

# STAR TREK

## THE MAKING OF

### The death of Spock

Behind the scenes with the people who made it happen

### WALTER KOENIG

### STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN™

VFX — from the Ceti eel to the U.S.S. RELIANT™

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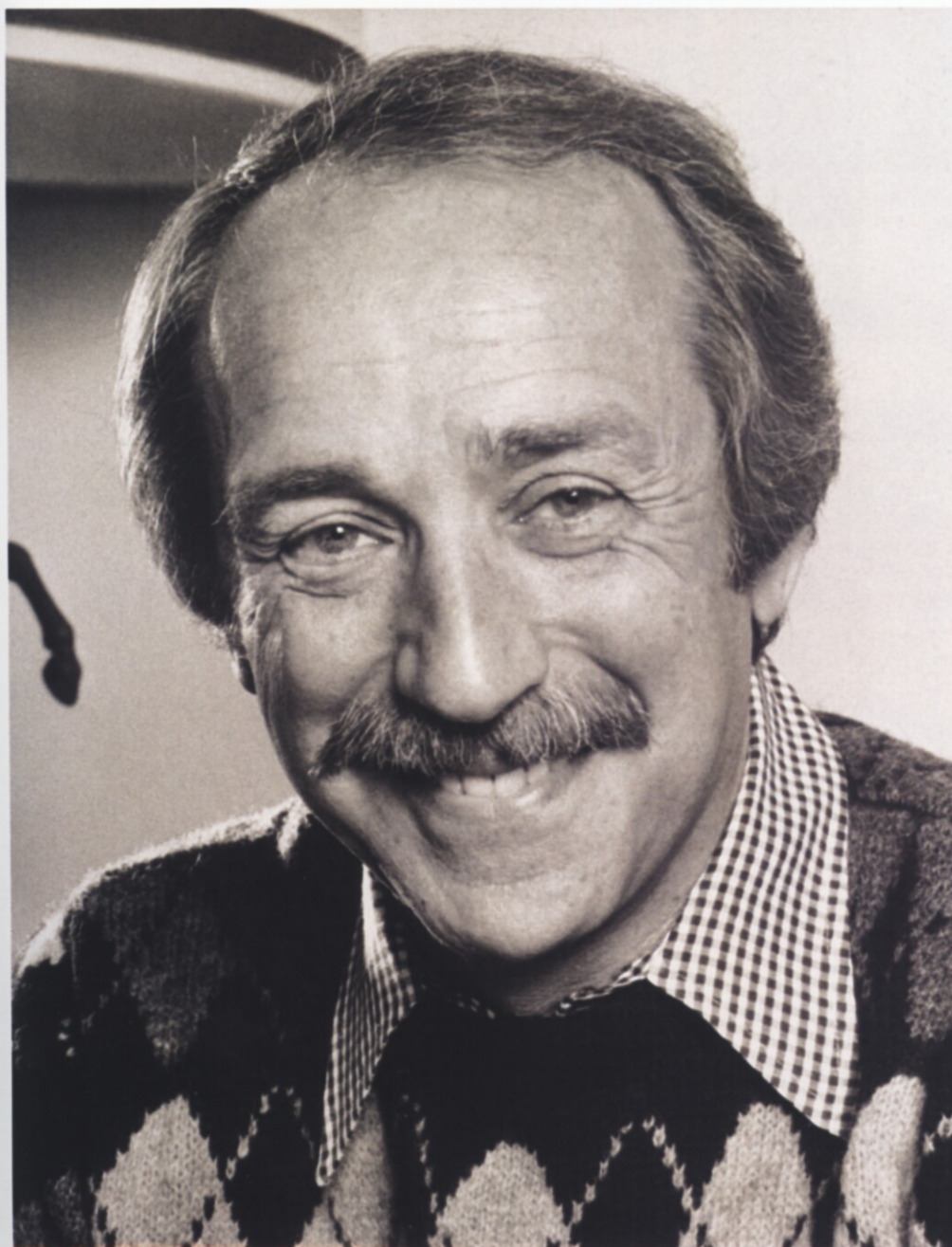


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# Robert Sallin

**STAR TREK II's producer Robert Sallin was a director with hundreds of television commercials to his name. Experience had taught him what it took to get visual effects on screen and how important it was to have a happy crew.**

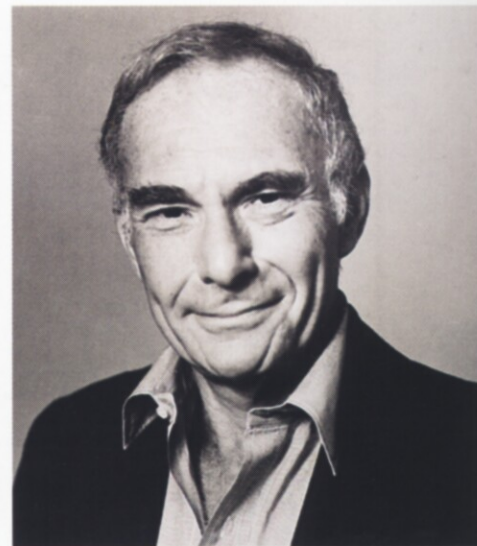


**As the producer of STAR TREK II, Robert Sallin was responsible for recruiting the crew, operating as a backup for director Nicholas Meyer, and supervising the visual effects.**

There were two producers on *STAR TREK: THE WRATH OF KHAN*; executive producer Harve Bennett, who had overall responsibility for the project, and producer Robert Sallin, who ran the production on a daily basis. As Bob says, it can be difficult to explain exactly what a producer does, not least because it can vary from movie to movie. In this case, he reported to Harve, who was responsible for several different projects. "He had three projects to do; one was 'A Woman Called Golda,' one was a television series called 'The Powers of Matthew Star,' and the third was *STAR TREK*. I always let him know what was going on, but in terms of planning the production, who I used on the crew, the look of the movie, that was all me."

## Contented team

Bob's first task was to recruit the team who would make the picture. To his mind, putting a crew together isn't just a question of finding talented people; it's equally important to use people with the right attitude. He remembers



**Bob worked with Harve Bennett, who had overall responsibility for the movie, along with several other projects.**



**Bob says that he was “in the room” when the decision was taken to kill Spock, though he was amazed to receive a death threat when the news leaked out.**

that he even wrote Harve a memo on the subject. “I’m a great believer in having a happy crew, because this is a very painful business. I said, ‘You know, I don’t want to recruit people for this picture who are just on board for their paycheck; I want people who are really going to participate in this total experience. I don’t want it to take the place of their wife or children, but I want an emotional commitment that this is going to make a terrific picture, and it’s going to be a great experience getting there.’ I think that is vital – it always benefits both the

production and the management. It’s about, ‘What kind of human being am I going to deal with here?’”

### **Efficient crew**

He goes on to say that at the time Hollywood was very concerned about escalating costs after several films, including *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE*, had come in dramatically over budget. Paramount Pictures responded by suggesting that most of Bob’s crew should have a television background. “Theoretically, television people knew

how to do things quicker and faster and more efficiently,” he says. “And, candidly, good crew people work across the board. I had some very good people and, yes, they were used to moving a little more quickly than they do in features. My cinematographer, Gayne Rescher, had shot a wonderful movie-of-the-week for television; it was just a beautiful piece of work. In terms of set design and so on I worked with Joe Jennings and Mike Minor, who were both very good. The costume designer, Bob Fletcher, was a wonderful man.”

### **Dangerous story**

The script was one area of the production that was left mostly to Harve, who worked intensively with a number of writers. Bob sat in on many of the meetings and contributed his notes, and he remembers that, when the fans didn’t like the rumors they heard, he was in the firing line alongside Harve: sometimes, it seemed, literally. “When the word leaked out that we were planning to kill Spock, I got a message on my answering machine, that said, ‘If you kill Spock, we’re going to kill you!’ I actually had a death threat! I was stunned. I’ve served in two branches of our military, the Marines and the Air Force, and I’ve never had anyone really say they were going to kill me! We were very concerned, and had to have security around our homes, because I had two young children.”

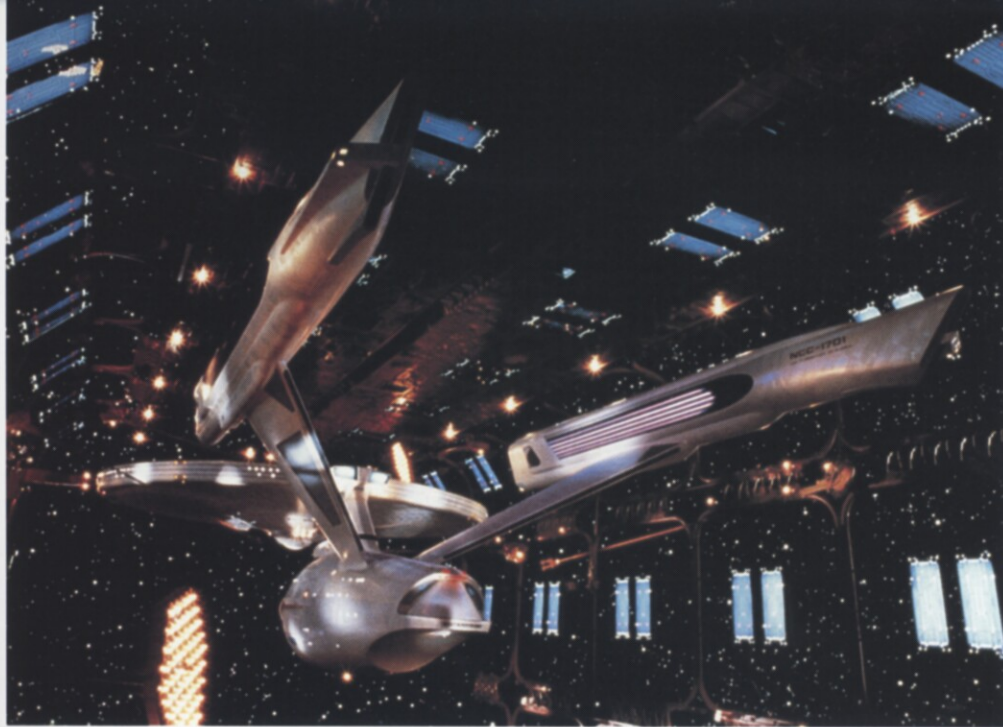
Despite their concerns, the producers never backed down on their plans for Spock, but the script did continue to evolve in other



**Bob claims credit for turning the script’s ‘wee beasties’ into sluglike creatures. He remembers that he got the idea when he found a slug on his doorstep.**



**Bob wanted to make the final battle between the ENTERPRISE and the RELIANT more dramatic, and he worked with art director Michael Minor to develop the idea for the nebula.**



**Saving money was an essential part of Bob's job, and he was able to identify various pieces of footage from the first film, which he and director Nicholas Meyer could reuse. The ENTERPRISE departure relied entirely on reused shots.**

ways. Beyond a general desire to see *STAR TREK* "go someplace it hadn't before," Bob doesn't remember many of the specifics of his notes, but he can point to one major contribution he made to the story. The idea that Khan would use alien creatures to mind-control Chekov and Terrell was introduced early on, but the first time they appeared they were described as spiderlike creatures that nestled between their victim's shoulder-blades.

### Disgusting contribution

"I said, 'Wait a minute, guys, that's 'Operation - Annihilate!' That's straight out of the television show; everybody's seen that. There's no drama in that.' They kind of looked at me and said, 'Well, great then. You go figure it out.' So the next day I woke up and went out to get my morning paper, and there on my walkway was a slug. I looked at it and I thought, 'Perfect. I hate these things. Everybody hates these things. What if ...' I called our technical adviser over at Caltech and said, 'Would it be feasible for a tiny little thing like a slug to get into the ear and go down into the cerebral cortex and then grow?' He said, 'Oh, sure! There's a thing called an earwig, and they do that down in the South.'"

Harve embraced the idea and named Bob's slugs 'Ceti eels.' Although many other things were changed, they survived to the finished movie, when Bob remembers seeing them with an audience for the first time. "The great payoff for me was when this thing came on the screen and women, and even some men, turned away, going, 'Ohhhhh.' One woman said, 'Oh, that's the

grossest thing I've ever seen!' And that was exactly what I wanted!"

### Preparing the way

Because the script was being developed before a director was in place, Bob took charge of the preparations for the shoot. "We were a little bit ahead of ourselves there," he says, "but I had to do it. I'd directed about 2,000 television commercials, and I owned my own production company, so I just attacked it like a large commercial.

"I looked at the previous wardrobe - thank goodness for Bob Fletcher - and said, 'These look like Dr. Denton's jumpsuits. They really don't have any style.' I wanted to redesign them, but I didn't want to throw away everything, because that's too costly, so I said, 'Let's

do some dye tests.' To this day I have the swatches of the different-colored uniforms that we tested to see if we could reuse some of the old material and rework it.

"We knew that we were going to use certain sets. I had even started on the design of the visual effects. Harve already had the idea to bring Ricardo Montalban back, so we started working with that and the inevitable conflict between him and Kirk, and the battle that would have to take place in space. I had [art director] Mike Minor draw up my storyboards for me. He and I would sit at my conference table; I'd say, 'Mike, draw this, where the ship crosses over this way,' and then he would say, 'You know, it might be neater if it came around 180 degrees in the other direction.' And I'd say, 'Oh, that's a great idea.' So we collaborated. He had valuable input, and was just terrific to work with."

### Into the nebula

One of the things that came out of Bob's discussions with Mike and the production designer Joe Jennings was the idea that the final battle should take place in a brightly-colored nebula. Bob was concerned that because the *Enterprise* and the *Reliant* were not highly maneuverable the final battle could seem awkward. When Mike showed him a book with pictures of a nebula, they thought they had found the answer, and, Bob says, the more he found out about it, the better the idea sounded.

"I talked to my scientific advisor and said, 'What happens in a nebula?' and he said, 'All your instrumentation goes wacky because of the intense magnetic field,' and so on and so forth. I thought, 'Yeah, that's



**Bob worked with Mike Minor to produce storyboards and sketches that could be shown to ILM, who then produced modified versions showing exactly what they could provide. The process continued to the end, when the shot of Spock's coffin was added.**



**Bob insisted that Admiral Kirk's first appearance was as dramatic as possible. He wanted a shot when Kirk was silhouetted by the light behind him, and when the first version wasn't powerful enough, he made sure that it was reshot.**

cool, because it means they're both disabled, and they're like two blind rhinoceros trying to find each other; plus the background will be so visually astonishing."

Bob would also be responsible for getting the nebula and all the other visual effects on screen. Because commercials are often on the cutting edge of technology, he had considerable experience of working with VFX, and he says that he was determined to get the best people he could without blowing the budget. "Originally, I was going to portion the work out to different houses. But in my heart of hearts I really wanted to go to ILM, because it put everything under one roof. As time went on and the schedule became compressed I knew that we were going to be in serious trouble. We could still have got the stuff, but I just felt that it was inefficient and it would cost us more money in the long run, so I pushed very hard for that and we did give the work to ILM."

## Finding Nicholas Meyer

While all this work was going on, Bob was devoting considerable effort to finding a director for the movie, which to his amazement, turned out to be a difficult process. "I started looking at the directors I admired: people who were just first-class directors. The bottom line was that no one wanted to do a sequel, no one wanted to do science fiction, and no one wanted to do *STAR TREK*. I couldn't believe it. I had a list of about 40 or 50 directors that I had gone through and talked with people about, and I couldn't get any interest. It was then that my secretary suggested Nick Meyer.

"I was aware of his work as a screenwriter, and in fact he had directed that one film, 'Time After Time,' which I thought

was a very interesting piece of work. Also, I thought *STAR TREK* was a space opera, and I saw that kind of vision in Nick's work. I interviewed him and then brought Harve into it, and told him, 'I think this is the guy.'"

Harve was soon convinced that Nick was the answer to their problems, and, after Nick performed an admired rewrite on the script, the movie was finally ready to go into production.

## On hand

Bob or his associate producer, Bill Phillips, was on stage for every day of the shoot. Bob explains that his function was partially to act as a backup for Nick, who was, after all, directing only his second movie, but also to offer the kind of advice that can only be given after years of experience.

"Nick's a wonderful storyteller, and I surrounded him with what I thought were some really wonderful people. But, bottom line, there were always little contributions that

I made to kind of make sure there were no problems. There's a lot of pressure on a guy directing his first big picture.

"I'll give you an example. This occurred at the opening of the picture when we discover that it's a training exercise: the doors open, and Kirk appears. I said, 'Look, guys; we're introducing Captain Kirk. I think we need a little drama here. So here's what I want to do. When those doors open, the room is filled with smoke, and I want him to emerge in silhouette. I want the strongest backlight you can give him, directly behind him, so that when he walks through there are fingers of light that surround him in the smoke. I want it to look like the Second Coming.' They said, 'Oh, that's a great idea.' I had to go up to ILM the day they shot. When I came back and looked at the dailies, the light was off to the side and the shot had no drama whatsoever. I made them go back and reshoot it, and that's the shot that's in the picture."

## Saving money

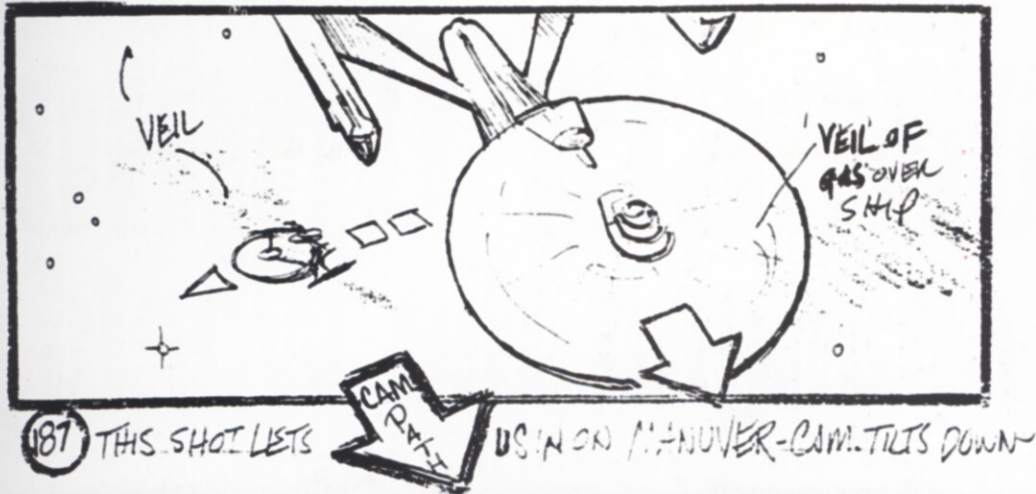
In other cases, Bob was able to make sure that Nick was able to get the shots that he wanted. During Spock's funeral, Nick wanted the camera to be directly in front of the torpedo that acted as a coffin and to move with it as it slid into the launcher.

"I got a call from the head of production at Paramount: 'Nick wants this, and we're going to have to rip out the floor, and we're going to have to rebuild the set so it's high enough off the ground to get the camera in. We've got to talk to Nick.'

"We all went down there, and everyone was gathered around looking at this trough. I just turned to the key grip and said, 'Do you have a Western dolly?' That's basically a trolley that you use to pull the camera. He said 'Yes,' and I said, 'Have you that tubular track for it? And



**Bob found a way of giving Nick Meyer this shot of a torpedo without having to rebuild the set. What he did was put tracks that are used to dolly (move) the camera in the trench so the camera was on the same level as the torpedo and could move with it.**



**Bob provided ILM with Mike Minor's storyboards, which showed them exactly what was needed. Inevitably there were some changes, but, as you can see, the storyboards were usually remarkably close to the finished shots.**

can you put on the little wheels?" He nodded, and I said, "Can't we mount the camera on the dolly, put the track down inside the trough, then move the camera with an offset arm [which allows you to control it from above] and do the shot that way?" He said, "Yeah, we can do that," and I said, "What's that going to cost?" and he said, "About \$30," and I said, "Well, I think that's what we're doing, then!"

## VFX supervisor

Nick describes *STAR TREK II* as being "an inside, outside film," meaning that everything he shot took place inside a ship or on a planet, whereas the visual effects almost all took place in outer space. Nick certainly had input to the visual effects sequences, but it was Bob who

conceived them and worked with ILM to make sure that he got exactly what he wanted.

He remembers that he was keen to control costs by using as much material as he could from *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE*. He storyboarded a new departure sequence that used shots from the extensive *Enterprise* flypast sequence that Doug Trumbull had created, and took a hard look at the models to see what could be reused. "We had things like the space station," he recalls. "I looked at the original one on the film, and I said, 'Well, gee, instead of building a whole new one, why don't we just turn it upside down?'"

However, there were also many new effects sequences that had to be produced at ILM, whether they were using old models or new ones. "I storyboarded as much as I could. If

you look at some of the original stuff I did, like the one ship passing over the other ship and they don't know that each is there, that remained in concept, but the execution of it was slightly different. ILM were always tweaking things and trying to come up with ways to make it look better, but Mike's boards were pretty tight. As a matter of fact, that's one of the reasons we came in on budget. If Nick came up with an idea, we'd say, 'Well, gee; now we don't need that shot we had planned before.' So I said, 'I want credit for that shot,' and Mike and I would storyboard a new shot. It's never as finely tuned as you would like it, but it was pretty highly disciplined, I'll tell you."

## Unexpected response

Finally, when all the shots were delivered and Nick had edited everything together, the team took their movie and showed it to a test audience. Bob remembers that the results were rapturous, but there was one thing that really caught him by surprise.

"I'll never forget this. As a director, you feel out what you can do with an audience; things that you can put in a film that are going to move them. When we knew that Spock was going to die in the engine room, and we were going to have a funeral, Harve said, 'When they're all standing there, what do you think about having Scotty play the bagpipes, and play 'Amazing Grace'?' I loved that idea. We went through the whole thing, and it was shot that way. We were at the preview screenings in Kansas City, and when Spock died the audience absolutely dissolved in tears. It was very emotional. But when Scotty started playing 'Amazing Grace,' they burst into laughter. I was dumbstruck. I couldn't for the life of me understand what had transpired. Upon reflection I realized that the death of Spock was such a powerful emotional experience for them that when they saw something as unusual as Scotty playing the bagpipes, it was a relief, and they laughed. But we left it in."

That choice, like almost every choice on this movie, was the right one, and the movie has earned itself a great place in *STAR TREK* history. No single person is responsible for a movie's success – if it is anything, filmmaking is the art of collaboration – but there is no question that Bob recruited the team and created the atmosphere that made that success possible. There is also little argument that this movie marked *STAR TREK*'s rebirth; if it had been a failure, there would have been no more sequels, and no more television series. ☆