

FLASH GORDON

A Review by John Brosnan

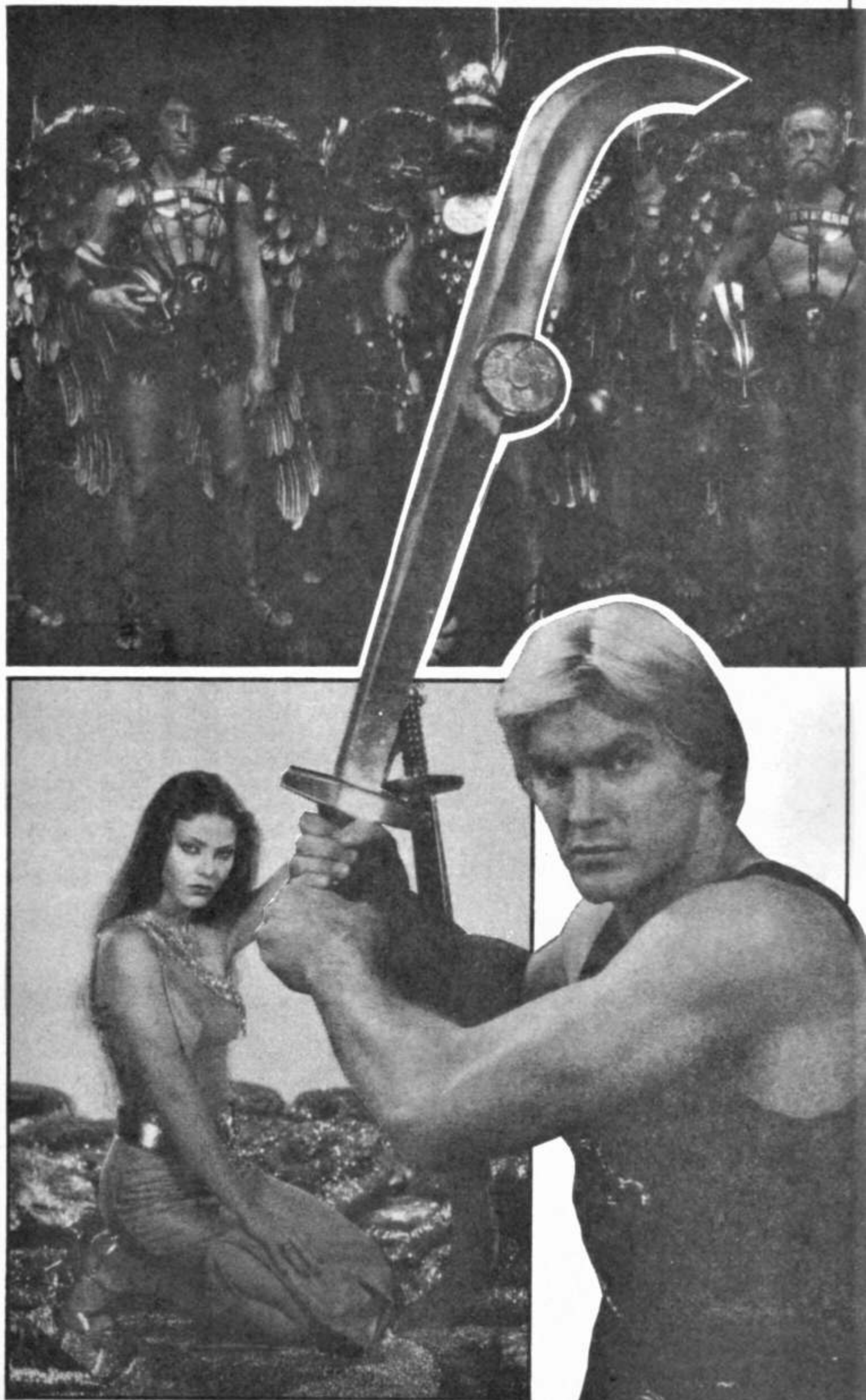
Well, Dino De Laurentiis has done it again. The man who brought you the second King Kong, the second Hurricane, Orca, The Bible, Anzio, Kiss the Girls and Make Them Die and many other films you'd like to forget now brings you Flash Gordon . . . and I sure wish he hadn't.

It was *Flash Gordon* that George Lucas originally wanted to film but when he couldn't obtain the rights to the strip he made *Star Wars* instead though visual elements from Alex Raymond's comic strip figure prominently in both *Star Wars* and *Empire Strikes Back*. (The ice world setting in the latter movie, for instance, is straight out of *Flash Gordon*.) One presumes that if Lucas had made *Flash Gordon* he would have handled it in the same way he did the *Star Wars* movies, ie — with a straight face. Not only did Lucas prove that this was the best way to treat what is basically comic strip material on the screen but so did Richard Donner with *Superman*. (Parts of *Superman* were played for laughs but they mainly concerned the villains — Superman himself was treated straight and with respect.)

But Dino, director Mike Hodges and his script writer Lorenzo Semple Jnr, don't seem to have learned from either *Star Wars* or *Superman* — their approach is one of pure camp reminiscent of the *Batman* tv series, which used to be written by none other than Lorenzo Semple Jnr (surprise!). The last time someone made a film this way was in 1975 with the late George Pal's *Doc Savage* and we all know what happened to that one . . .

No, *Flash Gordon* isn't quite as bad as *Doc Savage* but I will stick my neck out and predict that *Flash* isn't going to set any 1981 box office records. Mainly because I think younger audiences are going to realise pretty quickly that they're being patronised by this movie and all the "nudge-nudge" type humour it contains. I could be wrong, of course.

I think what I found most disappointing about it, apart from the grating, unremitting camp, was that it bore virtually no resemblance to Alex Raymond's original conception. Instead the strongest visual influence seems to have come from Dino's previous space opera, *Barbarella* (along with some of the



jokes), particularly with the lurid swirling backgrounds that are supposed to represent outer space or whatever (and the long-shots of Ming's city reminded me of the city of Sogo in *Barbarella*). There are also strong elements of MGM's *Wizard of Oz*. Noticeable mainly in the costume designs, some of the sets and especially in the sequences with the birdmen flying *en masse* which were similar to the flying monkey scenes in *Oz*. Also the villains in *Flash* have a tendency to melt away when killed, just like the witch in *Oz*.

The other dominant influence seems to be not the actual comic strip but the *Flash Gordon* serials of the 1930s. This is evident in both the dialogue and the way the various space ships and flying machines are presented. Which leads us, I'm afraid, to the special effects . . . These are indescribable but I'll have a go anyway. At times they are actually inferior to the ones in the old serials. The worst thing is the blue screen work — it's as if all the advances with this troublesome process over the last few years were never made. Photographic Effects Supervisor Frank Van Der Veer and his team go right back to square one and the matte lines around everyone are so thick you expect the actors to collapse under the weight of them. Even the most spectacular of the effects sequences, such as the ones where the bird men take to the air, are undermined and spoilt by the shoddiness of the blue screen work.

Some of the physical effects are



impressive though, like the sequence where Flash and Dale's plane crashes into Zarkov's glass-house, but one can only assume that the sheer overall tackiness of the visual effects is the result of a deliberate attempt to reproduce the cardboard quality of the serials.

The plot, such as it is, borrows from both the serials and the comic strip: Ming the Merciless (*Max Von Sydow*) is subjecting the Earth to an onslaught of earthquakes, hurricanes and fiery hail-stones, partly for the sheer fun of it and also to test human development. The plane carrying Flash Gordon (*Sam Jones*), famous football star, and Dale Arden (*Melody Anderson*), PR lady, is caught up in one of these storms and crashes right into the laboratory of the mad Dr Zarkov (*Chaim Topol*) who is about to launch a space ship to investigate the source of all these disasters.

He tricks Flash and Dale into entering his craft and off they go to the planet Mongo where they are immediately captured by Ming's guards and taken to his throne room. Ming, for some inexplicable reason, falls for Dale and decides to make her his bride. Flash puts up a gallant resistance and uses his American pro football skills to scatter Ming's men while Dale acts as a cheer-leader on the sidelines (if you can watch this sequence without cringing under your seat with embarrassment then *Flash Gordon* is the movie for you).

Flash is overpowered and later "executed" in a gas chamber but Ming's daughter, the beautiful Princess Aura (*Ornella Muti*) bribes a doctor to keep him alive and then smuggles him away in her flying machine to the jungle kingdom of Prince Barin (*Timothy Dalton*). Meanwhile Dr Zarkov is having his brain washed clean by the evil Klytus (*Peter Wyngarde*), head of Ming's secret police and the film's equivalent of Darth Vader. The sequence features a montage of Zarkov's memories showing the highlights

of his Jewish upbringing, including images of Nazi Germany, taking him all the way back to his actual birth and beyond which is strangely out of step with the rest of the movie's relentlessly camp approach).

After a fight in the swamp Flash and Barin are captured by Vultan's (*Brian Blessed*) wing men and taken to his city in the sky (which bears a strong resemblance to the floating city in *The Empire Strikes Back*). Flash tries to persuade Vultan to rebel against Ming but Vultan refuses and instead forces Flash and Barin to fight to the death on a circular, floating platform from which spikes rise at random (choreographed by Bill Hobbs, this is a well-staged fight sequence). Meanwhile, back at the fortress, Ming's daughter is being picturesquely tortured by Klytus and his female assistant Kala (*Mariangel Melato*). Being whipped doesn't faze her but her resolve crumbles when she is subjected to the dreaded "borer worms" and she confesses all. We never see the borer worms, unfortunately, so their exact nature can only be guessed at . . .

Ming's forces, led by Klytus, launch an attack on Vultan's city. The wing men flee the crumbling structure and Flash, at the last moment, discovers a rocket cycle which he escapes on. Led by Flash and Vultan the wing men attack Ming's flagship and overwhelm it at which point the ship's captain immediately cries, "stop all engines!" for some strange reason. Naturally you would expect the ship to drop like a stone but it just hangs there as if it was in outer space, which it obviously isn't. The battle itself, similar to the one at the climax of *Moonraker*, is impressive and is spoilt only by the occasional sight of the wires supporting the bird men, as well as by the inevitable matte lines . . .

Flash, piloting the captured ship, and the wing men proceed to Ming's stronghold and arrive in time to interrupt



Ming's wedding to Dale in a most spectacular way (Ming certainly gets the point, in more ways than one) and to prevent Ming from sending the moon crashing into Earth. But as the credits roll a question mark appears after THE END, suggesting that a sequel is on the cards, a prospect that is far from cheering.

The film provides some incidental pleasures along the way but overall I found it to be a tremendous disappointment and a major misjudgement on the part of the people behind it. As for the cast — well, Sam Jones as Flash doesn't exactly give a performance. He displays the same sort of presence as a clothes store dummy and is just about as expressive.

But in direct contrast to Jones' passiveness the Jewish star, Topol, gives a 50 megaton clowning performance as Zarkov that is so over the top it's in orbit. He even out-hams Brian Blessed as Vultan, which isn't easy. The grinning Blessed can show more of his teeth than any other living actor. The thought that Topol is the villain in the next Bond movie, *For Your Eyes Only*, is a depressing one.

The great Swedish actor Max Von Sydow is fine as Ming but you get the feeling he's in the wrong movie, and you get the feeling *he* thinks he's in the wrong movie too. Best among the male actors is Timothy Dalton as Barin who plays it absolutely straight and succeeds in rising above the tawdry material. As Klytus Peter Wyngarde certainly sounds good — we never see his face — delivering his lines in slinky, sinister tones that remind one of the late George Sanders.

Among the women Melody Anderson (first seen in John Carpenter's *Elvis: The Movie*) is adequate in the bland role of Dale but is outshone by Ornella Muti (real name Francesca Romana Rivelli, and yes, she is Italian) as Aura. Ms Muti is going to go far, if she hasn't already . . .

One can't help wondering how the movie would have turned out if Nicholas

Roeg had stayed with the project. It would obviously have been a very different movie, and possibly a difficult one too, knowing of Roeg's predilection for multi-layered, time-twisting narrative structures, but it would surely have been a much more interesting film than what we've ended up with (see Tony Crawley's interview with Roeg in *Starburst 23*) and probably more faithful to the *Flash Gordon* strip on the visual level at least. "I love the *Flash Gordon* books," Roeg said, ". . . and I gradually came to the conclusion that Alex Raymond was a genius, an absolute genius." But it was not to be. After a year of pre-production planning he and De Laurentiis came to a parting of the ways (I was amazed that the two of them ever got together on the film in the first place — their respective approaches to film making are light years apart) with De Laurentiis abandoning Roeg's concept and going for a purely "commercial" type of movie.

The result is a campy, jokey spoof that resembles nothing more than an expensive remake of *Flesh Gordon* without the sex, and also without that much cheaper movie's good special effects. And what's more, *Flesh Gordon* was funnier . . . ●

A Review by Alan Jones

If the character of Flash Gordon reminds you of Buster Crabbe's exploits in vintage 1930s serials, then this new version of *Flash Gordon* is definitely for you. Whether the same can be said if you are a lover of Alex Raymond's creation from the syndicated comic strips — then I'm not so sure. Viewed today *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* and his *Trip to Mars* are hilarious romps combining camp comedy with cheap special effects and even though producer Dino De Laurentiis wasn't too sure if Lorenzo Semple Junior's screenplay for the film was supposed to be funny or not, Semple has wisely played on these humorous elements. In doing so, Semple, who wrote the *Batman* television series in the mid sixties, has captured the very essence of the serialisations.

Starting with the very genesis of the *Flash Gordon* legend, we first see Flash, "the famous American football star", boarding an airplane with fellow traveller Dale Arden. Before they have even had

Far left: Max Von Sydow as Ming the Merciless. Opposite right: Flash Gordon (Sam Jones) is lowered into a swampy grave. Below left: Ornella Muti (real name Francesca Romana Rivelli) plays Princess Aura, daughter of Ming. Below: Flash (Sam Jones) and Prince Barin (Timothy Dalton) are made to fight to the death on a floating, spikey platform.



time to introduce themselves, they both find themselves battling earthquakes, hurricanes and hailstones of fire, which forces them to crash-land on Dr Hans Zarkov's laboratory. Zarkov tells them that the disasters are the work of Emperor Ming the Merciless who, from his palace on the planet Mongo, has pulled the moon 12 degrees out of its orbit, meaning it will collide with the Earth in 10 days. With this deadline in mind the three blast off to Mongo in an effort to save their planet. Captured on Mongo, Flash is sentenced to death and Zarkov is sent to be brainwashed into one of the Emperor's loyal workers. Dale is horrified to learn that Ming's evil plans for her include marriage, but help is soon close at hand! Ming's daughter, the Princess Aura, has designs on Flash for herself and helps him escape to the kingdom of Arboria where he begins rallying Prince Barin, head of the Tree-men and Vultan, leader of the Hawk-men, towards a revolt against Ming's tyrannical rule. Do they succeed? Is Ming vanquished? Surely, you don't need to ask and in true **Flash Gordon** fashion there's a cliff-hanger at the climax of the film which literally ends with a question mark.

Some of the dialogue exchanges are extremely funny. Dale and Flash are reunited on the Hawk-men's City in the Sky. Dale: "Oh Flash, I've got so much to tell you". Flash: "Save it for our children". Dale: (as she is being pulled away from all the fighting) "Please. Can't you see I've just got engaged?". Or how about the scene in the dungeon where Prince Barin and Zarkov are chained on the wall together. Prince Barin: "What was that about a man called Houdini?".

This should give you a rough idea of what to expect.

The special effects in **Flash Gordon** are by George Gibbs (**Arabian Adventure**) Glen Robinson (**Logan's Run**, **King Kong & Meteor**) and Richard Conway and, to be honest, they are very mediocre but in a way this actually complements the story. The obvious blue screen work, matte lines and transparent model shots all add to the general feeling of idiocy about the film and besides, if people keep expecting bigger and better special effects with every new science-fiction film released, they are nearly always going to be disappointed!

The cast is uniformly adequate, the exception being Chaim Topol who seems ill at ease and uncomfortable with his role as Zarkov. Sam Jones looks the part of Flash, which is really half the battle as a good actor isn't needed and he plays it very straight which is exactly right. Max Von Sydow doesn't quite erase the memory of Charles Middleton's characterisation of Ming from the serials but has a good try at being as viciously evil as possible. However, the real star of **Flash**



Gordon isn't anybody in front of the camera, it is from someone behind it. The contribution of Art Director Danilo Donati towards the success of the film cannot be underestimated. The huge futuristic sets which can only be described as psychedelic art-deco, and the intricate costumes add the most extraordinary visual impact that ravishes the eye. **Flash Gordon** is a stunning tour de force for the art department and Donati, who designed a lot of Federico Fellini's films, keeps up the comedic flow with his visual excesses. Touches like the graffiti written in the dungeons and on the palace walls of "Long live Flash" and "Ming is dead" make the film an enjoyable experience.

Mike Hodges' sure direction keeps up

the pace never letting it flag throughout the film's 116 minute running time. Nicholas Roeg had been the first choice as director but was replaced when it became apparent that his concept of the film was nearer that of the 1974 pseudo-erotic spoof, **Flesh Gordon**, than that of the wholesome family entertainment that Dino De Laurentiis had in mind. That spoof, **Flesh Gordon**, arguably had better special effects than **Flash Gordon** but I derived far more pleasure and enjoyment out of this new larger than life version and hopefully, despite the greater awareness of the technique of special effects, we haven't yet forgotten the fundamental purpose of the cinema, which is to entertain.



Above inset: *Ming the Merciless* (Max Von Sydow) and his hatchet man *Klytus* (Peter Wyngarde). Above: *Flash Gordon* (Sam Jones) wields a sword like a master. Below left: *Kala* (Mariangela Melato) is second in command of Ming's secret police and assistant to the evil *Klytus*. Below centre: *Prince Barin* (Timothy Dalton) rules the jungle Kingdom of *Arboria*. Below right: *Chiam Topol* portrays the Earth scientist *Dr Zarkov*.

