

Beneath the 12-Mile Reef

“You see it without glasses!” screamed the one-sheet poster for *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef*, right under the huge and new Cinemascope logo. In 1953, television was having a profound influence on the American public and movie attendance was down and worrisome to the major studios. They needed to combat that little box with something bigger and better, something you could not have in your living room. And so, in 1952 a new, bigger, better, fantabulous process was unveiled – Cinerama. It was an instant sensation. Twentieth Century-Fox already had their own new, bigger, better, fantabulous process in the works – Cinemascope. The first feature to be released in Cinemascope was *The Robe*, and it was a huge hit. From then on, all Fox pictures were to be made in Cinemascope, while other studios committed to widescreen in all kinds of ratios during those wild and woolly early widescreen years. While *The Robe* was in production, Fox had two other Cinemascope features shooting – *How to Marry a Millionaire* and *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef*.

Using *Romeo and Juliet* as inspiration, screenwriter A.I. Bezzerides (*They Live by Night*, *Kiss Me Deadly*) set his story in picturesque Florida. Robert D. Webb (*Seven Cities of Gold*, *Love Me Tender*) was in the director’s chair, and Fox assembled a cast of young up-and-comers like Robert Wagner, Terry Moore, Richard Boone and Peter Graves, along with seasoned pros like Gilbert Roland and J. Carroll Naish. But the big draw here was Cinemascope, stereo sound, and spectacular photography, both under and above the ocean (Edward Cronjager would win the Oscar for his photography), not to mention a brilliant

score by Bernard Herrmann, sounding not quite like anything anyone had ever heard. You couldn’t see and hear those incredible sights and sounds in your living room on your 12-inch black-and-white television, so a trip to the movie theater was essential. And audiences went. In droves.

In movie palaces all over the country, the lights dimmed, the curtain opened on the huge Cinemascope screen and that glorious Twentieth Century-Fox logo came on – but instead of the classic Fox Cinemascope music by Alfred Newman, instead we were treated to Herrmann’s score in thrilling stereophonic sound, immediately drawing us into a musical soundscape. Then came a stunning shot at sunset in Technicolor, over which the credits played. Herrmann’s main title music immediately drew you in and weaved an evocative spell, with its incredible orchestral colors. And directly after the credits, we are underwater, while a narrator (Rock Hudson) sets the scene. The film that follows may be standard issue drama, but it was those underwater sequences that held audiences in thrall. That and the completely unique Herrmann score.

By the time of *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef*, Herrmann had already become one of Hollywood’s most treasured composers, having written such classic scores as *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and then beginning his long tenure at Fox with such scores as *Jane Eyre*, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, *Hangover Square*, *Anna and the King of Siam*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *On Dangerous Ground*, *Five Fingers*, and *White Witch Doctor*. His sound

was unique, right from the beginning. He had an innate sense of how music should function in film. To evoke the underwater world of *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef*, Herrmann employed nine harps, each with its own separate part. The score perfectly captures the mysterious underwater world – sinuous, hypnotic, flowing – a spellbinding tone poem that even today mesmerizes with its intense beauty.

Since this was his first score to be recorded in multi-track stereo, Herrmann went so far as to include diagrams for instrument and microphone placement on his manuscript for the score. Needless to say, the resulting score remains one of Herrmann’s greatest. Studio chief Daryl F. Zanuck wrote, “I thought *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* was one of the most original scores I have ever heard. It really gave me a thrill.” And later, after the film opened successfully, he wrote to Alfred Newman, “The entire picture has been enormously enhanced by this wonderful score. It gives the picture a bigness it did not originally have.”

Herrmann would go on to write many more great scores for Fox films, including *King of the Khyber Rifles*, *Garden of Evil*, *The Egyptian* (with Alfred Newman), *Prince of Players*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, *A Hatful of Rain*, *Blue Denim*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *Tender Is the Night*.

— Bruce Kimmel