

JAMES CAMERON'S

ALIENS

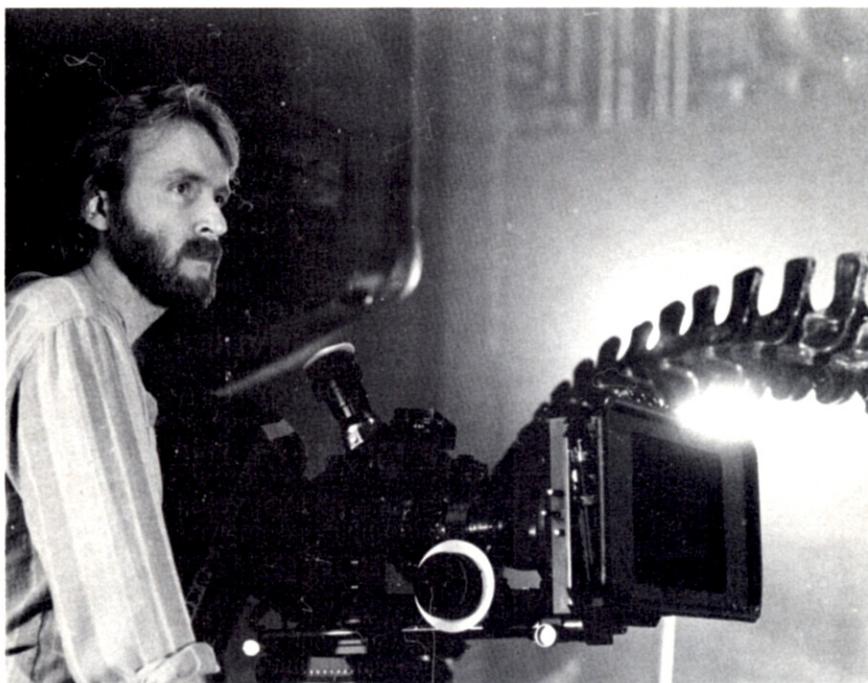
A direct hit, and a worthy successor to the original. James Cameron is unsurpassed in visualizing SF.

By Thomas Doherty

The intervening years and the conspicuous lack of credible SF standard-bearers have only enhanced the reputation of ALIEN (1978). Anyone presuming to attach to the host film a roman numeral, or a plural for that matter, faces a level of expectation and suspicion not usually accorded the conveyor belt serials of a Sean Cunningham or Sylvester Stallone.

Raising the ante for the ALIEN sequel yet further is the participation of James Cameron as writer/director. Cameron, who managed to invest even such unpromising projects as PIRANHA II: THE SPAWNING (1981, as first-time director) and RAMBO (1985, as co-writer) with moments of enjoyment, could probably coast into any SF pantheon on the strength of THE TERMINATOR (1984) alone, a film that (like ALIEN) looks better with each viewing. Indeed, THE TERMINATOR was such a fabulous tour de force, its critical and commercial success so universal, that Cameron's position is not at all unlike Ridley Scott's on the eve of BLADE RUNNER. Is this hotshot a one shot?

Not bloody likely. ALIENS is a direct hit, a worthy successor to the honored original and



James Cameron directs the film's climactic scene involving Ripley's showdown with the Alien Queen.

decisive proof that nobody, but nobody, surpasses James Cameron in the art of speculative fiction and the visual realization of same. It's been so long a season without rain, SF action-adventure-wise, that ALIENS will probably suffer from Overhype followed by Backlash, but not since Cameron's last outing has there been so proper an occasion to flip through a thesaurus and pour on the superlatives.

Cameron has opted for a wise middle course, one that misfired in the hands of Peter Hyams with 2010 but works splendidly here. Rather than slavishly rerun the original or drastically depart from it, he extends the logical conse-

quences of the source narrative, albeit pulling them in a direction that very much suits his ballistic proclivities. He moves the scene forward in time and outward in space, setting ALIENS 57 years after Ripley blasted the Nostromo's stowaway into oblivion, and stages the action away from the confines of a spaceship and onto the wider field of play offered by the vast architecture of a colony base.

In opening up the filmic landscape, the director forfeits the claustrophobic horror of the original but gains an arena for the combat action choreography that is his forte (this guy needs room to move). Cameron's soon-to-be-classic

"rock 'n' roll" firefights are just plain spellbinding, a series of fast-cut, flash-and-blast battles that capture the wild confusion, dumb fright, and adrenalin rush of a free-fire zone.

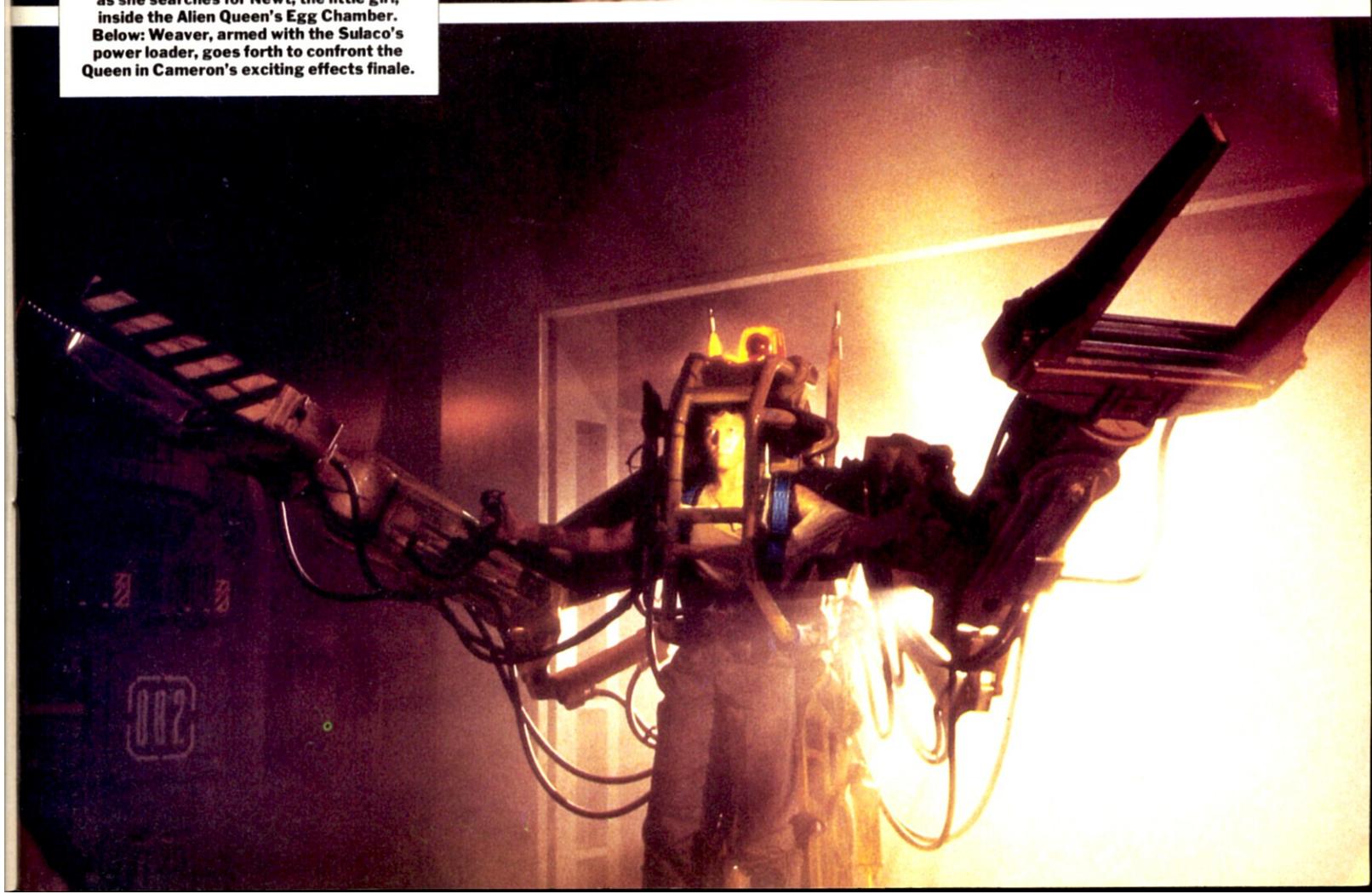
But visually diverting and aurally enchanting as it is, the combat footage does more than keep the special effects guys off the street. Just as THE TERMINATOR owes its emotional power less to the cyborg's murderous persistence than to Sarah Connor's growth from a clumsy teenage waitress into a resourceful woman warrior, ALIENS is mainly a study in character, a psycho-drama with Ripley playing both

patient and therapist.

In Ripley, we recall, Scott (himself a Ridley) and writer Dan O'Bannon forged a radical alternative to one of the hoariest of SF cliches: the bimbo scientist. Although vintage SF had its share of proto-feminists [c.f., THE THING (1951), THEM! (1954), and especially IT CAME FROM BENEATH THE SEA (1955)], a woman's place in space was usually as a tightly-packaged fifth wheel. On missions from FLIGHT TO MARS (1951) to FANTASTIC VOYAGE (1966), she could be counted on to look great in a skin-tight space suit before wilting into the armpit of the square-jawed hero. By making Ripley the



Above: Director James Cameron goes over a scene with Sigourney Weaver as Ripley, as she searches for Newt, the little girl, inside the Alien Queen's Egg Chamber.
Below: Weaver, armed with the Sulaco's power loader, goes forth to confront the Queen in Cameron's exciting effects finale.

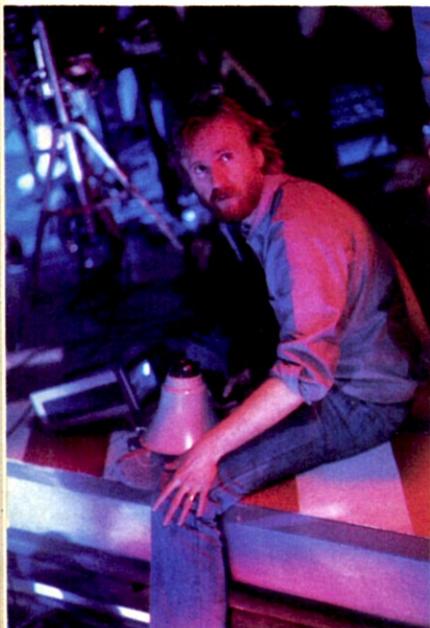


“masculine” voice of ruthless logic, ALIEN reversed generic expectations 180 degrees. And seeing a woman take the reins put audiences off balance.

At the same time, Ripley was too much of a cold fish, too off-putting in her strident self-sufficiency, to engage an audience’s unqualified sympathy in a feature-length vehicle of her own. In expanding the role and delving deeper into the character, Cameron, aided immeasurably by a subtly multi-leveled performance by Weaver, softens Ripley’s hard edges. Despite the distaff Rambo theme of the theatre lobby display kits, Ripley is no Amazon. Like audiences everywhere, the ALIEN experience left her rattled, a bundle of nerves and nightmares (including a wry “false start” in homage to the original).

Only reluctantly does Ripley decide to confront her demons and, at the urging of a suspiciously solicitous company man (a nicely lubricated turn by comedian Paul Reiser), accept a post as advisor to an expeditionary force returning to planet LB426, the lair of the original alien and now an established space outpost. ALIENS’ opening acts, before a shot is fired or beast spotted, are exemplary instances of the “ticking bomb” school of Hitchcockian filmmaking, all the more effective for Weaver’s fearful alertness and jumpy expectation. Unlike the gung-

Director James Cameron



SPECIAL EFFECTS

ALIENS

Work by the L. A. Effects Group looks state-of-the-art, so why were they fired?

By Sheldon Teitelbaum

The effects credit on screen at the start of ALIENS is a bit odd. Perhaps even unfriendly. “Certain Visual Effects by L.A. Effects Group, Inc.” This might even be a credit with a grudge. But director James Cameron does not allow much time to ponder what might lie behind it. The credit is quickly and neatly upstaged by the film’s stylized opening shots, by James Horner’s jarring, ostensibly reverent recycling of the Gayne Ballet Suite (by now the anthem of deep space angst) and by Cameron’s kick-start resumption of the plot-line left idling at the conclusion of Ridley Scott’s ALIEN.

It would be unwise, however, to view the opening credit as either inaccurate or misleading. According to Suzanne Benson, LAE’s line producer for visual effects on the production of ALIENS at England’s Pinewood Studios, her husband’s company contributed between 70 and 80 percent of the special effects work in the film. Some of it, to be sure, was subsequently dropped from the final cut. Nothing sinister in that, though—LAE’s attorney has, in fact, compiled a stack of depositions from people involved in the production who swore they had never heard complaints on the set that LAE’s work on the picture wasn’t up to snuff.

Indeed, though only a few years old, LAE has been quietly



The L. A. Effects Group, (l to r) Larry Benson, Steven Benson, Suzanne Benson, and visual effects director Alan Markowitz.

establishing itself as a comer in the visual effects arena. After a brief debut on a number of small, low-budget productions, LAE distinguished itself with several others that took off commercially, among them JEWEL OF THE NILE and COMMANDO.

The company’s appeal seems to stem from its penchant for doing as much of its work as possible in-house. And, as was the case with ALIENS, for its ability to work with large, practical sets and model work, which tend to make live-action easier to photograph because they provide more believable details.

“Initially,” recalled Allan Markowitz, a senior LAE executive who functioned as the company’s optical effects and animation supervisor on ALIENS, “Cameron had agreed that the special effects for the film should be as close to the first generation as possible.” In fact, Suzanne Benson recounts that, during the early stages of production, she and ALIENS producer Gale Anne Hurd

(Cameron’s wife and his producer on THE TERMINATOR) had dispatched a batch of effects laden dailies back to anxious studio execs at 20th Century-Fox. They called back praising the work, but where, they asked, were the effects? Hurd laughed. “You’re looking at them!” she said.

LAE had contracted to produce all models for the project. This included recreating the Narcissus escape pod and building the

Gateway space station, the Sulaco battle frigate, its dropship and armored personnel carrier, the colony complex and the atmospheric processors. Additionally, LAE assumed responsibility for creating miniature, puppet versions of the Alien Queen and of the power loader. These, however, were contracted out to veteran cable-actuated puppeteer Doug Beswick (see sidebar page 10). The full-scale Alien Queen, face huggers, and newly-hatched Alien chest-bursters were provided by makeup wizard Stan Winston. British effects man John Richardson assumed the unenviable task of designing and assembling the full-scale power loader used in the film as well as the pyrotechnic effects. LAE undertook all of the process work on ALIENS.

Suzanne Benson left Los Angeles for Pinewood in May, 1985, preceding James Cameron and the live-action crew by about a month. There, with substantial assistance from the people at the British studio, she saw to the initial logistics of

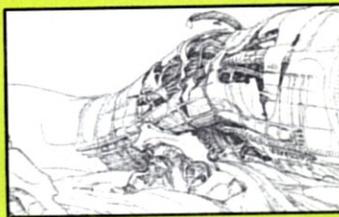


The L. A. Effects Group reconstructed the derelict alien ship from the first film for scenes that were eventually cut from the sequel. Below, sketches by director James Cameron to show how the ship had been broken-up and moved by a lava flow.

transferring operations from the San Fernando Valley to the studio's L, M, F and G blocks, on the outskirts of London. Allan Markowitz and LAE chief Larry Benson joined her at Pinewood two weeks later. Actual shooting was not scheduled until August.

Meanwhile, at LAE's North Hollywood facility, its executive in charge of production, 28 year-old Steve Benson, was already at work trying to reassemble the derelict alien ship that had been featured in the first film. Cameron did not want the model to appear in his film as it had in the first. He envisioned it as having been carried away, in the 56-year interim between the first and second film, by lava flows, which have embedded the derelict into a rock wall.

The actual job of restoring the derelict, as well as creating



the volcanic environment for it, fell to Jay Roth, LAE's 25 year-old model shop supervisor. Team members Matt Rose and Mark Williams resculpted part of the ship in foam. The landscape generated for the derelict, which was eventually cut from the final version of *ALIENS*, used up two tons of plaster.

Roth was also charged with recreating the *Nostromo*'s escape pod, no mean feat because the original model had been stolen at an exhibition. Working from photographs, Roth's team produced a square steel tubing armature which was welded together, using wood for the understructure,

flexiglass on top of that, and styrofoam detailing.

Although shooting had been scheduled to begin in August, preproduction was prolonged to provide yet more time for set and model design. Because he had been an art director at New World Pictures and, moreover, one particularly well-versed with the exigencies of optical effects work, Cameron himself generated or oversaw much of that design process. LAE was able to complete the reconstruction of the derelict ship and the *Narcissus* in California because the question of design, in these cases, had already been predetermined. But, for the rest of the effects work commissioned by Cameron, LAE was essentially confined to Cameron's designs. Any autonomy granted the company in terms of modelmaking pertained, in the main, to subsequent detailing work.

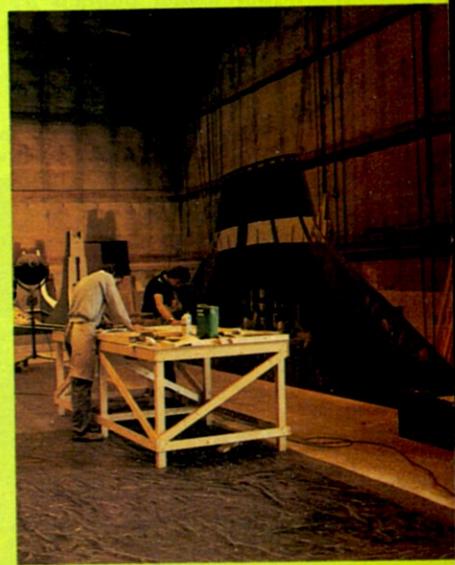
Not that Cameron took on sole design responsibility on the film. He had hired both Ron Cobb and Syd Mead as conceptual designers. Reportedly, Cobb generated the majority of the model designs used on the film. Although Mead apparently designed the *Sulaco* warship as well as some cargo locks, many of his other designs were deemed too stylized, too unrestrainedly futuristic to be of much use to

Cameron, who was looking for a more functional, ordnance-oriented look. An armored personnel carrier designed by Mead reportedly looked too much like a fancy sports car.

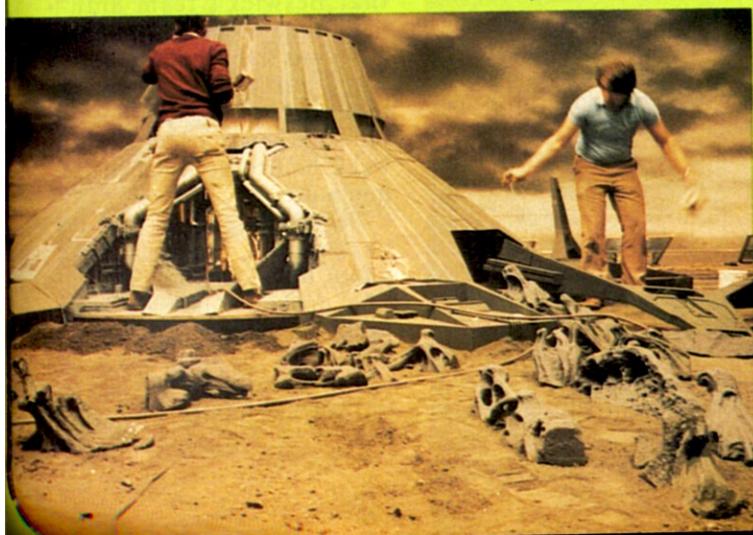
Unfortunately, Cameron was also hard put to communicate, verbally, the precise look of the work he wanted to receive from his people. Frequently, Cameron would conclude that the best way to get things done was to do them himself. More often than not, though he was also spread thin over other departments and areas, he could be found bent over storyboards and blueprints he had drawn himself. For the people who depended upon prompt receipt of storyboards and designs, this proved nearly disastrous. The initial designs began coming in bits and drabs. Or they did not come in at all, not for weeks and sometimes months. Addi-

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L. A. Effects used painted cut-outs with practical lights for larger and more distant versions of the A.P. Station.



L. A. Effects Group modelers detail a large scale set of the Atmosphere Processing Station in London. Left: An effects storyboard of Ripley and Newt as they watch the station burn.



THE ALIEN QUEEN

ALIENS

Ingenious rod puppets designed by Doug Beswick made the Alien Queen come alive in combat.

By Sheldon Teitelbaum

From day one, H. R. Giger's aliens were a brutal slap in the face to the proponents of creationism. No power, divine or otherwise, could have been depraved enough to design such creatures in the normal course of biogenesis. No, the foul hands of evolution had to be at fault here. But who would have thought that these suckers had evolved directly from the dinosaur, more specifically, from the great, big, lumbering lizard who took star billing in *MY SCIENCE PROJECT*?

In fact, this particular dinosaur, which had been designed and constructed by Sylmar-based puppeteer Doug Beswick, and towered at a mighty two-and-a-half feet, begat both the Alien Queen of James Cameron's thunderous sequel to Ridley Scott's *ALIEN* as well as the power loader that eventually does her in.

Beswick had been approached to create the Alien Queen and the power loader puppets by the Skotak brothers, Bob and Dennis, on behalf of L.A. Effects Group, Inc. At that



Michael Burnett of Doug Beswick Productions seams over the foam body of their 1/4-scale Alien Queen rod puppet used to film the climactic battle scene in *ALIENS*.

point, some time before actual preproduction had begun, the Skotaks had been talking about using both stop-motion photography and puppetry to achieve the kind of effects Cameron was looking for in *ALIENS*.

A week later, Cameron joined them to view footage of the dinosaur in *MY SCIENCE PROJECT* (see 15:5:41). According to Beswick, it immedi-

ately occurred to Cameron that the same technology that had made the dinosaur possible could deliver the kind of quick moves he foresaw for his Alien Queen and for Weaver's power loader. This way, he could film the battle sequences live-action. And he could avoid the painstaking stop-motion process.

Initially, Cameron did not believe that he could avoid stop-motion entirely. But after a few weeks of puppet design, it became evident that it would be impossible to build both a stop-motion and a cable-operated puppet. The prospect was simply too expensive so stop-motion was dropped.

Actually, Beswick's team produced three puppets in all: the Queen, the power loader, and a puppet of Sigourney Weaver, to be fitted into the power loader. The three were initially budgeted at \$189,000. Interestingly, the dinosaur puppet in *MY SCIENCE*

PROJECT ran up a bill of half-a-million dollars. And in the end, the three *ALIENS* puppets combined only cost Beswick's plant \$167,000.

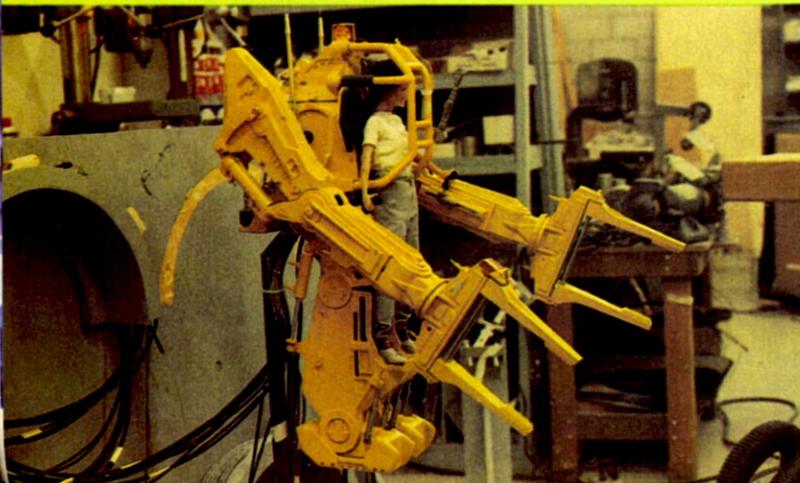
Cameron himself had generated the original design for the power loader. He had drawn a rendering of the dance of death he envisioned for the two. Beswick worked from that initial design, trying to determine the broad strokes of the technology it would involve. But he had to wait for the design of the full-scale power loader Cameron and John Richardson were creating to be locked down before actually going to work on the puppet. The wait, he said, was nearly interminable. But Beswick said that he doesn't think the design process could have worked any other way.

"Unlike us, they had to work around a human being," he recalled. But Beswick felt squeezed nonetheless. He had been allotted six months to complete all three models. Work on the Queen began after a month. The power loader design didn't come in until three months had passed. The work on it was so rushed that Beswick's team didn't have time to paint or detail it—it was shipped out to Pine-wood unfinished. Beswick recalled that Cameron shot the full-scale power loader scenes a week before he finished the miniature.

Beswick explained that his puppets did not break any major technological ground. The problem, he said, was packing as many capabilities as possible in the small space he had to work with. "We had to retrofit mechanics," he said.

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The 1/4 scale puppets of Ripley and the power loader supplied by Doug Beswick Productions to film the climactic sequence, ready for painting and final detailing.





Sigourney Weaver as Ripley rescues Newt (Carrie Henn) from the egg chamber of the Alien Queen in ALIENS, James Cameron's high-powered sequel to Ridley Scott's ALIEN.

ho squad accompanying her, she (and we) know what lies ahead and are scared silly.

Accentuating the original's horror was the terrible solitariness of the Nostromo's crew, a collective that had little of the warm esprit of a group living at close quarters. Cameron's co-ed band of "colonial marines" are a nicely humanized organization—gripping, joking, and risking their lives for each other. Played mostly by fresh screen faces, the actors delineate themselves sharply and quickly: the lifer drill sergeant (Al Matthews, who has the crowd in his pocket the minute he picks up a cigar first thing after hypersleep), the private who goes to pieces (Bill Paxton, an audience surrogate who shrieks the film's funniest lines), the emphatically unladyl-like Vasquez (Jenette Goldstein, with an Hispanic accent and Ms. Olympia physique), and the forbidding "synthetic" Bishop (Lance Henriksen), who prefers the term "artificial person."

Sent in to search and destroy, the self-described "grunts" (complete with American flag insignia and flamethrowers) conjure deliberate evocations of more contemporary police action. The slang, the lower-class ethnicity, and the macho posturing plays like a Viet Nam period run-through-the-jun-

gle. (ALIENS also takes as a matter of course the American military's subservience, though ultimate moral superiority, to venal corporate interests.) Significantly, the initial combat engagements are rendered through video transmitters in the soldiers' helmets and watched on monitors from afar by the field commander. The cross-cutting from the "real" scene of action to the video version(s) is fast, furious, and disorienting, a television war lending viewers a dual vantage of distance and immediacy.

First among equals in the marine corps is Corporal Hicks (Michael Biehn, who at one point, to raucous crowd ap-

proval, pulls out his TERMINATOR shotgun). The dimmest of romantic sparks flash before the more urgent task of saving their asses from alien cocooning smotherers the boy-girl stuff. One of ALIENS' few disappointments is that Biehn, a remarkably attractive screen presence, is underused: for the final conflagration, he is literally out for the count. This is all Ripley's show. While the men freeze or freak out in a crisis, she makes the intelligent choices, performs the dramatic rescues, and assumes natural leadership over the squad.

Modulating Ripley's "mas-

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Weaver and Henn scurry under a bunk to escape one of the running Facehuggers.



Cast & Credits

A 20th Century-Fox release of a Brandywine production. 7/86. 137 mins. In color and Dolby. Directed by James Cameron. Produced by Gale Anne Hurd. Executive producers, Gordon Carroll, David Giler, & Walter Hill. Screenplay by Cameron from a story by Cameron, Giler, & Hill—based on characters created by Dan O'Bannon & Ronald Shusett. Director of photography, Adrian Biddle. Editor, Ray Lovejoy. Production designer, Peter Lamont. Supervising art director, Terence Ackland-Snow. Art direction, Bert Davey, Fred Hole, Michael Lamont, & Ken Court. Set decoration, Crispian Sallis. Costume design, Emma Porteous. Alien effects created by Stan Winston. Certain special visual effects created by The L. A. Effects Group. Visual effects supervisors, Robert & Dennis Skotak. Visual effects post-production supervision, Brian Johnson. Original Alien design, H. R. Giger. Conceptual designer, Ron Cobb. Conceptual artist, Syd Mead. Special effects supervision, John Richardson. Sound, Roy Charman. Assistant director, Derek Cracknell. Casting, Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg, Judy Taylor & Mary Selway. Second unit director, Stan Winston. Music, James Horner. Stunt coordinator, Paul Weston. Unit publicist, Geoff Freeman. Video effects supervisor, Richard Hewitt. Special effects technicians: Norman Baillie, John Morris, Nick Finlayson, Ron Burton, Ken Morris, Peter Pickering, Ron Cartwright, Joss Williams, Michael Dunleavy, Paul Whybrow.

Ripley Sigourney Weaver
 Newt Carrie Henn
 Corporal Hicks Michael Biehn
 Burke Paul Reiser
 Bishop Lance Henriksen
 Private Hudson Bill Paxton
 Lieutenant Gorman William Hope
 Private Vasquez Jenette Goldstein
 Sergeant Apone Al Matthews
 Private Drake Mark Rolston
 Private Frost Ricco Ross
 Corporal Ferro Colette Hiller
 Private Spunkmeyer Daniel Kash
 Corporal Dietrich Cynthia Scott
 Private Crowe Tip Tipping
 Private Wierzbowski Trevor Steedman
 Van Leuwen Paul Maxwell
 ECA Rep Valerie Colgan
 Insurance Man Alan Polonsky