

***Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (June 4, 1982)**



June, 1982: A Slice of Life

U.S. President: Ronald Reagan

Hit movies: *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Rocky III*, *Poltergeist*

Average Movie Ticket Price: \$2.75

Hit Songs: “Always on My Mind,” Willie Nelson; “Goody Two Shoes,” Adam Ant; “Fantasy Island,” Tight Fit; “Hungry Like a Wolf,” Duran Duran; “Single Women,” Dolly Parton

Popular TV: *Magnum P.I.*, *Knight Rider*, *Dynasty*, *Solid Gold*, *Fantasy Island*, *The Love Boat*

Events: Graceland is opened to the public, 750,000 people rally against nuclear weapons in New York, the Equal Rights Amendment fails to gain ratification, legendary baseball player Satchel Paige dies, and future figure skating gold medalist Tara Lipinski is born

Despite the commercial success of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, Paramount executives knew the franchise was in trouble. The television show had ended with its terrible third season, and nearly everyone agreed the first film lacked the ingredients needed to revitalize the property: a victim of too many chefs spoiling the broth and Paramount’s continual insistence to the filmmakers to make everything less “TV” and more epic for the movie theaters. The suits at Paramount knew the *Star Trek* fanbase, though devoted, would quickly erode with another similar showing. And so in 1980, the next film project began with the executives looking for a change of pace.

Firstly, Paramount had to deal with the first film's producer, Mr. *Star Trek* himself, Gene Roddenberry. Rightly or wrongly, the executives felt he was responsible for much of the first film's faults (including the monstrous budget... never mind that half of it was spent because they kept changing the project!). The Paramount brass wanted him out of the way. Roddenberry, nearing the end of his life and growing weary of the battles with the executives, was aware that his partnership with Paramount wasn't working and accepted the studio's offer of a new position: he would now be an "Executive Consultant". Under the terms of the new contract, he would be paid to give advice, and Paramount was free to ignore it. From Roddenberry's standpoint, it was a good deal because if the second film was a failure, he wouldn't get the blame. If it was a success, his baby could have new life. Meanwhile, Paramount was happy to have Roddenberry's important name on the project while finally gaining full control over the potential moneymaking machine Roddenberry had given birth to.

Secondly, the executives needed a producer to replace him. With budget more important than "epic", they chose penny pinching television producer Harve Bennett (*The Six Million Dollar Man*, *The Bionic Woman*) and let him run the show, mostly with people from Paramount's television division. (Bennett, who had only seen a few episodes of *Star Trek* before agreeing to produce its second feature film, spent about three months binge watching the whole series as he began to put a plan in place for his project.)

The "new guy" started the job with a number of tasks to deal with. To begin with, there was the "Mr. Spock" problem. If Gene Roddenberry was "Mr. *Star Trek*" offscreen, Leonard Nimoy was (to the general public) *Star Trek* on it. Unfortunately, after the way the TV series ended and the way the first film turned out, Nimoy decided he had had enough of *Star Trek* and was declining any invitations to return. Knowing Nimoy cared more about ideas than money and that the actor wanted to move past Spock, Bennett came up with something he hoped would excite the face of the franchise. "Hey, Leonard," the producer asked, "how would you like to do a great death scene?" That perked up Nimoy's own ears, making him look not unlike a certain Vulcan, and soon after, Nimoy agreed to join the *Star Trek* cast for one last voyage. "Harve was clever," Nimoy later said. "He had come up with the idea I had been searching for." (Heck, once Spock was killed off, nobody could ask Nimoy to play the character again, right?)

And then there were the issues of developing an acceptable screenplay and finding someone to direct it. Like the first film, established writers were given their chance to romp around in the *Star Trek* universe in the hopes their drafts would excite Paramount executives and eventually the filmgoers. Like the first film, their efforts (including a draft by Samuel Peeples, the writer of the pilot that sold the *Star Trek* television series) excited no one. Meanwhile, no established directors were interested in joining the team, and for good reason. Like the writers, the director would have to work within the framework of pre-established ideas (along with Roddenberry looking over their shoulders) while following a movie many considered a failure. Most directors thought it was a recipe for disaster and didn't want the potential result damaging their resumes.

But a Paramount executive, Karen Moore, put forth her childhood friend, Nick Meyer, as a possibility, noting that he had written and directed *Time After Time* in 1979, a science fiction movie that was well received by critics, and that he was available. (The eccentric Meyer was as different as could be from Robert Wise, being relatively young and having only directed the one film!)

Bennett thought Meyer could be a good choice, but he didn't know what to do about the unacceptable screenplays, especially with deadline pressure looming. (Paramount had already booked the film into theaters.) When he told Meyer he didn't even want to show him the fifth draft because it was so terrible, Meyer quipped, "What about the fourth one?" Bennett then explained that each draft was a completely different story, and Meyer made a suggestion which would alter *Star Trek* forevermore: he asked if he could completely rewrite the script, taking the best elements from the prior screenplays and reformulating them into a new story. Ideas that were popular included scientists terraforming a planet, Khan reappearing and seeking revenge, Spock having a dramatic death, and the crew of the Enterprise confronting the age issue that the media was having so much fun teasing the actors about. Meyer wrote the new screenplay in twelve days, took no writing credit for it, and was named the director of the film.

His new *Star Trek* borrowed elements from *TOS*, absent from the first film, to remind fans of the beloved show. There's the familiar opening notes of *TOS*'s theme song, the Kirk/Spock/Bones relationship, the villainous Khan, and even a return to the soap box communicators that hadn't been used in 15 years. But much of the look and feel of *Star Trek* was reinvented, with a new paint job for the bridge, new uniforms, and a quicker pace than the franchise ever had before.

Unlike the first film, Industrial Light & Magic was contracted to handle the special effects. For ILM, founded by George Lucas, and Paramount, *Star Trek II* was the perfect marriage; the job would come in between *Star Wars* films, helping ILM pay the bills, and the team would be working on ship effects it already had experience with.

One gentleman from the first film who was not asked to return was Jerry Goldsmith, the music man. He was simply too expensive for *Star Trek II*'s shoestring budget. Director Meyer spent what little free time he had listening to cassette tapes sent in by aspiring composers until he stumbled upon the work of a young James Horner, who he brought on board. (Paramount, as a cost saving measure, floated the idea that Horner should use synthesized music instead of live performers; Meyer, however, insisted on a full orchestra and got his way.)

Meanwhile, Paramount was not about to repeat what might have been its greatest mistake with the first; this time it budgeted in time for a test screening. For this preview, the studio invited shoppers from a local supermarket, and they laughed, cried, and shouted with joy, ultimately falling silent as the film concluded. The picture closed with the notion that *Star Trek* had soared triumphantly one last time before saying its final goodbye. Audiences quietly left the screening in tears as if it were a funeral. Nick Meyer was thrilled, having achieved just what he wanted to; but Bennett and the Paramount executives

began to have second thoughts. Nimoy, too, began to question the ending. “Never again the raised eyebrow; never again the delicious teasings of the irascible doctor, or the offering of logic to my impetuous friend and captain. Never again the mind meld, the neck pinch, or the Vulcan salute and blessing ‘Live long and prosper’. The weight of it finally struck me as I was driving home. I asked myself, ‘What have I done?’”

Star Trek was back on track for the first time since 1967. Was it really a good idea to put it out of its misery? Bennett recalled that Spock liked to say “There are always possibilities,” and he and Paramount hatched a plan to alter the ending.

“What the film needed,” he later said, “and what the audience needed... was hope.”

Bennett asked Meyer to add a coda to the film that would give the film goers this feeling as the credits began to roll. Meyer, however, refused. But the young director couldn’t stop the wishes of a “corporate entity”. The needed scenes were shot by Bennett, and the completed film was tested once more: this time, the result was just what Paramount wanted. And with that, *Star Trek II* was released to the world.