knows will die in the War—to come with him to the rebuilt future, where he has spent the last 30 years (though Filby has only aged 15 years since they last met). For the outcome, you'll have to see it.

Rod Taylor, a gregarious, good-humored man, was glad to return. Asked if he thought the original film was going to be classic at the time he made it, he replies with typical candor, "Frankly, no. I thought it was cute, and well-done," but nothing special, just another film in his MGM contract. But since then, he has found that when people talk to



After a long search and a bit of frustration, Bob Burns (right) found, purchased and restored the Time Machine.

him about his movies, "First, it's *The Time Machine*, then the goddamned *Birds*. They forget all the other goodies, like *Young Cassidy*, or *Darker than Amber*." But he's happy for the association. Taylor (who discussed those films in STARLOG #108 & #118) had just returned from Ireland. "Lord Killarnen, who headed the Olympics, has a son John, and his son, John Michael, is my godson. I took him a tape of *The Time Machine*, and he went crazy, just crazy, had all the kids—and adults—in from everywhere."

He likes the Machine himself. "It wasn't the outlandish, marvelous thing that, say,

Steven Spielberg would come up with, but you believed that this could have been made in 1899, and somehow he got the power with the crystals to make it go. It's so rococo, it's great, it's fantastic."

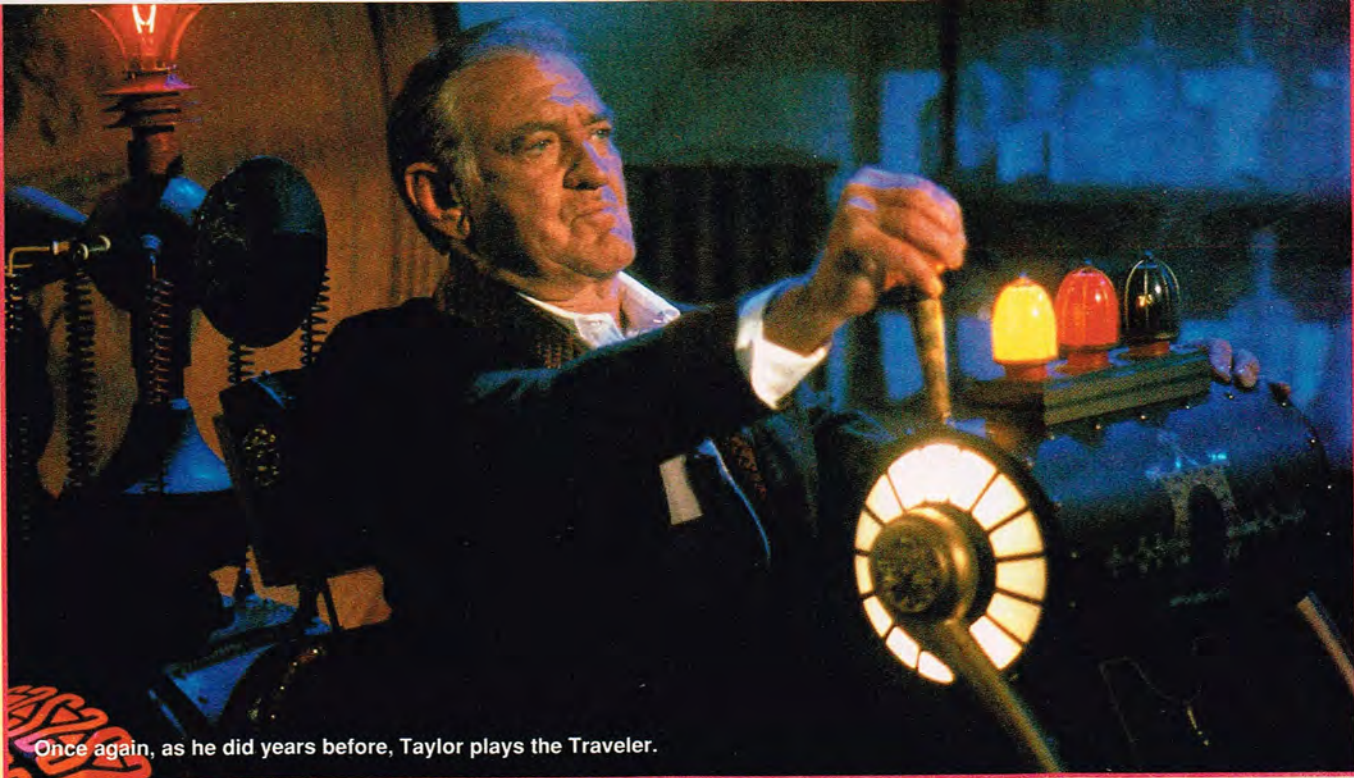
Taylor's enthusiasm for the film and the Time Machine extends to George Pal. "He was such a *dear* man; his whole world was wrapped up in his puppets, and his time machines, and his own thing. He made this movie on a budget, but nobody knew it would be the classic it has become. [Before his death, Pal] tried to shlep around town to do *The Time Machine II* and a few other movies, and they told him, 'You've had your time, George. It's all over.' I honestly believe he died of a broken heart."

The one-time Los Angeles film festival, Filmex, showed a collection of Pal's famous Puppetoon shorts not long before he died. At the end of the showing, the audience rose, cheering, applauding, and giving the stunned Pal a standing ovation. This man had been told, as Taylor says, "that he was a relic of the past, and had almost come to believe it. When he saw the joy his shorts had brought this modern audience, and felt the love they were showering on him, George Pal put his face in his hands and wept."

For Alan Young, returning to the (reconstructed) set, is something akin to time travel itself. "It's eerie; suddenly you're back 33 years, and looking for George Pal, but now it's just Rod and I." And it was "great" to work with Taylor again, Young asserts. "I hadn't seen him since we finished shooting 33 years ago, and it was like we



"I just knew if you could get inside that machine," enthuses Clyde Lucas, "you could go through time."



Once again, as he did years before, Taylor plays the Traveler.

had never parted. He's a good actor, and a very nice fellow."

Young is quite pleased about his association with *The Time Machine* (which he discussed in STARLOG #132). "It's a joy to be part of a cult film. You never grow old, you go right along with it." And he admires the Time Machine itself. "It's so odd looking, so antique-y, and yet so far into the future. And that was George. He had a way of combining the nostalgic with the modern, and that's what the Time Machine is. He has H.G. Wells' whole ambiance, and we mustn't forget to give credit where it is due. Wells wrote it, and he wasn't a bad writer at all," Young laughs. "From that basis sprang this lovely picture."

Memories Present

The only actor to have starred in two Pal movies—he's also in *tom thumb*—Young has strong feelings about the producer/director. "He was the most precious, gentle, gentleman. He was an old country man, and that was probably one of his problems. His voice wasn't loud—he didn't raise his voice—but his talent was loud. But [finally] people didn't look at his talent."

To be fair to all concerned, it should be pointed out that to those working for Pal, he could be a strong taskmaster. Gene Warren Sr. who won the Oscar for *The Time Machine*'s FX, says that "it was difficult to work with him on the level we worked. He was a perfectionist, and, unfortunately, so were we [Warren and his partner Wah Chang]. When you don't always agree on what it is that's going to make something perfect, you end up doing a lot more work one way or another than if you just had one perfectionist, and one who would buy it. But he was a very talented guy for ideas and premises."

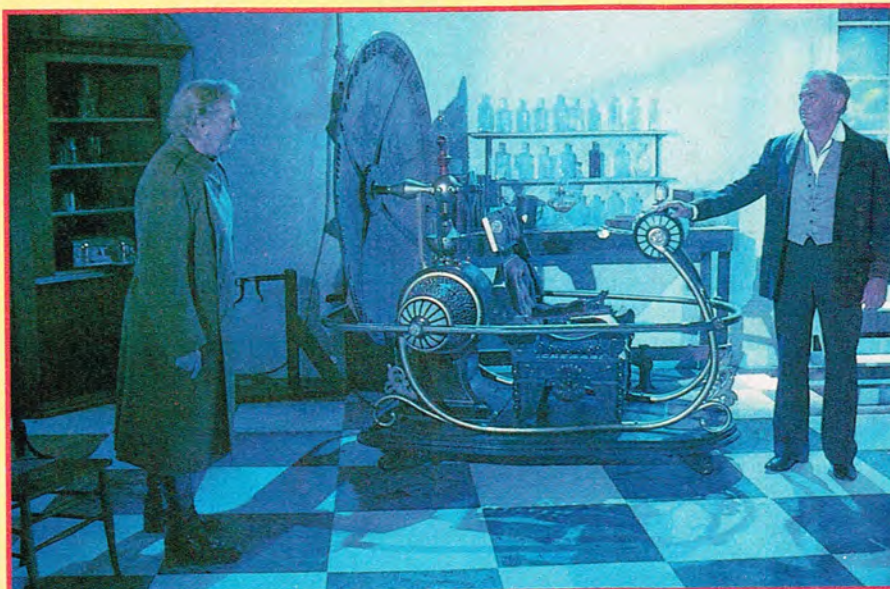
However, the odd, elusive quality of *The Time Machine* isn't due so much to Pal's

direction, but to Taylor's outstanding performance. He creates the mood in the film through his strong but subtle acting, and does it again in Clyde Lucas' film. And Taylor knows how to run the Machine, leaping effortlessly into that reconstructed barber chair. "When he flips on the Machine," Lucas points out, "he waits so patiently for every light to click on before he starts moving the lever. He knows the timing exactly. As he told Bob, 'What, you think I don't know how to drive this thing?'"

"The Time Machine," says Lucas, "is the *Enterprise*, and Rod Taylor is Captain Kirk. And Alan Young is a combination of McCoy and Spock. Anybody who ever has a chance to do a full sequel to this movie is out of their minds if they don't put those people in it—not in cameos, but as part of the movie. And then Pal, God bless him, will

be able to do what he always wanted, to make a sequel to it. Somebody ought to pick up that torch and run with it."

Until that happens, the dreamer's torch that H.G. Wells lit, and which was carried proudly by George Pal and Bob Burns, is now in good hands with Clyde Lucas. Who, as a last word, did finally achieve his boyhood dream, and he, too, got into the Time Machine. "It was so *satisfying*," he says with feeling. "It's like when you've done a long run and just crossed the finish line. All those years of thinking about it, all the whole reality, came together. Rod Taylor was at the other end of the room, laughing with the crew the way he does, and I thought, 'This is incredible, this is *incredible*.' The child in me had such satisfaction at sitting in the Time Machine; the feeling of that nine-year-old kid was still inside me." ☆



George Pal "had a way of combining the nostalgic with the modern, and that's what the Time Machine is," notes Young.

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