

A Nostalgic
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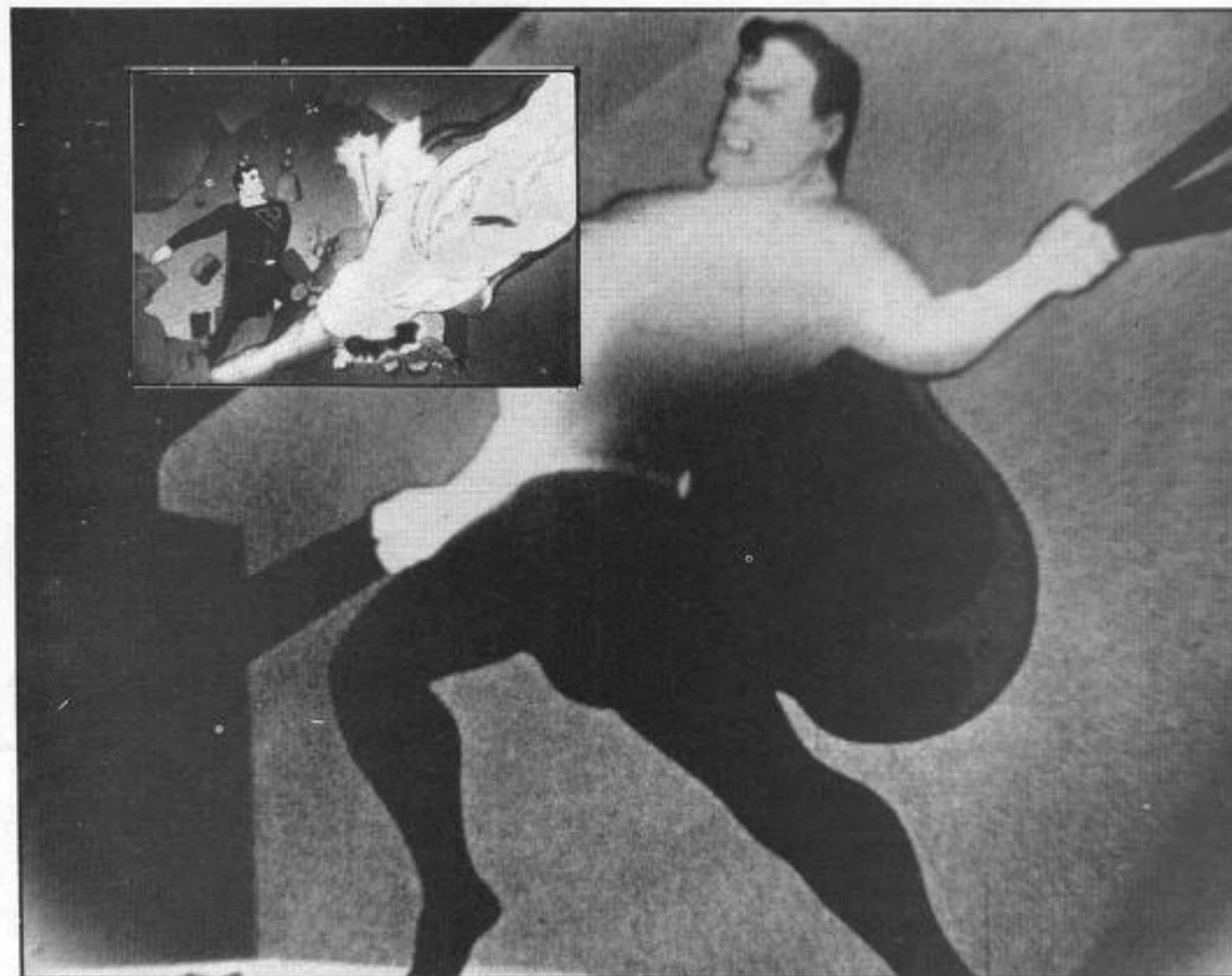


SUPERMAN **THE** **ANIMATED** **KRYPTONIAN**

*In many ways more interesting
than his present Saturday morning image.*

Article by **ERIC HOFFMAN**

In 1941, Republic Pictures issued its annual brochure of upcoming productions to theater exhibitors all over the country. But this time, there was a special addition to its usual planned lineup of dramas, westerns and serials. A two-page announcement heralded plans for a serial built



around exploits of National Comics' powerhouse super-hero, Superman!

At the same time, however, Paramount Pictures had put in its own bid to National (while Republic was in negotiation with the publishing firm) for the right to use the Man of Steel in a series of animated cartoons to be made by the Fleischer studios.

Just what Republic's proposed Superman serial would have been like can only be speculated upon. But the end result was that Republic and National Comics came to a parting of the ways during negotiations.

There have been various factors, rumored or stated, that may have contributed to this. Jerry Siegel, Superman's co-creator, has said that at the time Paramount and Republic were competing for the rights to Superman, he (Siegel) was asked which format would be the best showcase for the Man of Steel. Siegel opted for animation.

Then there was the matter of control over the serial. Gary Grossman, in his book *SUPERMAN: Serial to Cereal*, noted that "Republic was not willing to give up control to the omnipresent comic book owners, who insisted on absolute control of script and production. It wasn't Republic's style to submit . . ."

Paramount's bid was finally accepted and the Man of Steel was placed in the hands of the Fleischer animators and technicians at the studio in Miami, Florida.

The series of 17 cartoons that emerged are now considered classics, as well as a testimony to the skill and talent of the Fleischer people; they were certainly a radical departure for the company that gave audiences such humorous cartoon characters as Popeye, Betty Boop, Bimbo the dog, Koko the Clown, etc.

Certain factors are immediately noticeable upon viewing any of the cartoons. The first is that the figures of Clark Kent/Superman and Lois Lane are very true to the style of the strip as drawn by Joe Shuster. Jerry Siegel had the answer for this. According to Siegel, Shuster was flown to the Fleischer set-up, leaving behind 'model' sheets of the characters' appearance. Judging from the reactions of fans, the artists must have

followed Shuster's concepts closely.

Then there was the remarkable attention to detail and the almost (at times) mind-blowing use of color. Certain moments from the 7 color cartoons presently available stick in the memory; the use of red in *Bullet-eers*, or the silver/gold radiance of the mad scientist's death ray in the first Superman film; the almost electric blue or glowing reds in *The Mummy Strikes* and the almost psychedelic use of colors in the human sacrifice sequence in *Jungle Drums*.

Sammy Timberg's original music added to the excitement, from the many bits of action music, to the mood-inducing mysteriosos, as well as that special theme that heralded Clark Kent changing into Superman, whether it be in a phone booth or even a taxi-cab.

Humor popped up in the films, ranging from visual (the almost human raven in the first cartoon) to sly (the dormant volcano seen through a ship's porthole, in *Volcano*, looking exactly like Paramount's famed mountain logo) to groaning-funny (Lois's one liner, on being asked how she knew Clark was at the museum in *Mummy Strikes*; "My mummy done told me."). But at heart, it never interfered with the story line, merely helped accent the friendly rivalry between Kent and Lois.

Through the 17 cartoons, Superman had his hands full coping with foes ranging from the fantastic and monstrous (an army of giant robots; a prehistoric monster; a giant gorilla; bird-men) to gangsters to agents of the Axis Powers, both German and Japanese.

With the final entry, *Secret Agent*, the Man of Steel flew off into the sky, saluting the American Flag in mid-flight; an appropriately patriotic note to the popular super-series.

Available in the past only in black-and-white, the Paramount/Fleischer adventures of *Superman* have gradually been resurfacing in color once again. To date, seven of the seventeen mini-epics have turned up, with the promise of more to come, giving today's fans a chance to see just what all the excitement was about regarding a very unique animated series that stands alone in its category. ■

