

THE LAST STARFIGHTER

Robert Preston stars as "The Music Man" in outer space, with state-of-the-art computer-simulated effects.

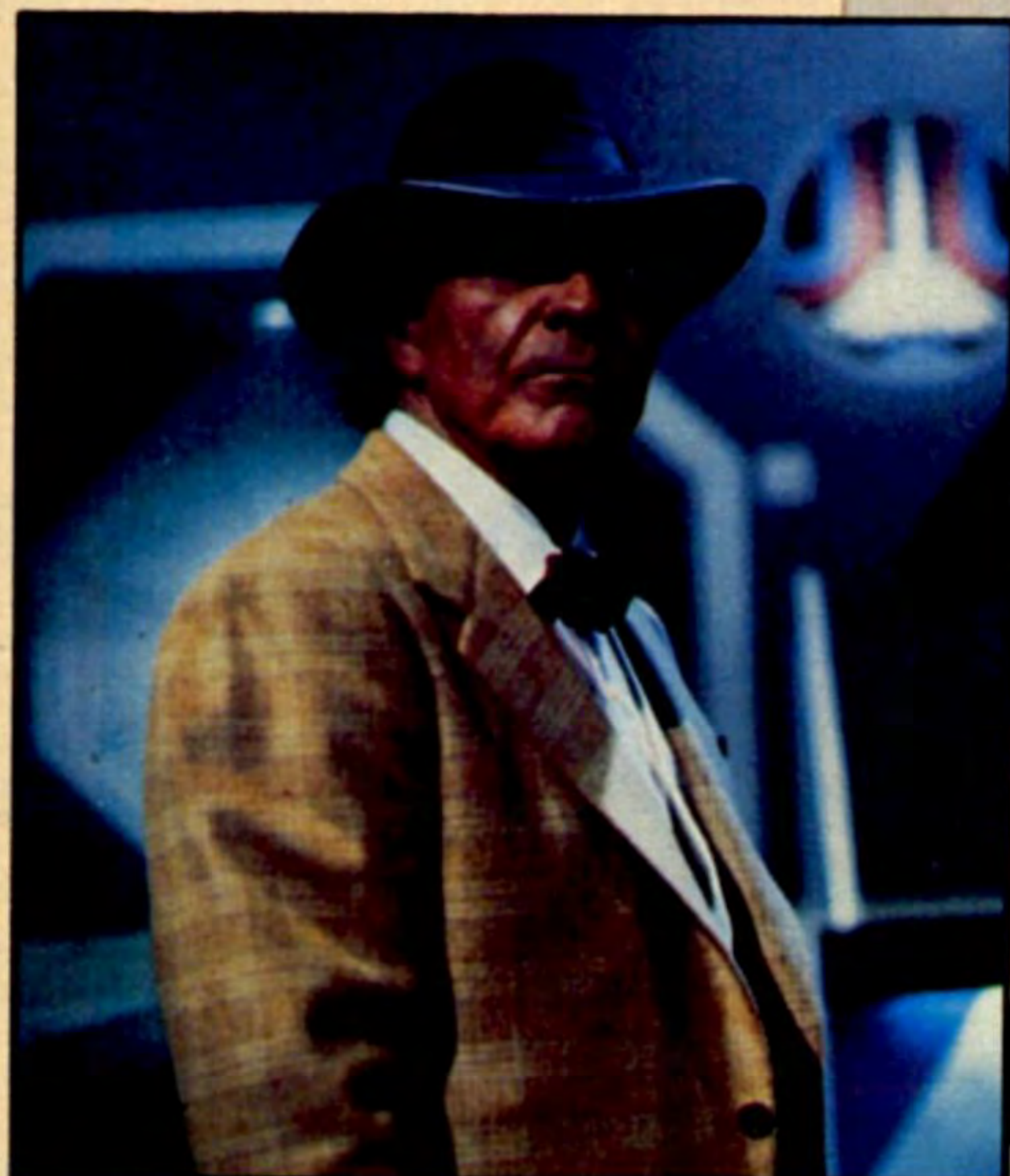
by David J. Hogan

The most ambitious computer simulation ever attempted will highlight THE LAST STARFIGHTER, Lorimar's \$13 million science fiction adventure, tentatively scheduled for a June 22 release by Universal.

Director Nick Castle Jr., working from a script by Jonathan Betuel, has guided a cast which includes Robert Preston, Lance Guest, Dan O'Herlihy and Catherine Mary Stewart. A 40-day shooting schedule began June 8 with exteriors shot at a trailer park in Soledad Canyon, California, and filming at MGM studios.

Lance Guest plays Alex, a resourceful 18 year-old whose chance encounter with an extraterrestrial video game whisks him into outer space, where the Star League of Planets is threatened by the evil KO-Dan race. His skill with the game—which is actually a testing device—qualifies him to become a Starfighter. While Alex fights hair-raising battles in the dark corners of the galaxy, his klutzy double, delivered as a courtesy by the Star League, replaces him at home.

Right: Lance Guest as Alex, video-gamer-cum-starfighter. **Inset:** Robert Preston as Centauri, a roguish talent scout for the Star League of Planets.





Centauri (Robert Preston) introduces new recruit Alex (Lance Guest) to Grig (Dan O'Herlihy), his lizard-like navigator.

Robert Preston plays Centauri, Alex's roguish mentor whom Castle describes as "Harold Hill in space," referring to Preston's famed Broadway and film roles as *THE MUSIC MAN*. The imposing Dan O'Herlihy is Grig, Alex's lizard-like navigator. And Catherine Mary Stewart plays Maggie, Alex's puzzled girlfriend.

THE LAST STARFIGHTER will be highlighted by 27 minutes of computer simulation—the bulk of it employed to depict alien worlds, spacecrafts and battles. A \$3 million effects contract was awarded to Digital Productions, a California-based computer graphics house headed by John Whitney, Jr. The pride of Digital is its Cray Super Computer, a one-of-a-kind

giant whose imaging capabilities will, according to Castle, "fool you into thinking that the spaceships, planets and terrain you're looking at are real."

Castle dismisses any comparison of *THE LAST STARFIGHTER* to *TRON*, Disney's computer-generated adventure that did not do well at the boxoffice in 1982. "TRON is what I'd call a low-res (resolution) film," said Castle. "The colors were purposefully flat and artificial, almost a cartoon look. That was appropriate since *TRON*'s action takes place inside a video game.

"As far as *THE LAST STARFIGHTER*, there's been a conscious effort not to draw a lot of advance attention to Digital or to

the presence of computer simulation, mainly because we've gone for simulation that gives a photo-real look," continued Castle. "What we expect to happen is that the film community will see that computers can now match motion control graphics in terms of special effects. For instance, we can do multiple elements in a single pass, or start from five miles out and zoom right in on something. The technique could revolutionize the special effects industry."

Digital's computers build images with polygons that are molded and shaped into the desired form. One major element of *THE LAST STARFIGHTER*, the Gun Star, will be constructed from 400,000 polygons. "Some full battle scenes will use more than a million polygons," said Castle.

This sort of technical ambition has been a challenge for Castle, an amiable man in his mid-30s whose only other directorial credit is *T.A.G.* (initials for *The Assassination Game*), a low-budget comedy-thriller that received limited distribution but some warm notices in 1982.

Castle wrote for television in the early '70s and assisted in the shooting of John Carpenter's *DARK STAR* (Castle and Carpenter were classmates at USC film school). In 1978, Castle played *The Shape* in *HALLOWEEN*, and later wrote film scripts, including *SKATE-TOWN U.S.A.* and *ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK* (co-written with Carpenter).

Castle is the son of the late Nick Castle, a famed Hollywood choreographer who spent many produc-

tive years at MGM and Paramount. The director credits his early exposure to musical comedy as a major contributing factor to the tone of *THE LAST STARFIGHTER*.

"We've played the picture on that sort of broad level," he said. "It's got a 'little film' quality to it. We've put in a lot of warmth and humor. John [Betuel] and I had time to refine the script before shooting began, to make it fun and unpretentious."

Castle is quick to credit Ron Cobb, in charge of the film's "visual concepts," with many of the film's hoped-for strengths. A highly skilled designer and illustrator who has contributed striking visual ideas to *STAR WARS*, *ALIEN* and *CONAN*, Cobb has been involved in nearly all of the design aspects of *THE LAST STARFIGHTER*—from aliens to spaceships to costumes.

"Ron is the person who coordinated everything," asserted Castle. "If anyone can be credited with having as much 'vision' on the picture as the director, it's Ron Cobb. The picture just oozes design. What you'd love to do with Ron is give him hundreds of millions of dollars and just say, 'Go!'"

Castle made sure that Cobb—who earned his union card on the picture—remained an active force in postproduction. "His presence was absolutely necessary," Castle said.

Principal photography was expedited by detailed storyboards prepared by Digital Productions' Carl Aldana. The boards were designed to aid Castle as he blocked out the action in scenes that would require the addition of special effects in postproduction.

"Forty days is a real lean schedule for a picture with this sort of effects work," said Castle. "So the storyboards were a big help. I always knew pretty much what was called for."

Castle is excited about *THE LAST STARFIGHTER* as both entertainment and as an ambitious piece of technology. "The computer can do things that couldn't be done without the expenditure of an enormous amount of money," he said. "On the other hand, you have limitations of time and the state of the art. Digital is pioneering this, and, as John Whitney told me, sometimes the pioneers are the ones with the arrows in their backs.

"Technology aside, I wanted to base the picture in reality and prevent it from becoming a cartoon," Castle continued. "It's fairly sophisticated. The adventure doesn't rely only on this boy going into space. I hope that people will say the film is charming as well as adventurous." □

Robert Preston is escorted aboard the Gun Star, a space battlecruiser. Production designer Ron Cobb defined the look of the film's costumes, which were designed by Robert Fletcher.

Alex and Grig appear before a Star League assembly, a crowd scene of alien makeups designed by Ron Cobb and executed by makeup expert Terry Smith.



