

# The Promise of Space



All Space Photos & Art: Copyright 1998 Fox

Venturing into intergalactic warfare, James Wong & Glen Morgan take fans *Above & Beyond*.

By MARC SHAPIRO

When former *X-Files* producer/writers James Wong and Glen Morgan were asked to come up with "a space show" for the Fox Network, Wong recalls telling the Fox brass "I'm not sure Glen and I are the right guys to do something like that." Fox, however, wasn't willing to take no for an answer and even offered to provide a blueprint for them.

"Initially, they wanted us to do [the long-discussed] *Starfleet Academy*," he remembers. "I said we probably shouldn't be doing that, because the regular *Star Trek* people are probably going to do it, and if we were to try something like that, the *Trek* fans would almost certainly turn on us. Besides, Glen and I were more interested in trying something kind of new."

"Watch where you step," warns Morgan, leading the way through a claustrophobic, metal-riveted and bolted hallway mockup of a *Space: Above & Beyond* transport. "We've just painted here and a lot of this stuff isn't dry yet."

Wong and Morgan step lightly around the corner into another of the literal jungle of

standard sets that have been constructed on two Southern California soundstages. *Space* has been a rush job. After months of prepping the series with the idea of lensing in Australia, it was decided, after shooting the pilot *Down Under*, that it would ultimately be cheaper and more deadline-friendly to move the series to Los Angeles. Sets were hastily constructed and, in some cases, reconstructed.

Now, according to Wong, the show is simply a race against the clock. "We're still scoring the pilot and the FX aren't in yet," he sighs, pausing momentarily in the tour to rest against a metal strut that looks right out of World War II. "The pilot has to be finished and turned in by August 11. We're also currently shooting the second show and prepping the third. It gets overwhelming after a while, because nothing is ever really finished."

The producers lead the way into a second transport mockup, complete with Stone Age-

looking electronics equipment. "This is just a big space truck," explains Morgan. "It can carry food, troops—just about anything."

Next stop: the flight deck. Amid strings of overhead wires and dangling cables, small compact fighter units called Hammerheads are being test-lowered up and down into what will be the takeoff pattern in the series. "This is probably the most specific place on the show," says Morgan. "The Hammerheads do just *one* thing."

Down a flight of stairs, a cramped, submarine-style hallway leads to the crew quarters. Amid primitive bunks and family mementos, producer Wong pauses to explain that the social interaction on the futuristic battle cruiser *Saratoga* will be, if nothing else, enlightened. "In our military, men and women serve together with no stigma about sex. The sexual dynamics are different and interesting. They live together, they use the showers together and they sleep together—but *not* in the same bed," he laughingly cautions.

The producers lead the way through a transport bay that will come to life with the



"Cooper is very much like a child," says *Space* co-creator Glen Morgan of the genetically engineered In Vitro character played by Rodney Rowland.

aid of computer-enhanced FX and into a recreation room complete with virtual reality games, video equipment and a CD collection that runs the gamut from futuristic music titles to Eric Clapton. Outside the rec room, Wong, amidst the ongoing clatter and buzz of sets under construction, pauses to ponder the trials and tribulations of their series, which is set to face off against ratings juggernaut *60 Minutes* on Sunday evenings.

"They agreed with us that nobody wanted to do a namby-pamby show," he says, "but they also said they don't want us to use the word ass a lot. The studio realizes this is a war show and is open to the intense stories and situations we want to present. I don't know if coming from *The X-Files* is going to make the relationship with Standards and Practices any easier. If anything, it makes those people more suspicious of us. On the second show, we've already gotten a note to use caution on the blood FX. My response was, 'Damn! This is a war!'"

## Ship of Fools

When the noise of sets under construction finally gets to be too much, Wong and Morgan retire to a more decibel-friendly conference room for further discussion. And with the pilot not yet airworthy, describing *Space* often revolves around dispelling wild rumors and rabid typecasting.

"*Top Gun* meets *Melrose Place*?" cringes Morgan in response to the most outlandish description to date of the pair's show. "God! That's the worst one yet!"

"That's definitely *not* how we would describe this show," Wong chuckles. "If you see us do a *Melrose Place* kind of show, you have my permission to kill me. I believe that

once people see the show, they'll know what it is. I'm not really concerned that people won't get this show once they see it."

*Space*, whose pilot script was written by Wong and Morgan and directed by David (The X-Files) Nutter, takes place in the year 2063, when, after years of peace, Earth begins to look outward and colonizes other planets. The peace is broken when a previously unknown alien race—dubbed the Chigs by Earth forces—wipes out two colonies. In the ensuing battles, Earth's top fighter pilots are killed and, consequently, a group of wet-behind-the-ears military cadets are thrust into the front lines of an intergalactic war.

The raw recruits are a literal ship of fools. Nathan West (Morgan Weissner) has signed on for the opportunity to be reunited with the love of his life when he's unexpectedly bumped from a colony expedition. Shane Vansen (Kristen Cloke) has gone to war to deal with her painful past. Cooper Hawkes (Rodney Rowland) is an In Vitro, a race bred to serve in menial capacities but who has been unjustly sentenced to serve in the military. A fierce fighting spirit tempered with empathy for her fellow man is the hallmark of Vanessa Dampousse (Lanei Chapman). Also on board is Paul Wang (Joel de la Fuente), an intellectual with a great deal of

curiosity that always seems to result in his being on the wrong end of trouble. McQueen (James Morrison) is the veteran squadron leader given the responsibility of molding his young charges and keeping them alive. Aiding McQueen in this military brand of tough love is Sergeant Major Frank Bougus (R. Lee Ermey).

Handling the array of *Space* visual FX producer Tim McHugh and visual FX supervisor Glenn Campbell. The show is budgeted, according to Wong, at "just under \$2 million per episode."

Morgan and Wong, beginning with their initial Fox conversations in 1993, went through three executive shakeups at Fox while seeing their idea for *Space* go from a one-hour pilot to a two-hour movie to a two-hour movie with a backdoor to a series built into it. It was early in this odyssey that Wong remembers how their higher education became a major inspiration. "When we were in college, we took this class called The Fiction of War, in which we read things like *The Naked and the Dead*, *Catch-22* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. That class always stayed with us and so we decided, 'Well, we should do war.'"

The pair sold the concept to Fox based on nothing more than the idea of "Space and War." But, as the skull sessions between the

Budgeted at "just under \$2 million per episode," according to Wong, *Space* promises to be a visual feast for tech-hungry viewers.



Co-creator James Wong notes that the *Space* staff was warned by the network not to let the show get too bloody. His response? "Damn! This is a war!"



two writers continued, the show's premise took on deeper meaning.

"We didn't just want to do blast 'em, shoot-'em-up stuff," declares Wong, "but we weren't sure exactly what we wanted to do. Finally, we came up with the notion of how there has been a general loss of faith in the world and that telling a story about people who had banded together under the umbrella of war might find a way of renewing their faith and in the idea of believing again."



Kristen Cloke is Shane Vansen, a cadet who joined the military to deal with her painful past, only to face the even greater pain of war.



Nathan West (Morgan Weisser) has signed on for the opportunity to be reunited with the love of his life.

Adds Morgan, "The big thing we want to address, especially in this first season, is the question of what you would die for and what you would give your life for. As far as James and I are concerned, that's a real good question that isn't asked much anymore. What's ultimately worth that kind of sacrifice is something that, thematically, is very important to the stories we tell."

### Reasons to Believe

The theme of belief will, according to Wong, be thoroughly ingrained into these characters' lives. "Nathan is a perfect example. Here's a guy who grew up believing in the colonial program and is truly in love. He has everything taken away from him all at once. But he still has faith that he'll find that love again and he's willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish that goal."

"Cooper is very much like a child," adds Morgan. "Because of the way he was raised, he has never had a family or been around people before. Consequently, he's oddly attracted to people and situations he doesn't quite understand. With Shane, it's a matter of dealing with the fact that her parents gave their lives for her and now she's sort of paying them back by joining the military and going to war."

Casting the series, according to Morgan, was never a problem. "We knew from the beginning that we wanted to go with complete unknowns. We didn't want to have the baggage of somebody coming to us from another show or another movie. Besides, there was no big-name actor interest because, at the time, we felt it was a certainty that we

would be filming in Australia and nobody wanted to spend eight months away from their families. In fact, we told people up front that if they weren't willing to go to Australia, they should not even bother coming in to audition. Many people passed because of that, and then look what happened; we ended up shooting in Los Angeles."

Both producers claim that the enemy aliens will be integral to the stories and that they'll be introduced in a non-stereotypical way. "We're going to reveal the Chigs little

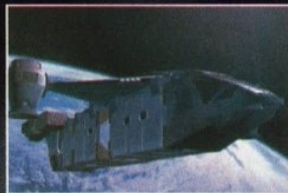
by little," explains Wong. "We want people to know them in oblique ways before we actually introduce them. In the pilot episode, you will see one in armor. You'll also see a Chig gravesite."

Morgan notes that much of what they learned on *X-Files* is going into the gradual unveiling of this alien enemy. "What we learned on that show was that you don't shoot your wad all at once. If we come out in the first episode and tell you where the aliens are from and what they look like, then there's no mystery. Much of what we learned about the Japanese in World War II was discovered by coming across their campsites, hearing their saki glasses clinking and hearing them sing at night."

Wong offers that one thing they're trying to avoid in *Space* is the idea that the aliens are horrible monsters. "As the show begins, the aliens will be depicted as our enemies. But, as we discover more about them, we'll find that they're less black-and-white and more grey."

*Space* is already a 24-hour-a-day job, so it comes as no surprise when Wong and Morgan (who discussed the previous series in STARLOG #210) claim that *X-Files* work of any kind in the future is out of the question. "It would not be fair to *X-Files* for us to come into the middle of the season and say, 'Oh, can we do one?' They're doing their own thing. So far, this show has been so complex that we haven't had much time to spend with our families. Personally, I would rather be with my family than do another *X-Files*."

But that doesn't mean that the duo, who cut their teeth on such episodic shows as *21*



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*Jump Street*, *Wiseguy*, *The Commish* and *Booker* before climbing on board *The X-Files*, haven't brought something from the latter adventure to their current project. "When we were working on *21 Jump Street*, we were told that to do a successful show, you have to keep doing the same show over and over," relates Morgan. "Well, when we got to *X-Files*, we felt we had to try and buck that attitude. So, with *X-Files*, we came up with the concept of there being basically four kinds of shows. There's the monster show, the conspiracy show, the UFO abduction show and the weird science show. When Chris [Carter, *X-Files* executive producer] did the alien show with the pilot, we said, 'OK, let's do a monster show.' We kept changing things, and I think that's what made *X-Files* work. People never knew what to expect. And that's the big lesson we feel we've brought over to *Space*."

### Visions of Light

Digital animation supervisor Ken Stranahan and visual FX producer McHugh wanted *Space* to look like *Star Wars*. "But the reality is that most people are going to watch this on a 19-inch Sony," says Stranahan. "So rather than width, we're going for a lot of depth in our FX shots."

Going under the moniker of Area 51 in a nondescript office building in Southern California, the FX crew, according to Stranahan, "is completely on. We're moving constantly." Armed with PC and Mac-based software, the company has created 150 computer-generated shots for the pilot while simultaneously scheduling shots for the first three episodes. And, according to McHugh, it has been a different kind of process for the crew.

"Most CGI guys are used to working on their own but, because of the schedule on this show, we've had to become a team. On this show, somebody might build a model, then hand it off to somebody else to do the animation who, in turn, might hand it off to somebody else who'll complete the shot. We've had to work very hard at being a team so that egos don't get stepped on."

McHugh claims that egos haven't gotten bruised on *Space* because "we can always count on four or five cool shots per episode." These include everything from asteroids fly-



The *Space* cast were prepared to move to Australia, but budgetary concerns returned the actors to LA for good.

ing by to airship battles in outer space, zaps from alien ray guns and, in a subtle bit of wizardry in the pilot, a sequence in which astronauts cross a gantryway to a CGI-created ship, while a CGI helicopter floats by in the background.

"The big challenge has been trying to come up with realistic models," offers

**"It's about believing in yourself and the group."**

Stranahan. "That's what's going to keep the look of this show consistent. Once we've established the basic setups for the sequences, all we have to do is slip in the model and it makes the whole process much easier."

With the exception of a two-part story in November, the producers state that the first order of 13 episodes of *Space* (including the two-hour pilot) will be self-contained one-hour shows. "But like the Cigarette Smoking Man in *X-Files*, we'll have certain fringe characters making appearances throughout the show's run," declares Morgan.

And for those who hope *Space* is more than SF military action, Wong emphasizes

that the show will also have relationships. "Those moments will definitely be much more real than anything we've seen before. I won't do a show where there's the huge battle going on and 'Oh, by the way, we're in love too.' Any romance or relationship will be played within the context of the whole show."

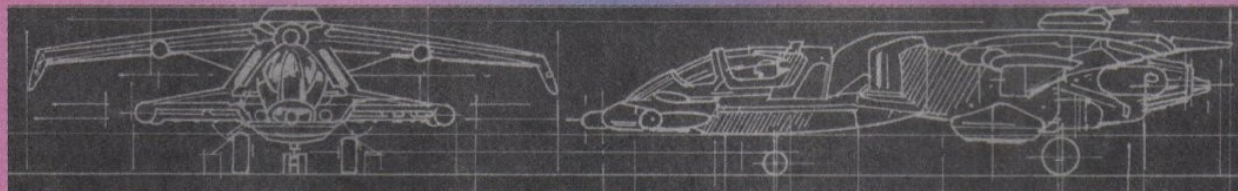
Wong and Morgan are aware that SF-TV series frequently have their breakout characters who rise above an ensemble cast. They claim they're prepared for that event, but that it won't alter anything. "We won't change the show to accommodate the popularity of one character over the others. If Cooper breaks out, it's not suddenly going to become the Cooper show. It will remain an ensemble cast no matter who breaks out," insists Wong. And that's especially true because the series is about future war. And people die in war. It's unlikely, the producers believe, that all the regular characters will survive the combat.

It's also no surprise what the biggest challenge of *Space* is. "A whole bunch of money," cracks Wong. "It's astounding how much a show like this one costs. And that's a pressure we really don't need, because the more money we spend, the more people are down here looking over our shoulders."

"It's not like we can go down to the prop department when a character pulls a gun," chimes in Glen Morgan. "We have to make a gun. Everything these people do that we take for granted has to be changed because of the time and setting. We still want to invoke that feeling of familiarity. But when they go to a planet that has no atmosphere, they've got to have space suits."

Ultimately, the producers believe that the message of *Space: Above & Beyond* will boil down to one word: belief. "It's about believing in yourself and the group. We're using the background of war to make that point."

But James Wong, with the last word, points to the year *Space* takes place in as something potentially much deeper. "It's the year 2063. It's 100 years after the Kennedy assassination and 100 years after what many people perceive as the last time we had hope. That was the death of innocence. We're taking that moment, leaping 100 years into the future and showing people where we are now." ★



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