

RICHARD H. LYFORD

**Amateur Seattle Filmmaker's
Cine-Odyssey Sails Him
into Tinseltown!**

Richard Lyford films a miniature effects sequence for his 1937 sci-fi thriller, *As the Earth Turns*.

Article by JAN ALAN HENDERSON

MANY FILMMAKERS WHO HAVE ACHIEVED GREATNESS started out making amateur movies with their families' home movie equipment. The cameras used to film outings, picnics, weddings, and family gatherings suddenly became the instrument of youthful imagination. This became a phenomenon in the late 1950s and early '60s. Popular genre magazines ran letters and features on these future Hollywood hopefuls.

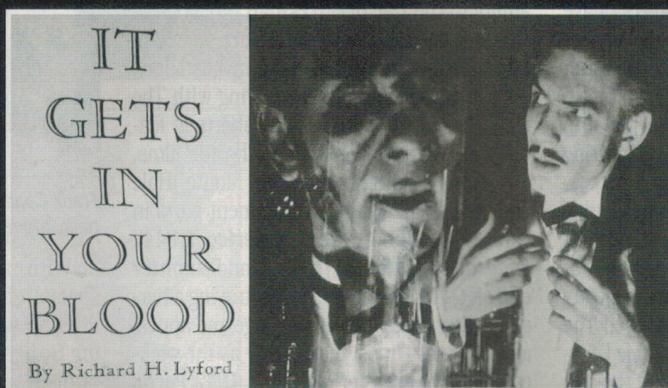
One example of these indie efforts appeared in *Filmfax* #71, titled "Monster Rumble: The Amateur Films of Don Glut." Early '60s monster magazines featured monsters of all ages and sizes announcing their latest cinematic efforts. What these shutterbugs didn't know was their passion had been played out decades before in Seattle, Washington by Richard H. Lyford.

Lyford was born on October 7, 1917, and began staging plays in 1924 at the age of seven. In an article written by Lyford and published in November of 1938 (in *American Cinematographer* magazine), Lyford recounted the genesis

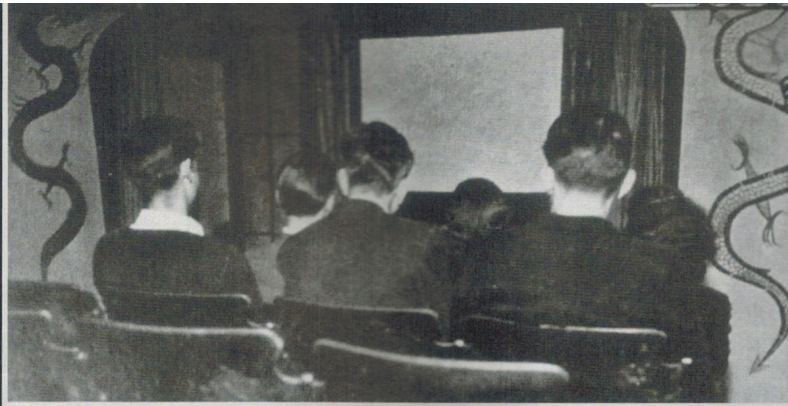
of his budding show business career (no mean feat for a 21-year-old who had just migrated to Los Angeles, for a one-year internship at Walt Disney Studios).

Titled "It Gets Into Your Blood," this detailed and technical overview covered Lyford's career prior to arrival in Los Angeles. A true multi-hyphenate, Lyford begins his piece recounting his first theatrical production of *Peter Pan* in which his older brother hit his head on a radiator in the family basement while Peter and Captain Hook engaged in mortal combat. At this juncture most parents would put their foot down on these pint-sized thespian activities. But not so with the Lyford family. Shortly after his production of *Peter Pan*, the family basement was transformed into a 43-seat theater, dubbed the Oriental Theater. Lyford immediately went into production on his second play, the adult themed *Bluebeard*. Pretty heady stuff for 1924.

Three years later, Lyford became besotted with Bram Stoker's diary styled



This *American Cinematographer* article from Nov. 1938 featured a scene from Richard H. Lyford's amateur production of *The Mystery at Huxley Inn*, for which he won a third place prize of \$100 in the Pete Smith-MGM amateur movie contest.



Left: Viewers wait for the film to begin in the Lyford family's basement theater. Right: Lyford as Dracula in his theater group's version of the Liveright play.

novel *Dracula*. Years later, Lyford would be a loyal fan of actor Bela Lugosi, but in 1927 their lives would revolve in parallel universes thanks to the soon to be world famous vampire, Dracula. It is unknown whether Lyford had been exposed to the Hamilton Deane/John Balderson three act play before his Seattle based production. The professional production had run preview performances in Hartford, Connecticut, and in New Haven in mid-September with Horace Liveright producing. It made its Broadway debut on October 5th (two days before Lyford's tenth birthday) to mixed reviews, and ran 261 performances before closing on May 19, 1928.

Over a span of two years, Lyford's theater group performed their version of the Liveright play, adding characters, and finally closing the run with a performance at Lyford's elementary school. The horrific ending resulted in several cast members being suspended for two days. After *Dracula*, Lyford and company mounted and performed 58 plays which were mostly originals written by Lyford.

Another interest would come into play; Lyford's love of photography that would lead him and his theater group into the almost unattainable realm of motion pictures. With a second-hand Eastman Model B 16mm camera, Lyford dove in head first with his first cinematic endeavor, *The Phantom Terror*, which ran eight minutes.

Lyford's second film, *East of the Congo*, was followed quickly by the ambitious production *The Sea Devil* which was his first attempt at producing a talkie.

For the audio content of *The Sea Devil*, transcription records were used, like the sound discs used for *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. A custom-built dual turntable system was constructed. Three scenes that included dialog were completed, and music and sound effects were recorded for the picture. Languishing on the shelf for 24 months, the project's many logistics proved to be insurmountable to complete the film, so it was abandoned.

Quickly rebounding, Lyford and Company produced the 800-foot horror short *The Scalpel*, which in 1936 was voted one of the ten best in the Amateur Cinema League's annual competition.

Keeping up the pace, *Midnight Adventure* was followed by *The Mystery at Huxley Inn*, which placed third in the MGM Pete Smith film contest, gleaning Lyford a \$100 check.

Lyford pulled *The Sea Devil* out of mothballs and completed it. While not satisfied with the finished product, he valued it as a learning tool. The picture featured 22 life sized sets, nine minia-

ture sets, with a variety of sailing vessels (all scale models), and a French village. This was his most ambitious project to date.

Ritual of the Dead was more gruesome than any of Lyford's previous films, but the most prophetic show from his 1937 canon was *As the Earth Turns*.

Richard Lyford's grand-niece, Kim Lyford Bishop, with Ed Hartman (who also composed, scored and performed the music for the picture) have spearheaded the restoration of *As the Earth Turns*, which was due to make its debut at the Inspiration Film Festival of April of 2019. The event was canceled due to theater overbooking, and will be held in 2020. ⇨

"AS THE EARTH TURNS"

80 YEARS IN-THE-MAKING!

DIRECTED BY RICHARD LYFORD
(DIRECTED ACADEMY AWARD WINNER)

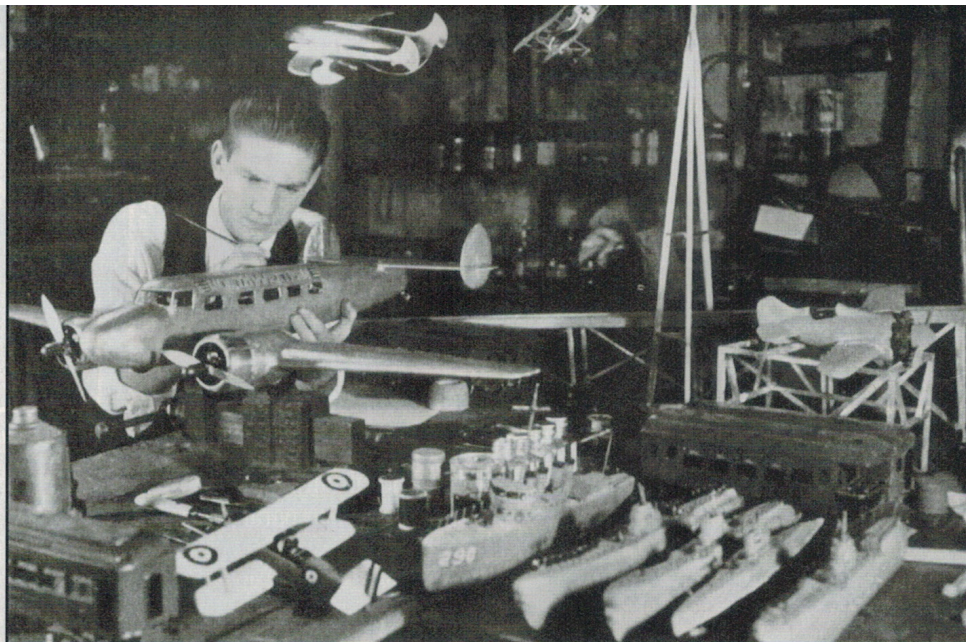
PRODUCED BY 8TH SENSE PRODUCTIONS
NEW SCORE BY ED HARTMAN

Promotional art for the release of Lyford's lost film, *As the Earth Turns*.

“I knew my uncle was involved in directing and editing the short subject *The Titan*, about the life of Michelangelo, which was narrated by Fredric March and won an Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1950. Uncle Richard was the only relative who was involved in creative endeavors—my other relatives were business people. This inspired me to start my own little video and photography business. My dad, who was a pilot and raced boats, was close to Uncle Richard, and told me stories. I wasn’t close to Uncle Richard’s family, and only recently met his son in 2017.

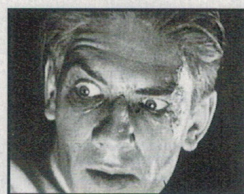
“Before I knew Richard had a son, I was contacted by someone from the Classic Horror Board, asking if I was related to Richard Lyford, because someone had discovered some footage related to what appeared to be a low budget horror film that could have contained uncredited work that was shot by my great-uncle. The film was *Monsters Crash the Pajama Party—Spook Show Spectacular* (1965). Footage from *Ritual of the Dead* is one of the clips used in the film.

“I made contact with Richard’s son, who gave me Uncle Richard’s film library to which



Richard Lyford is surrounded by a variety of special effects miniatures as he works in his model shop.

I acquired the legal rights. But one film that was not in his collection was *As the Earth Turns*. The film had been lost for almost half a century. In June of 2017, my dad died in an auto racing accident. My father was very much into the search for *As the Earth Turns*, and was making inroads through my cousin at the time of his death. My first cousin drove from Kansas to attend my dad’s memorial reception. When he arrived, he presented me with his personal archive of great-uncle Richard’s films. In it was the surviving footage from *As the Earth Turns*.



Lyford as the mad scientist “Pax” in *As the Earth Turns*.

“Uncle Richard was extremely well read and that’s how he discovered a 1915 novel *The Man Who Rocked the World*, by Arthur Train and Robert Williams Wood. The book was a prophetic warning of nuclear war, and the entrance of the United States into World War I. It also predicted our involvement in World War II. Uncle Richard used this as the basis for *As the Earth Turns*. He borrowed the main character’s name “Pax,” and modernized the plot, adding his own twists.

“Uncle Richard’s ‘Pax’ was a benevolent, slightly mad scientist, whose obsession with world peace caused him to employ climactic change to bring about peace on earth, with a deadly price to pay.”

As *the Earth Turns* is a mixed genre affair with elements of Republic serials, Old Dark House melodramas, and distinct reminiscence of vintage ‘30s science fiction, with ample nods to *Flash Gordon* and the Lydecker Brothers. Some

parts of the film appear to have been shot yesterday, and other portions show their age.

Multi-instrumentalist, soundtrack composer, and performer Ed Hartman has been involved in *As the Earth Turns* restoration process from its earliest days.

“Kim’s son took drum lessons from me some years ago. Then he went off to college and Kim started to take hand drumming lessons from me. I had a drum shop in Seattle for 20 years. At that time, she had just started the restoration process of her great-uncle’s films, digitizing the 16mm footage for archive. She thought

a little bit about adding a soundtrack, but she didn’t know how to go about doing it.

“At that time, I had been doing an increasing amount of soundtrack work for films, television, and documentaries; and my music has been all over films and TV. One way that I have promoted my work is by creating an extensive library of YouTube videos. I had done a video using some old footage from a Buster Keaton film, and put a Danny Elfman style track to it, which Kim had seen. So she asked me if I could score her Great Uncle Richard’s film, and that’s how it started. It’s turned into quite the monster at this point.

“We created a production company around it, “8th Sense Productions.” So, not only was I involved as a co-producer, I did promotion and some of the editing. Originally, from what materials were known, the running time of *As the Earth Turns* was 150 minutes. We had about 35 minutes on the reel we were working with. We found another 10 or 12 minutes on another reel, and edited in scenes that we

Young Camera Expert Blasts ‘Ship’ in Film

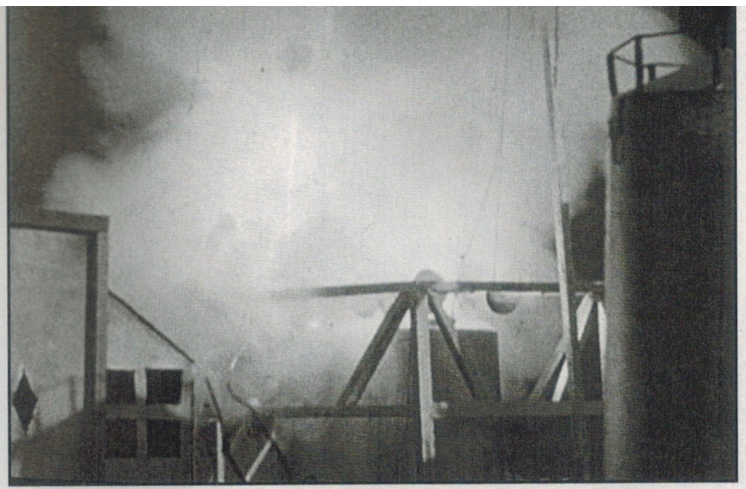
A toy boat, sunk to the bottom of a two-foot tank and covered with a handful of sand, and then exploded with a tiny dynamite cap, gives the impression of a terrific blast at the bottom of the sea in a motion picture made recently by Richard Lyford, 13-year-old amateur cameraman and University of Washington student.

The explosion will be incorporated in Lyford’s latest production, “The Goddess of Mars,” photographed in miniature.

Lyford recently showed some of his pictures to a juvenile audience in the basement of his home at 3008 Mount St. Helen’s Place, and thrilled the youngsters with pictures of a person being transformed into a skeleton.

Most of the work in the skeleton scene was done through double exposure. The youthful photographer spends much of his time at his splicing board, where each scene is given its proper proportion. To Lyford this is the most interesting part of picture making.

Newspaper clipping about Lyford’s special effects work on his lost film *The Goddess of Mars*.



Left: Lyford sits at the controls of his basement studio soundboard. Right: This controlled explosion effect was created by Richard Lyford for *As the Earth Turns*.

felt would fit within the continuity of the film.

"What we had was missing some fairly important action. The version that we have may or may not be the final cut. That footage came from Kim's cousin. We had another company do the physical editing. I set up a mock of the edits to guide them through this process. I think this version is pretty close to Richard's vision of the film. He was very young when this picture was started, so I think he would go back and look at it and add and subtract things along the way. For this version, we stuck with Richard's cut of the film—and who knows, we may discover more footage before we have the ultimate version!



Lyford as "Pax" in pilot goggles for *As the Earth Turns*.

"We haven't found any of the other eight films that Richard did during this period, but Kim has other footage and we're looking at doing a documentary; a short documentary as a companion piece to *As the Earth Turns*. We are looking at the streaming angle. I'd love to see it on TCM.

"Through this process, I've been getting a feel of who Richard Lyford was, and have developed my own pet theories about his work. As a score composer you get to watch the film as much or more than the filmmakers themselves. One could talk about Lyford's technology, which for an amateur was far ahead of its time. We have to respect what he did with limited funds, no studio backing, and the age he was when he produced, wrote, and directed these shows. His title sequences, the double and triple exposures, and the mechanical effects are mind boggling for an independent filmmaker in the late 1930s."

Orson Welles was born two years before Richard Lyford, and died the same year as Richard Lyford. (Lyford died on November 4, 1985). Both Orson and Richard had established their ideas through stage productions. Both had their own theatrical companies. Richard had something like a hundred people he could draw from—this is from someone in their teens. Remarkable! He was also a tremendous makeup artist.

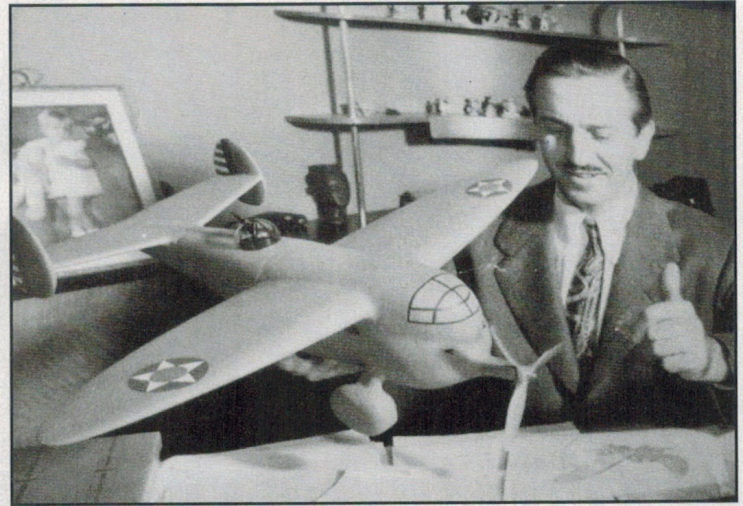
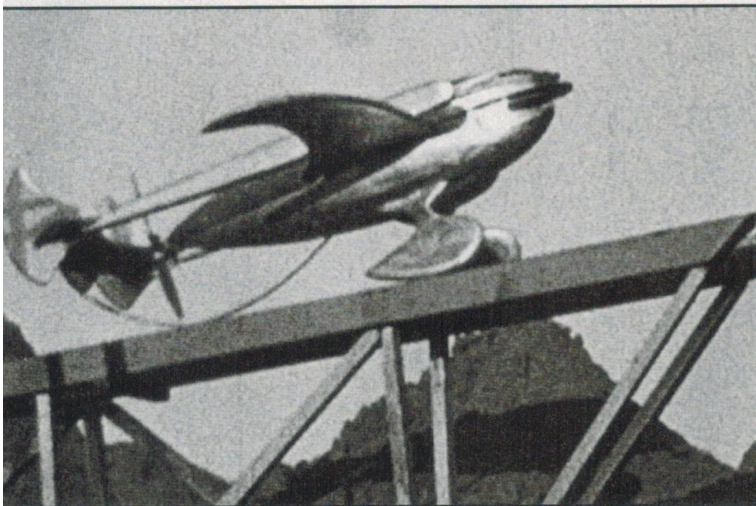
Like Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre company, Richard had his own version in Seattle. He knew acting, directing, and staging and here he is with nine intense films to his credit. *As the Earth Turns* is his last intensive effort before going professional, in the Pacific Northwest where there was no film industry.

My question is, what if Richard Lyford had not gone to work for Disney? What if he hadn't worked unbilled on *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, and *Dumbo*? What if he hadn't directed the Academy Award winning *The Titan* about Michelangelo? Would he have risen to the level of Orson Wells? We'll never know.

The Beach Cities Inspirational Film Festival awarded *As the Earth Turns* an Outstanding Recognition Award in March of 2019. Festival president Dana D. Winseman marvels at the discovery of this almost lost piece of cinema history. "For film fans, this is like finding a lost Egyptian pyramid, after years of obscurity. It's another piece of the puzzle that will remain in motion picture history forever!"

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The author wishes to thank Kim Lyford Bishop, Ed Hartman, Dana D. Winseman, and all of you who made amateur movies, thinking you were the only ones.



Left: Richard Lyford built this futuristic airplane model seen in *As the Earth Turns*. Right: Walt Disney examines the *Dumbo* bomber model built by Lyford.