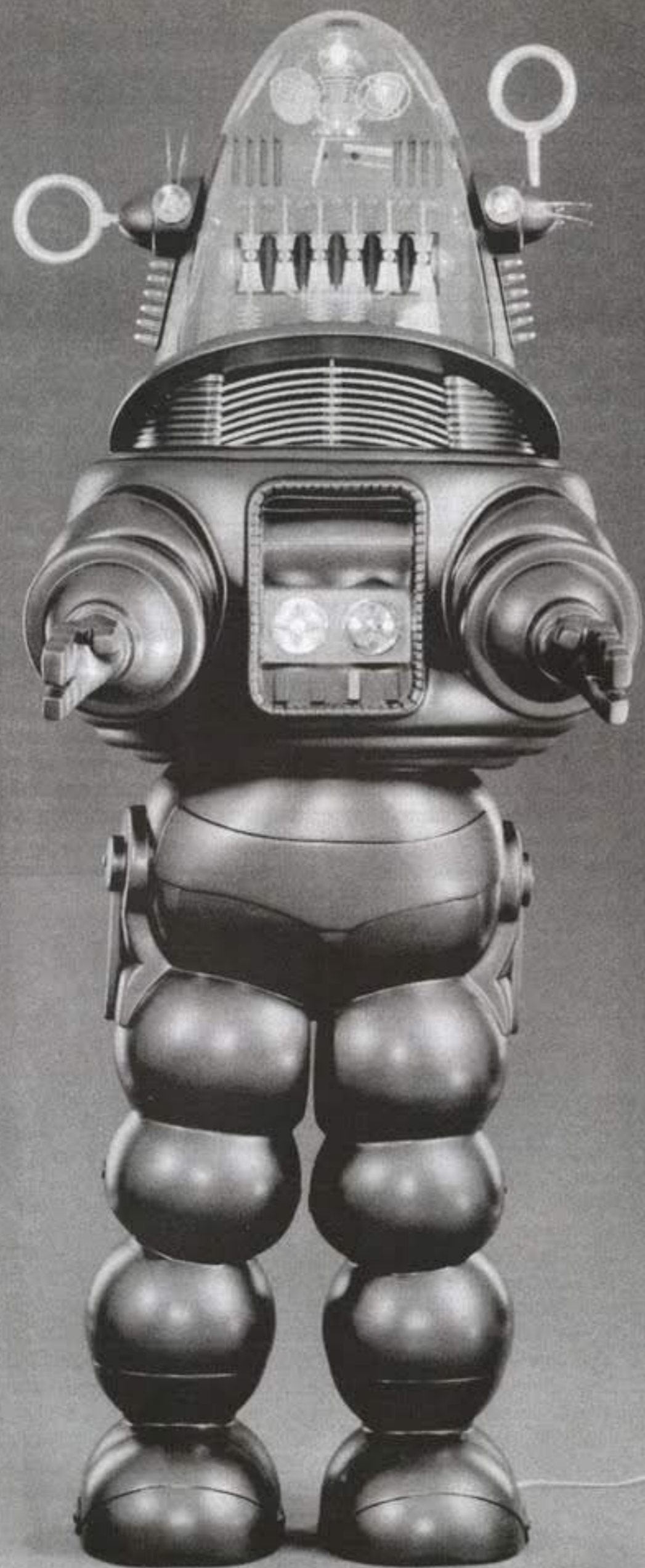




Top: The Robby miniature and transport cart from *Forbidden Planet* before, and (above) after Fred Barton's restoration. Center: Teen-aged Barton, in 1974, with his first replica Robby. Right: Barton's 2005 model.

Select photos courtesy of Dan Moore



How *FORBIDDEN PLANET*'s Metal Mascot Came to Life Again

Article & Interviews by DAN MOORE

NEXT YEAR (2006) WILL MARK the 50th anniversary of one of the all-time classic SF movies, *Forbidden Planet*—the tale of a rescue mission to a faraway planet that goes terribly wrong. The impact of this top-notch adventure has rippled through countless space-age offerings, from *2001: A Space Odyssey* to *Lost in Space* and the *Star Wars* series.



robot that plodded across the silver screen in other films and television shows of the '50s—which tended to resemble either a man wrapped in aluminum foil or a gasoline pump with an inverted metal drum for a head—the ergonomic Robby offered a glimpse, albeit an eccentric one, of the future.

From his glass-bowl head containing a futuristic, yet easily recognizable face, down to his flexible knee and ankle joints, Robby offered a believable companion for 21st-century space travelers and explorers. Mind you, MGM did invest \$125,000 in building the robot—a huge sum at the time. ⇒

ROBBY THE ROBOT

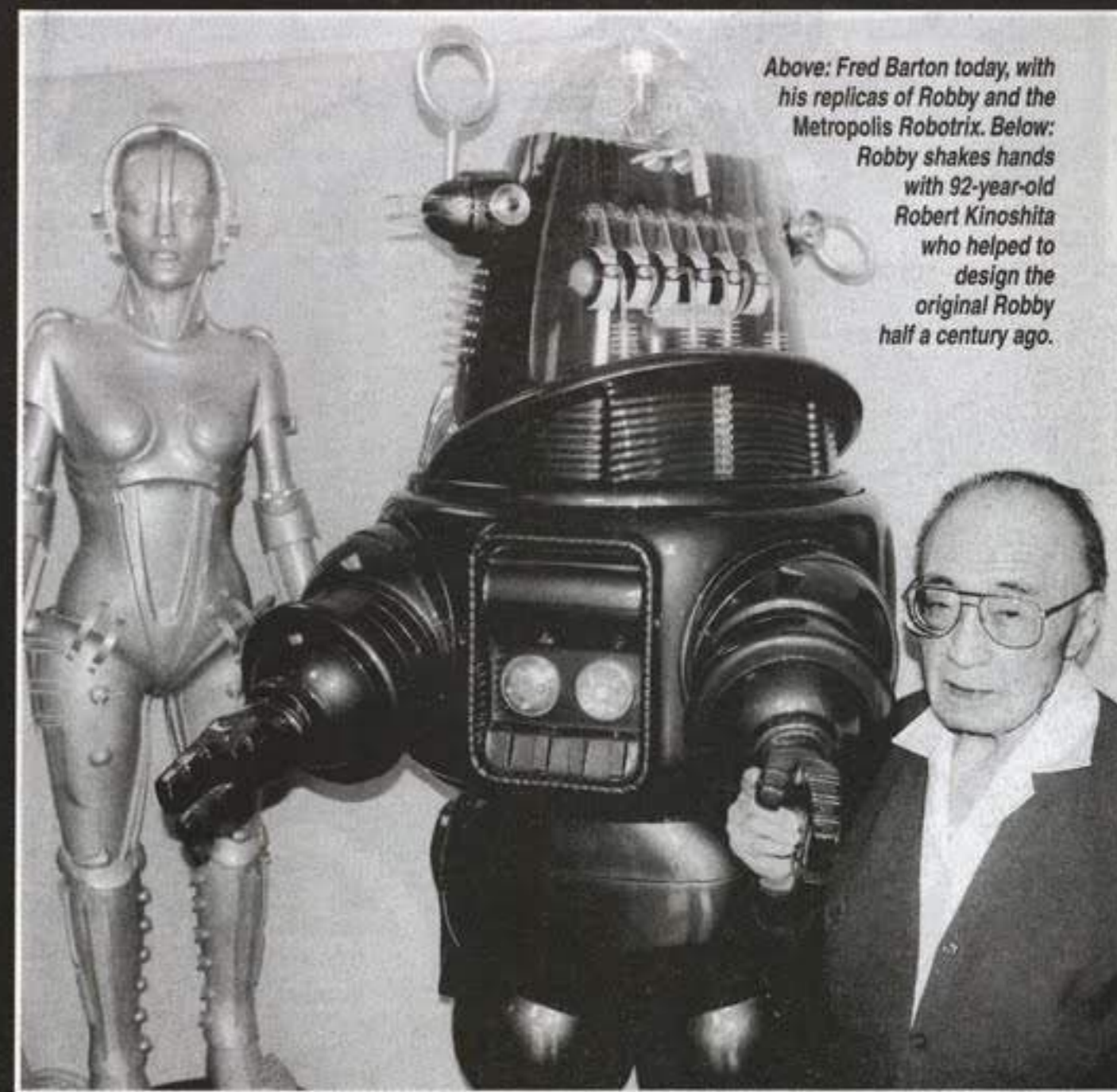
PAST & FUTURE?

Where *Forbidden Planet* differs from the rest is in the fact that, up to now, there has been no re-make or sequel. Yet, if the current trend of rehashing old television shows and classic movies from yesteryear prevails, it is only a matter of time before this particular gem gets a make-over.

Should a new *Forbidden Planet* ever actually make it into cinemas, one question stands out: will Robby the Robot be featured? The smart money is on some special effects guy wanting to chance his arm at out-doing the likes of George Lucas by producing the ultimate, over-the-top Über-robot (such as in the recent *Lost in Space* movie).

However, the producers of a re-make would surely be mad to leave out such an iconic character from a bygone age. Robby is the only member of the original cast who could slip effortlessly into his role nearly 50 years on (with apologies to Leslie Nielsen, Richard Anderson, and Anne Francis!)

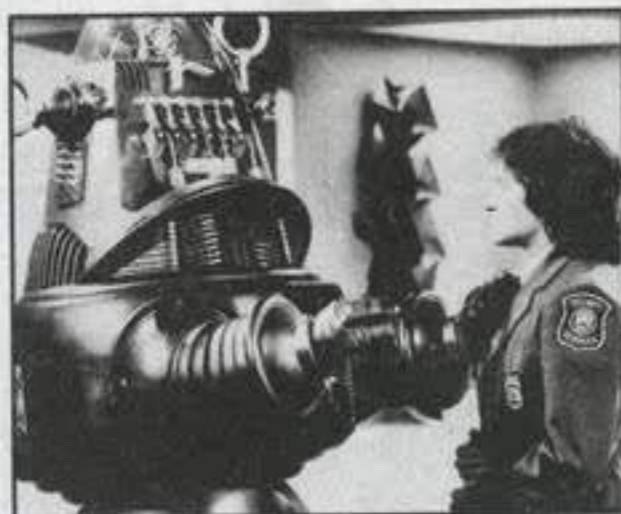
When Robby was introduced to audiences back in the 1950s, he became an instant hit. Compared to the type of



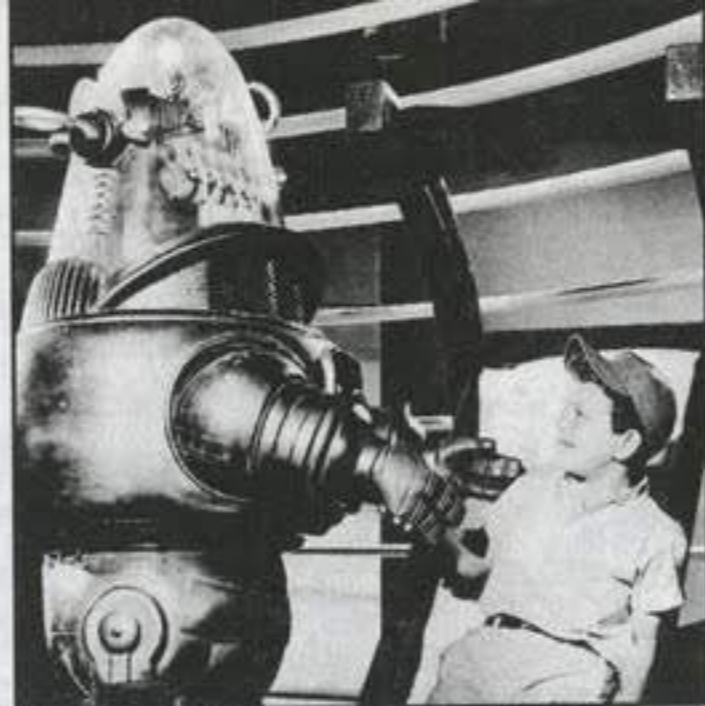
Above: Fred Barton today, with his replicas of Robby and the *Metropolis Robotrix*. Below: Robby shakes hands with 92-year-old Robert Kinoshita who helped to design the original Robby half a century ago.

The scale of this investment in one element of the movie hints at the serious treatment MGM was keen to give **Forbidden Planet**. As Richard Anderson, who played Chief Engineer Quinn, recalls, "It wasn't like the other films we usually made at MGM. Normally, the studio produced Westerns or musicals, but despite claims to the contrary, it wasn't a B-movie either. MGM was good like that, in that they gave us a top-class script, based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and a big budget to spend on cast, scenery, and special effects, including Robby the Robot."

The result was a high-quality movie, with a



Right: Robby's second appearance was in *The Invisible Boy* (1957). Above: Barton's replica with Robin Williams on *Mork and Mindy* 20 years later.



mechanical star who had a formidable screen presence. Robby stood seven-feet-two-inches tall, and was capable of interacting with the actors in a way other screen robots would have found hard to imitate. This was due to two main factors. First was the relatively light-weight Robby suit, at less than 100 pounds, which made it easier for actor Frankie Darrow to maneuver. The second was the decision to give Robby a human voice.

In **Forbidden Planet**, the dulcet tones of actor Marvin Miller spoke for Robby. Miller, who played Michael Anthony in *The Millionaire*, was able to inject both an air of mischief as well as humor into the performance, providing further layers to Robby's character.

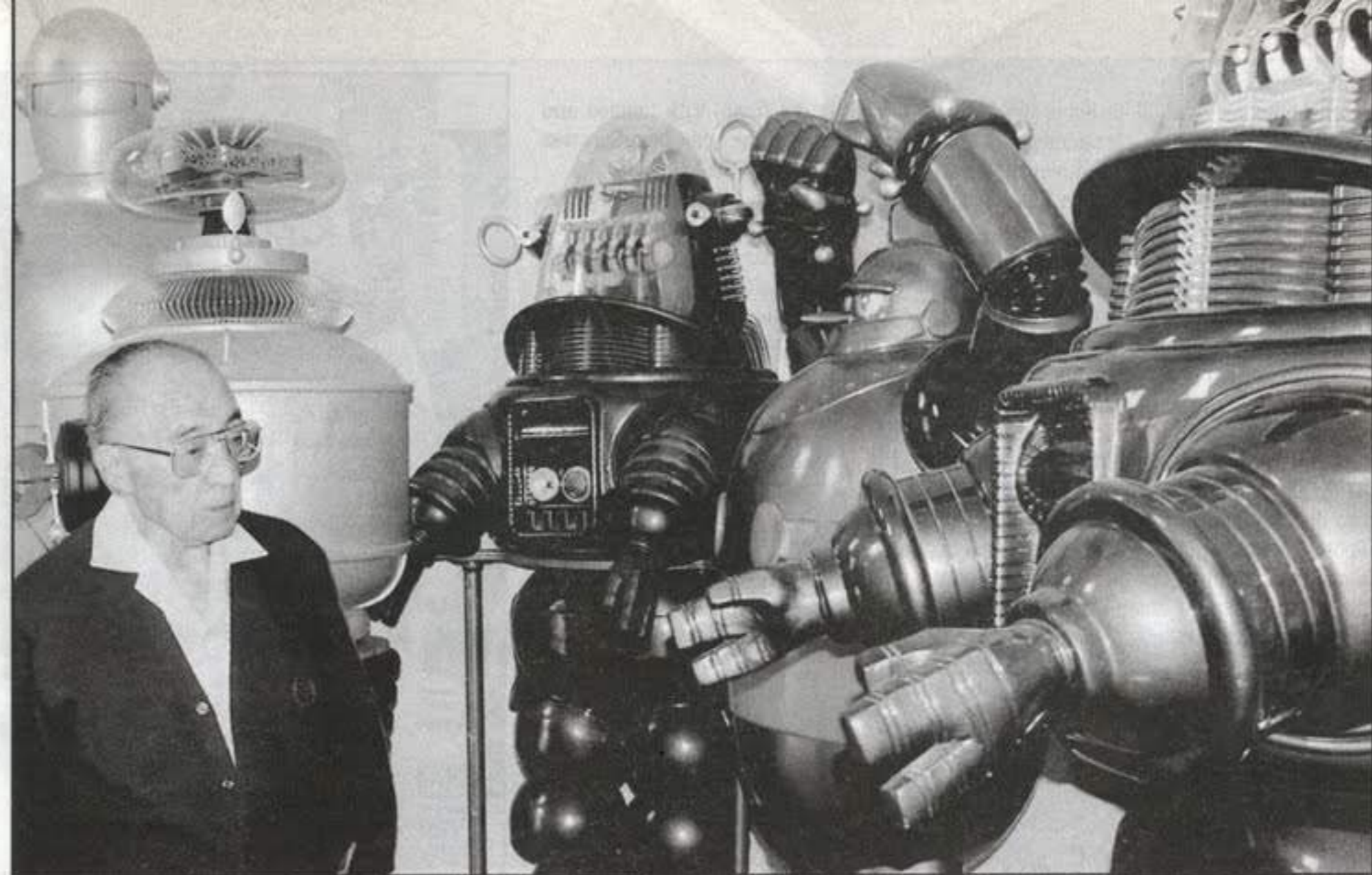
Giving the robot such a prominent role in what was an odd outing for MGM did leave a lasting impression on the cast, as Richard Anderson remembers, "My style was always to go with it, and this approach definitely helped on **Forbidden Planet**. For one, it was a pretty strange story, especially when you are used to playing more conventional roles, such as policemen or criminals."

"Acting opposite a robot was strange, but then it was also awkward for my character to be faced with a scientist doing extreme things, a beautiful lady on another planet, and a wise-cracking robot so, in some respects, it wasn't a problem."

Given the cost of producing Robby, and his popularity with movie fans, it was unsurprising that the robot was soon wheeled out of whatever prop-room he resided in for a role in another movie, **The Invisible Boy**. Then Robby appeared in what seemed like an unending series of cameos on the small screen. Anyone who was ever an avid fan of such hits



Marvin Miller's distinctive voice helped give Robby an almost human personality.



Above: Robby designer Robert Kinoshita examines some of Fred Barton's other popular robot replicas: Gort (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*), B9 (*Lost in Space*), and Gigantor.

as *The Twilight Zone*, *Lost in Space*, *The Addams Family*, *The Love Boat*, *Project UFO*, and even *The Red Skelton Show*, to name but a few, may well have caught a glimpse of the omnipresent Robby at some time.

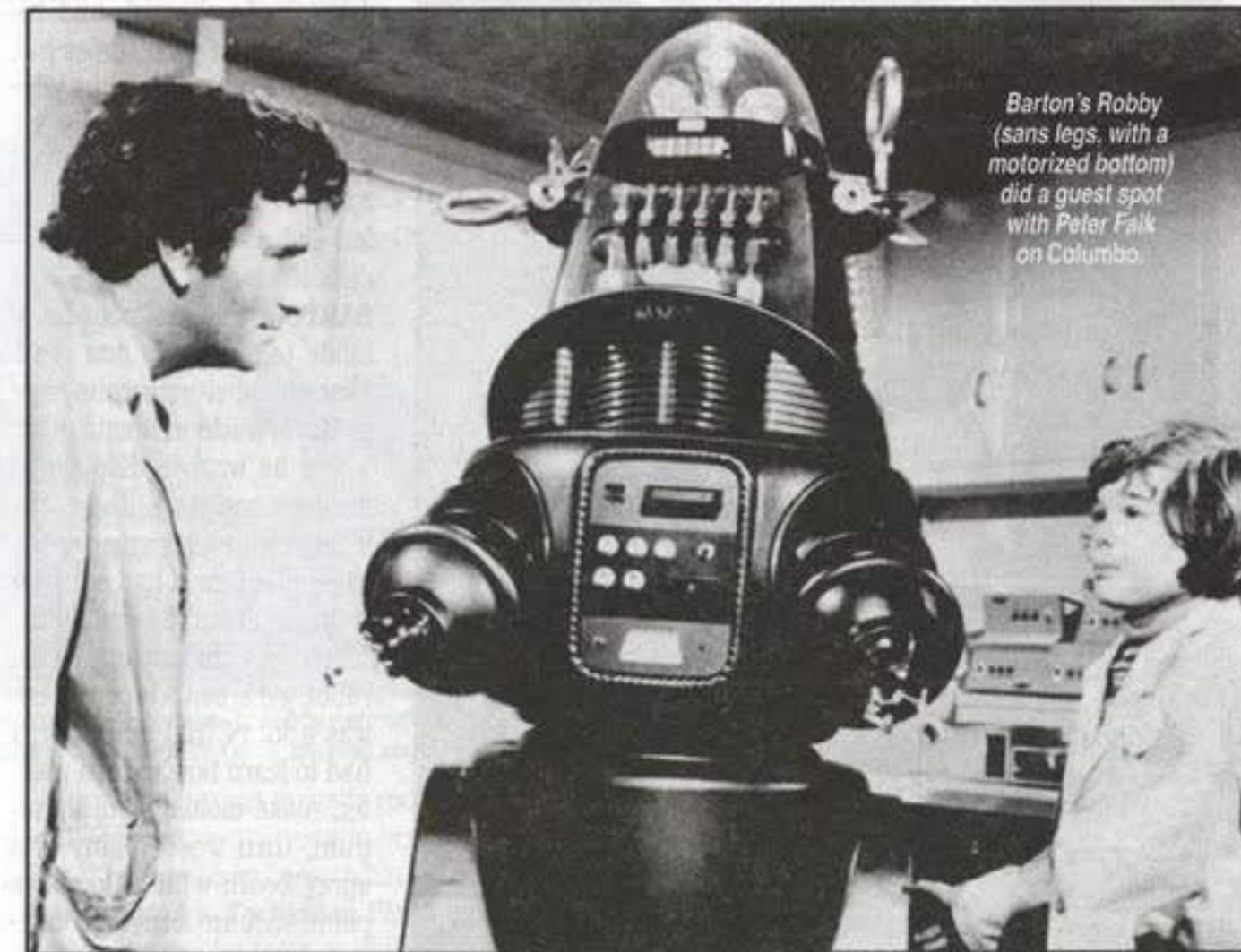
by the Robot. The fact that, unlike human film and television stars, he doesn't seem to age is undoubtedly a major factor in his favor. However, as Fred Barton explains, there's much more to Robby than that: "Both his look and

his manner contribute to Robby's enormous popularity and longevity. Robby wears many hats: bodyguard, cook, confidant, comic relief, as well as a defensive weapon that acts only against non-rational beings, and never =>

All good things come to an end, and for Robby, 1970 was the watershed year. After 14 years of clicking and whirring, clunking and quipping his way around the circuit of top-rated shows, MGM sold Robby to the Movie World prop museum in California. It was here that Robby languished, gradually deteriorating, until robotics enthusiast Fred Barton gave him a complete overhaul. Barton had come to the attention of Movie-World when he unveiled a perfect replica of Robby at the 1974 *Star Trek* convention in Los Angeles.

It proved fortunate that Barton was able to produce the replica Robby, as the original was finally sold off by the museum to a private collector, never to be seen in public again. Barton's initiative enabled Robby to come out of retirement, and soon the robot was appearing on prime-time television programs again, including *Wonder Woman*, *Mork & Mindy*, and even *Columbo*. Since then, Robby has appeared in a variety of movies, including **Earth Girls are Easy**, **Gremlins**, and **Looney Tunes**.

It's hard to think of any star, human or otherwise, who has had the staying power of Rob-



Barton's Robby (sans legs, with a motorized bottom) did a guest spot with Peter Falk on *Columbo*.

Cast members and prop men help actor Frankie Darrow into the Robby suit on the *Forbidden Planet* set. (Note how Darrow's face had been blackened, to hide it from sight behind Robby's "mouth" grid.)

against humans. Plus, all his lights and whirly gizmos are great to watch. He waddles back and forth like a jolly fat man, non-threatening, yet this fat man knows all and can topple your house off its foundation.

After Robby, a sci-fi outing without a robot with attitude wouldn't seem right. From B9 in *Lost in Space* to C-3PO and R2-D2 in *Star Wars*, Robby's legacy is clear.

The Robby of *Forbidden Planet* was made from an early form of the one-eight ABS-type plastic, totally thermoformed and vacuum-formed from wooden molds. Lacking the \$125,000 that MGM had at its disposal almost two decades prior to his decision to re-make Robby the Robot (the original being housed in a museum), Barton drew on impressive, some might say almost *A Team*-like, resources to reproduce this iconic automaton. Plaster

served as the torso, with molded and glassed clay for the heart box. Clay was also used to make the hands.

Displaying an enviable degree of resourcefulness, Barton also used inverted beer cans fixed with fairy lights to reproduce the stomach. Fiberglass and other materials filled out the figure. Making him work was another issue altogether.

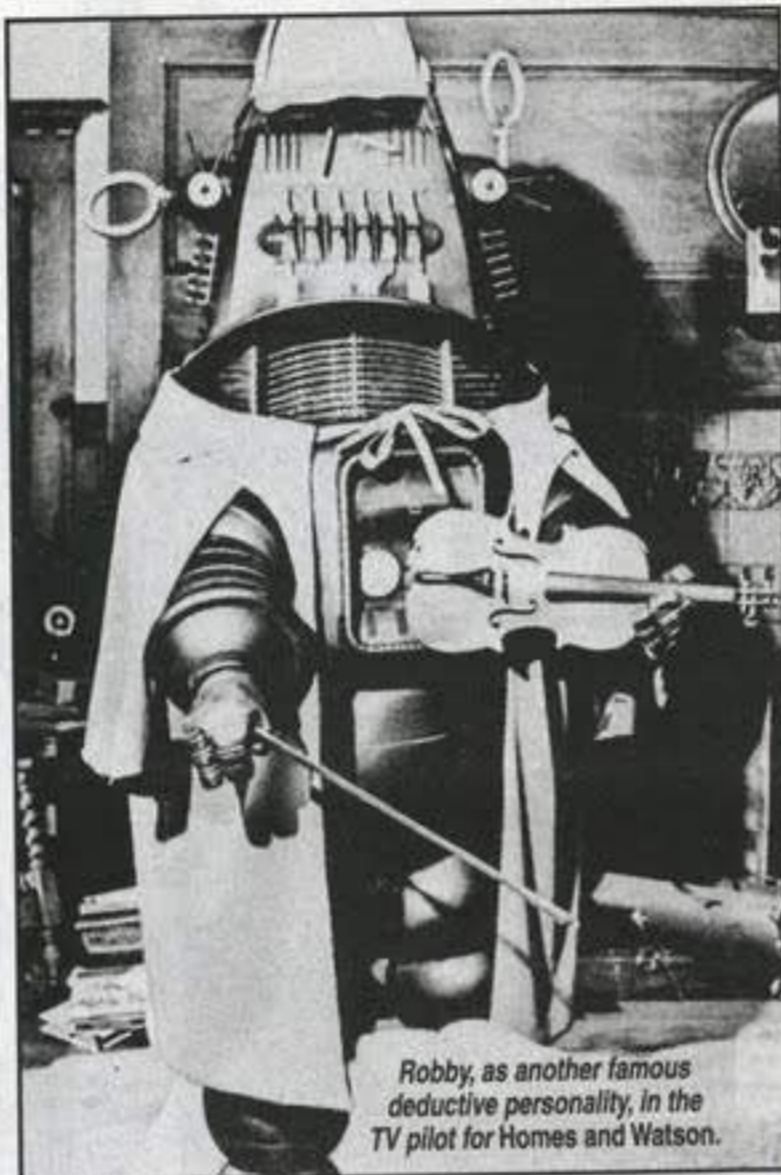
Major problems included how to fit and hide hinges that would enable a person to operate the robot from within, as well as issues relating to the potentially fatal collision between the human frame and a robot heat that incorporated nine 15,000 volt mercury-vapor neon

tubes in the mouth region. Add to this the fact that even the original Robby wanted to tip forward, and Barton's quip that Robby is a "fiberglass and plastic coffin."

On his restoration job, Barton says, "Robby was silver when I got him (as opposed to Krell Metal), and missing an ear, a scanner, blasters, and original heart box detail. His legs and body were warped, his ankles broken, his dome had yellowed, and he had dozens of screw holes put in him by uncaring grips who tried to keep him together for whatever shoot he was on."

FAX: How much time and effort did it take you to reproduce Robby?

BARTON: The first Robby I ever made took exactly one year. That included numerous trips to Movie World in Buena Park, where he was on display, to measure and gawk. There was a huge learning curve for me as, at that time, I had not even so much as built a model car, much less the coolest movie robot ever conceived. There was a lot of trial and error. I had to learn how to turn plaster, make molds, turn aluminum, turn wood, turn in a spray booth with automotive paint, vacuum form, and engineer a costume. The effort



Robby, as another famous deductive personality, in the TV pilot for *Homes and Watson*.

was continuous. I would work on it every day. I debuted my work at the Equicon '74 Star Trek convention in L.A. It was a rousing success, and very popular with the fans.

FAX: What was the original Robby constructed from, and what did the restoration process involve?

BARTON: I was only 16 when I built my first Robby, but by the time I was 17, the museum saw my Robby replica and were so impressed, they asked if I would restore the original. I couldn't believe it. Here was this giant prop museum entrusting the original Robby the Robot to a 17-year-old kid. It was really a dream fulfilled. I stuffed Robby into my parents' Lincoln Continental and drove him home, and immediately had my friend get inside him and walk him around the house. The robot suit still performed perfectly despite all the damage and wear over the years, and vandalism from souvenir hunters at the museum.

MGM had done a phenomenal job building him. I powered up his motors, and they started to sing. Everything was still working. Robby's mechanisms were basic cams, modified Geneva movements, and 45 gear drives powered by heavy duty General Electric 24 volt aircraft motors. Everything was over-designed and built to last, not like a cheesy prop built today—just good enough to get the shot. Robby is 50 years old, and still good as new. These mechanisms are still running to this day, and I



Below: Robert Kinoshita with Barton's Robby, the *Metropolis Robotrix*, the *Time Machine*, and Mysterious Dr. Satan robot replicas.

use the same exact designs in my Robby to get the same sounds as he makes when he is on—like a Hoover vacuum cleaner gone mad. It's just great. Robby smelled like plastic and machine oil. It was just a great experience.

After staring at him for a few days, just studying him, I slowly started taking him apart, shooting photos as I went and cataloging every tiny piece. I did a very meticulous job. Robby was all thermoformed plastic. He was made from an early form of ABS plastic, called Royalite, that was used for suit cases of the day. It was orange in color, and that is what gives the hint of orange color in Robby's face—it's the unpainted body showing through the detail. Subtle, but a really nice touch. Robby was put together with wood and aluminum.

He was also smoothed out at some joints with leather and a strange early form of body putty. All the years of bad studio paint jobs had to be sanded off, and Robby was painted with a Ditzler automotive paint #32222—1963 Jaguar Gun Metal Gray. It was as close a match as possible and worked very well. In the '50s, MGM used a paint chart in their shop and just ordered from that. I did

not have that luxury, or know their formula, but wanted to stay as true to his original look as possible. His left ear had been stolen and needed to be replaced, and all his original stomach detail was long gone—thrown out by a studio tech, and needed to be replaced as well.



Arnold Gillespie's initial rough sketches of Robby were refined by Mentor Huebner, then rendered into mechanical drawings by Kinoshita (seen above, signing a Barton replica).

Everything else was in pretty good shape and just needed minor attention to bring back the luster. I restored him back to his former glory as he appeared in *Forbidden Planet*, and set up a new display for them at the museum.

Speaking of restorations, Paul Allen—of Microsoft and private space program fame—commissioned me to restore the original *Lost in Space* robot for his Experience Sci-Fi museum in Seattle. I was lucky enough to be asked to restore both great Kinoshita robots from the ground up.

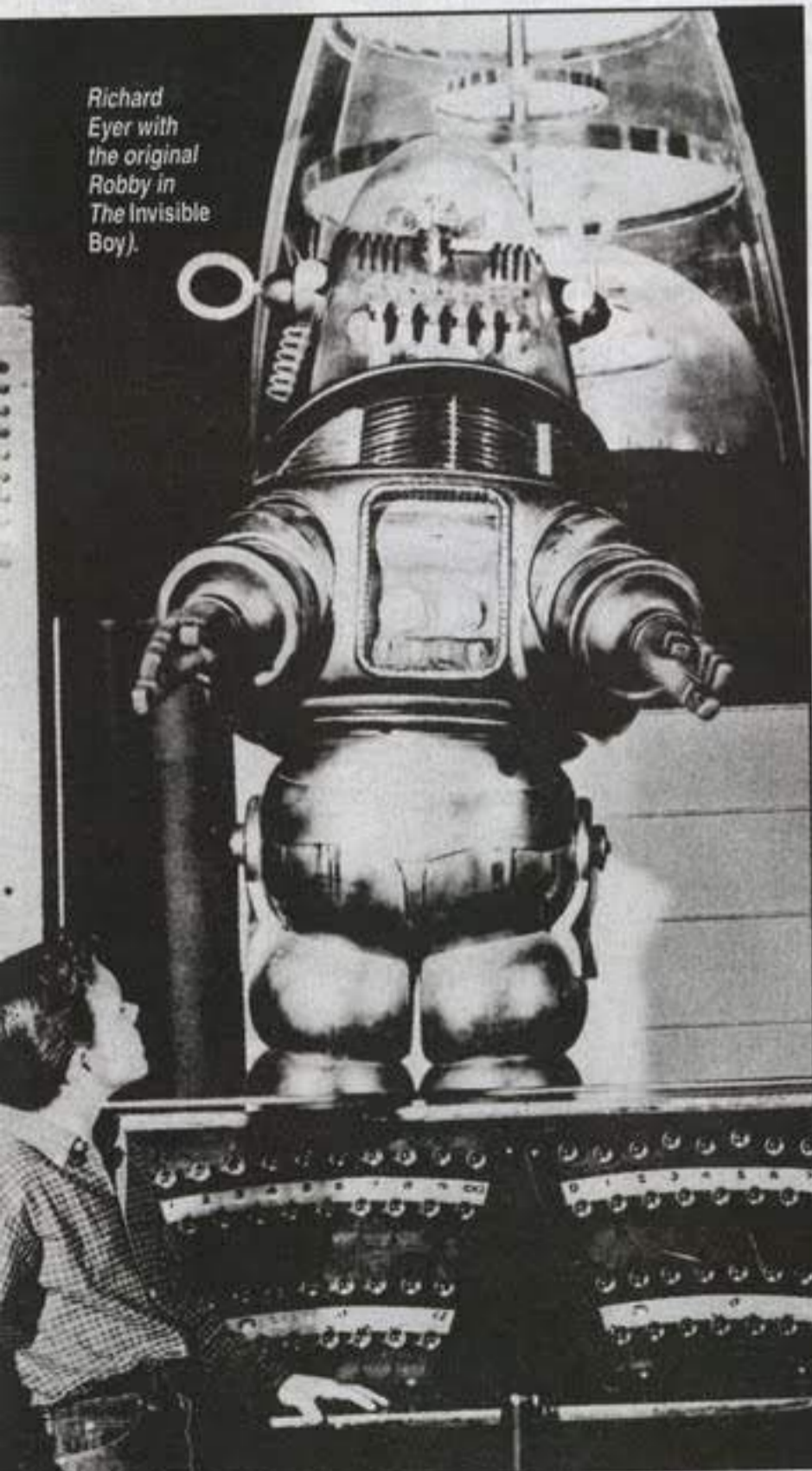
Both robots look and function as new today, and I'm glad I played a role in their care and conservation. I also restored the miniature vehicle and original Robby miniature made for *Forbidden Planet*.

I am also happy to report that Robert Kinoshita recently visited my studio and was very happy to see all his creations replicated with great care and detail. So much so, we decided to offer a special limited edition "Signature" series of Robby that is personally signed by the 92-year-old master. Very exciting.

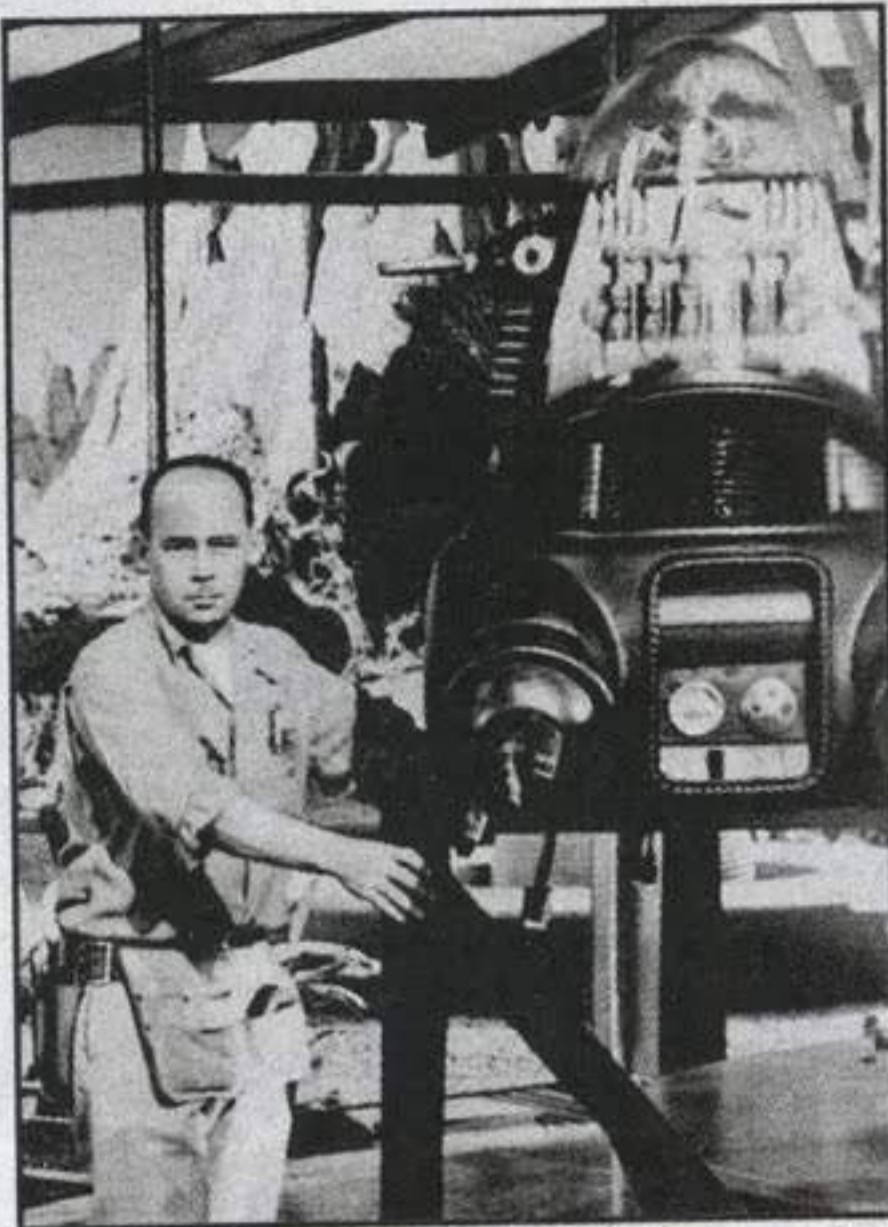
FAX: What influence do you think Robby the Robot has had on subsequent movie robots?

BARTON: Well, the most obvious influence is in the *Lost in Space* robot. Basically, Robert Kinoshita incorporated all the ideas MGM could not or would not incorporate into Robby's manufacture and brought them over to B9. Both have the big barrel body, telescoping arms, neons ⇒ 126

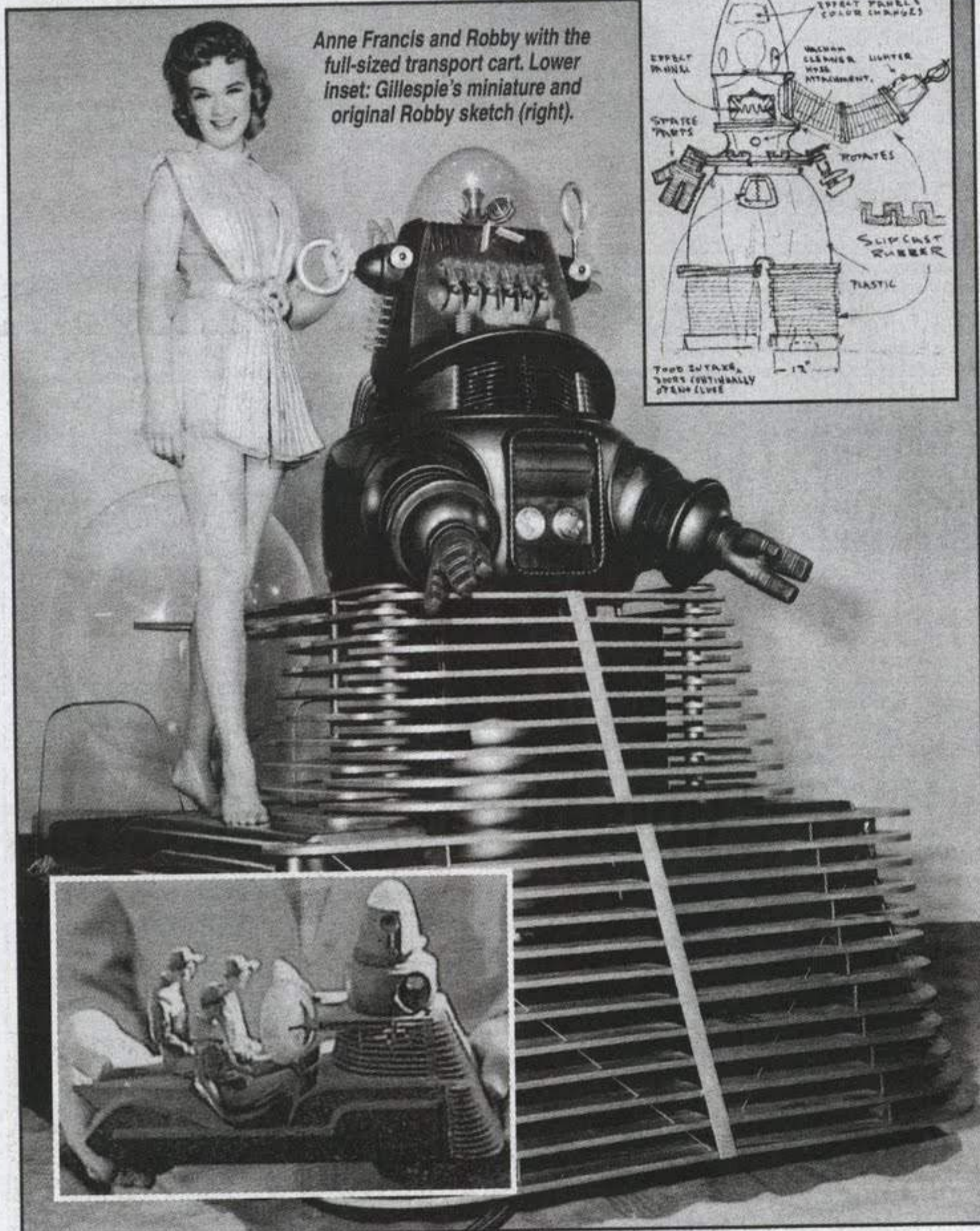
Richard Eyer with the original Robby in *The Invisible Boy*.



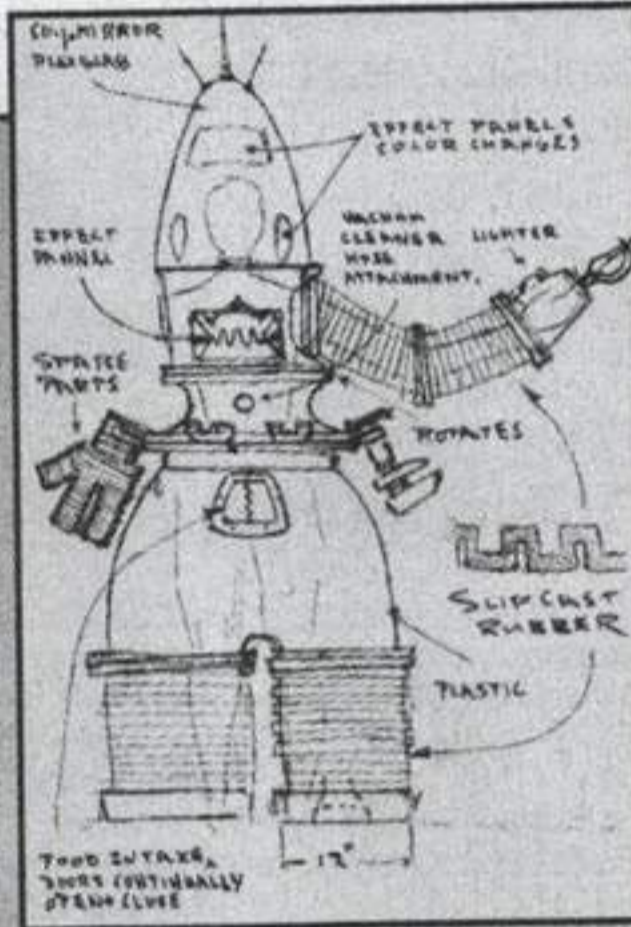
ROBBY THE ROBOT: PAST & FUTURE? from 93



Left: Andy Thatcher with Robby's head in a lighting test. Right: Robby with Cliff Grant, Andy Thatcher, and Jack McMasters, who built him.



Anne Francis and Robby with the full-sized transport cart. Lower inset: Gillespie's miniature and original Robby sketch (right).



in the chest area, whirling gadgets, and flashing lights. Both robots were to have interchangeable hands. That never happened either.

The shuffling of the legs, for instance—the bellowed legs and the tiny rotational scanners—he wanted those scanners to move and lock in on a sound. This didn't happen with either robot. He is 92 and still upset by that to this day. Although Robby was built like a tank at MGM in the '50s, in the '60s, Fox glammed B9 together in six weeks, and it showed.

It's obvious that Robby got the looks in the family, and B9 got the class clown personality. Because of Robby's design and demeanor, robots were no longer portrayed as mindless monsters of destruction. Robby set the groundwork for artificial intelligence and mechanical sophistication. Robby really influenced the toy world more than the film world. Almost every toy robot to this day has vertical and horizontal hoops on the ears, or balls for legs and arms, or a domed head. Face it, Kinoshita finalized a design that is classic.

There aren't many classics in the world, and in Science Fiction, Robby is king.

Certainly, Robby changed people's perception in the '50s, and ushered in the modern thinking of robots and their role in society to this day. Until Robby, robots were mindless walking classless garbage cans or policemen. Robby was the first of only a handful of robots to exude charm and intelligence along with physical capability. Other robots which mimic Robby with their personalities include B9 from *Lost in Space* (Robby's poor cousin), C-3PO, and R2-D2.

FAX: Do you believe that the cultural icon status of Robby the Robot has/will have any impact on the look of mass-produced robots for domestic customers?

BARTON: From a marketing standpoint, I think it would be a great idea if robots looked less human, and more machine-like, but Honda's Azimo looks human, and aside from industrial robots, it will be a long time until a company makes robots that look like Robby. Personally, I am going to make a real Robby in the near future, combining the classic look of Robby from the '50s with 21st century robotic technology. Robby looks amazing; he is an illusion created by master prop-men of the '50s who happened on a timeless, classic design that incorporated the high-tech '50s look with classic shapes and new plastic fabrication. People thought he was real, and still do to this day, because most people cannot figure out where a man would see out of. Therefore, the illusion is complete, and Robby is real. Ω