

Blu-ray Review: ‘Wallace & Gromit’s World of Invention’ Inspires, Entertains

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- [Bill Nye](#) [2]
- [Blu-ray Review](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Lionsgate Entertainment](#) [5]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [6]
- [Merlin Crossingham](#) [7]
- [Nick Park](#) [8]
- [The Wrong Trousers](#) [9]
- [Wallace & Gromit’s World of Invention](#) [10]
- [Wallace and Gromit](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – Befuddled inventor Wallace and his trusted, oft-exasperated canine companion Gromit deserve to be ranked alongside the greatest comic duos in cinema history. Brought to life by Nick Park’s exuberantly inventive stop-motion animation, Wallace and Gromit are best known for their series of short subjects, including 1993’s “The Wrong Trousers,” which is surely one of the best films ever made.

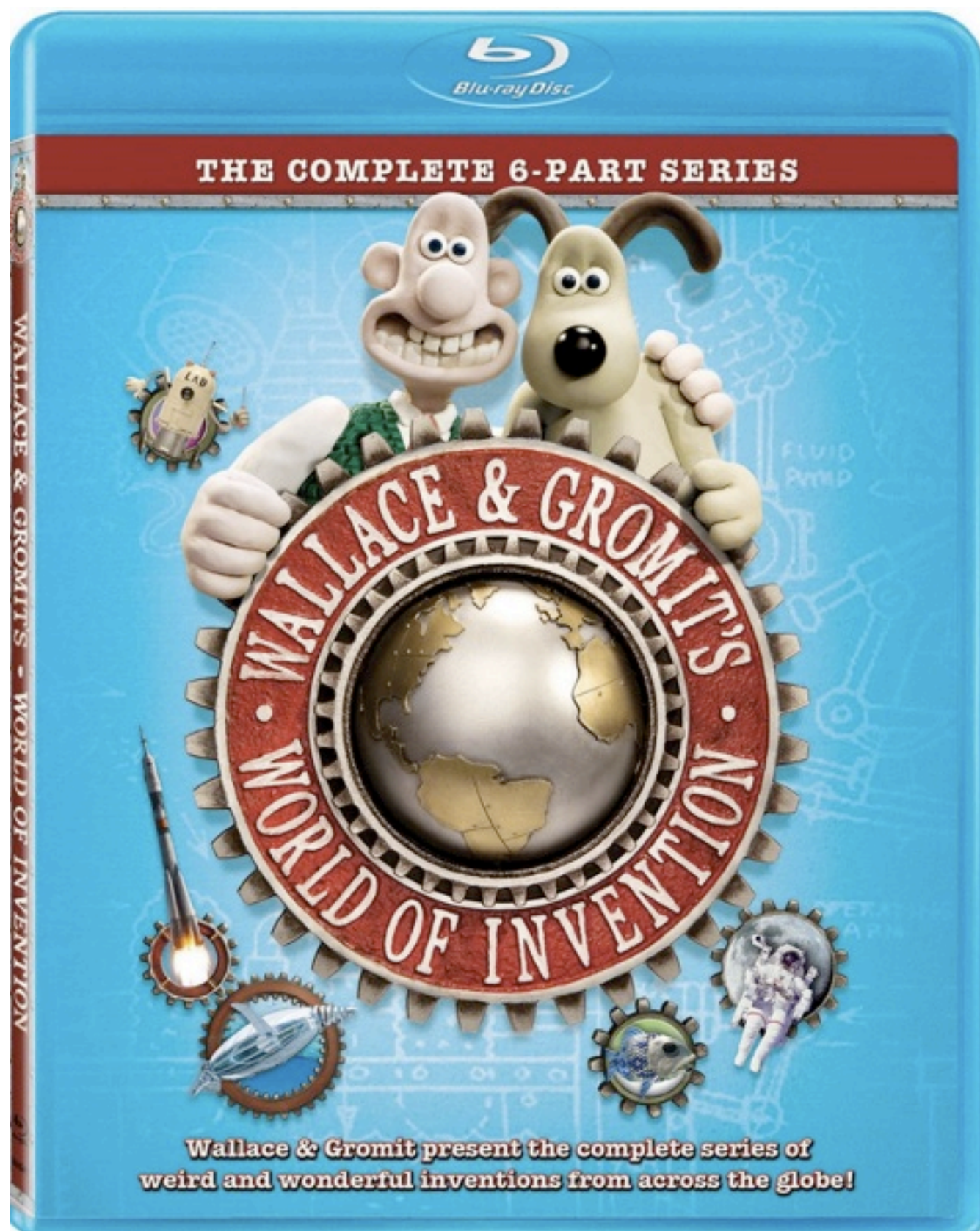
Audiences hoping to find new adventures for the duo contained within this disc may be initially disappointed by its content. Wallace (voiced again by the inimitable Peter Sallis) and his wordlessly wise pup serve as hosts for this family friendly educational program exploring the modern world of wacky inventions. Consumers leery that this show merely uses bookended skits featuring the popular characters as bait to sell dry scientific lectures can rest easy. “World of Invention” is an excellent six-part series that all ages can embrace.



Blu-ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

It’s clear that the producers actively sought out human subjects whose crafty work is truly eye-opening and compulsively entertaining. This show is so good that it could even assist in recharging one’s own creative juices. Consider the story of William Kamkwamba, a 14-year-old Malawian who brought irrigation and electricity to his village of Wimbe using spare materials like PVC pipes. In contrast, inventor Theo Jansen’s use of those very same pipes may appear more than a little harebrained. Jansen constructs enormous kinetic sculptures that are powered by the wind and receive graceful movement from their rotating joints.

It appears that the inventor’s stunning marvels are spawned by his own awe at the work of “the real Creator” and His flesh-and-blood creatures currently occupying the planet. Some of the inventions are still a work in progress, such as an “invisibility cloak” that can hide objects from radar detection, a machine that can extract oxygen out of water and a slim Bio-Suit offering lightweight attire for astronauts when exploring gravity-heavy Mars. It’s endearing to watch some of these inventors as they struggle to outwit obstacles in pursuit of their dream (one young man accidentally sets his mother’s laundry afire with his homemade rocket). The show also earns points for unearthing some historic inventions worthy of attention, from Gustav Mesmer’s celebrated flying machines to Hedy Lamarr’s unheralded work in frequency-hopping technology, the influence of which can be seen in today’s telecommunications industry.



"Wallace & Gromit's World of Invention" was released on Blu-ray and DVD on March 13, 2012.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Entertainment

Each segment is introduced by Wallace in a television studio located in his basement where Gromit toils away with various production duties. Their sketches are appropriately droll and wry but not particularly memorable (a running gag about elephant flatulence thankfully lasts only one episode). That barely matters, since the segments themselves are littered with unexpectedly funny moments, especially when the narrators manage to get in a few cheeky lines. In a segment illustrating the influence of termite-made air-conditioning systems on man-made buildings, a female narrator uses Portcullis House in London (next to the Houses of Parliament) as a prime example. "It's full of MP's offices," she explains, "so no wonder it needs 14 tall chimneys to get rid of all the hot air." "World of Invention" reminded me of how much I cherished programs such as "Bill Nye, the Science Guy" in my youth. They not only make homework more palatable, but also reawaken one's awe and excitement about the possibilities of our world and what miracles can be achieved purely through human ingenuity. It's actually fitting that Wallace and Gromit headline this show, since the various inventors' obsessive need to create is no different from that of a stop-motion animator.

"Wallace & Gromit's World of Invention" is presented in 1080i High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio) and includes one additional segment for each half-hour episode. In the "Your World of Invention" demos, host Ricky Martin (no relation) teaches viewers how to build their own inventions using homemade materials, albeit with "adult supervision and appropriate safety gear." Martin's sketches are as delightfully executed as the show itself, and it's fun to watch him construct air rockets, spy cameras and atmospheric pressure machines out of tools that could easily be found in one's own attic or garage. Even viewers who don't care for "World of Invention" will benefit from watching these demos, since they'll learn about the option of using a Blu-ray disc to build a wind-powered water sprinkler.

'Wallace and Gromit's World of Invention' is released by Lionsgate Entertainment and stars Jem Stansfield, Ashley Jensen, John Sparkes and Peter Sallis. It was created by Nick Park and directed by Merlin Crossingham. It was released on March 13, 2012. It is not rated.

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- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/the-wrong-trousers>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/wallace-gromits-world-of-invention>
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