



SUPERMAN THE MOVIE

After our look at the making of the movie last issue *Starburst* now casts a critical eye over the movie itself, in this review by John Brosnan.

Well, I did and I didn't. Believe a man can fly, that is, as the **Superman** publicity machine assured me I would.

Many of the flying scenes were very good and at times the illusion was perfect (and I'm happy to say that I never spotted one wire) but there was something wrong somewhere and it wasn't until afterwards that I realized it had to do with the way Superman took off. Most of the time he didn't bound or leap into the air, like George Reeves used to do in the old TV series, but simply rose slowly into the air like a helicopter. This gave the impression that he wasn't flying by means of his super-strength but was instead utilising some sort of anti-gravity force.

Of course, if you want to be logical, the way Superman flies in the comic books suggests that he is doing just that—long-gone are the days when his flying was just a super leap permitted by Earth's weak gravity in comparison to his home world of Krypton. In fact, as Superman's abilities have become closer to omnipotence since his first appearance 40 years ago the rationale behind them has become more and more convoluted, involving yellow suns and all sorts of other factors. In the movie Jor-El makes a weak attempt to explain the situation by saying that his son's powers are both a result of his dense molecular structure (yet later we learn he is of normal weight) and the rays from Krypton's sun... all of which goes to show that trying to be logical about Superman is an exercise in futility. You've just got to accept him as he is.

Anyway, apart from the flying, how was the rest of the movie? Pretty good, I thought. Not as good as I'd hoped but certainly the best attempt so far to put a comic book super-hero on the screen. Fortunately the director, Richard Donner, decided to treat the whole thing as straight as possible and though there is a lot of comedy, and some camp humour remi-

niscient of the **Batman** TV series of the mid-sixties, the fact that Superman himself comes across as a *believable* character is the film's main strength. (I hate to imagine what would have happened if the film's original director, Englishman Guy Hamilton, who had wanted to turn it into a complete send-up, had remained with the project—it was vital that the creative, guiding force behind **Superman** should come from an American who would be familiar with Superman as part of his cultural background.)

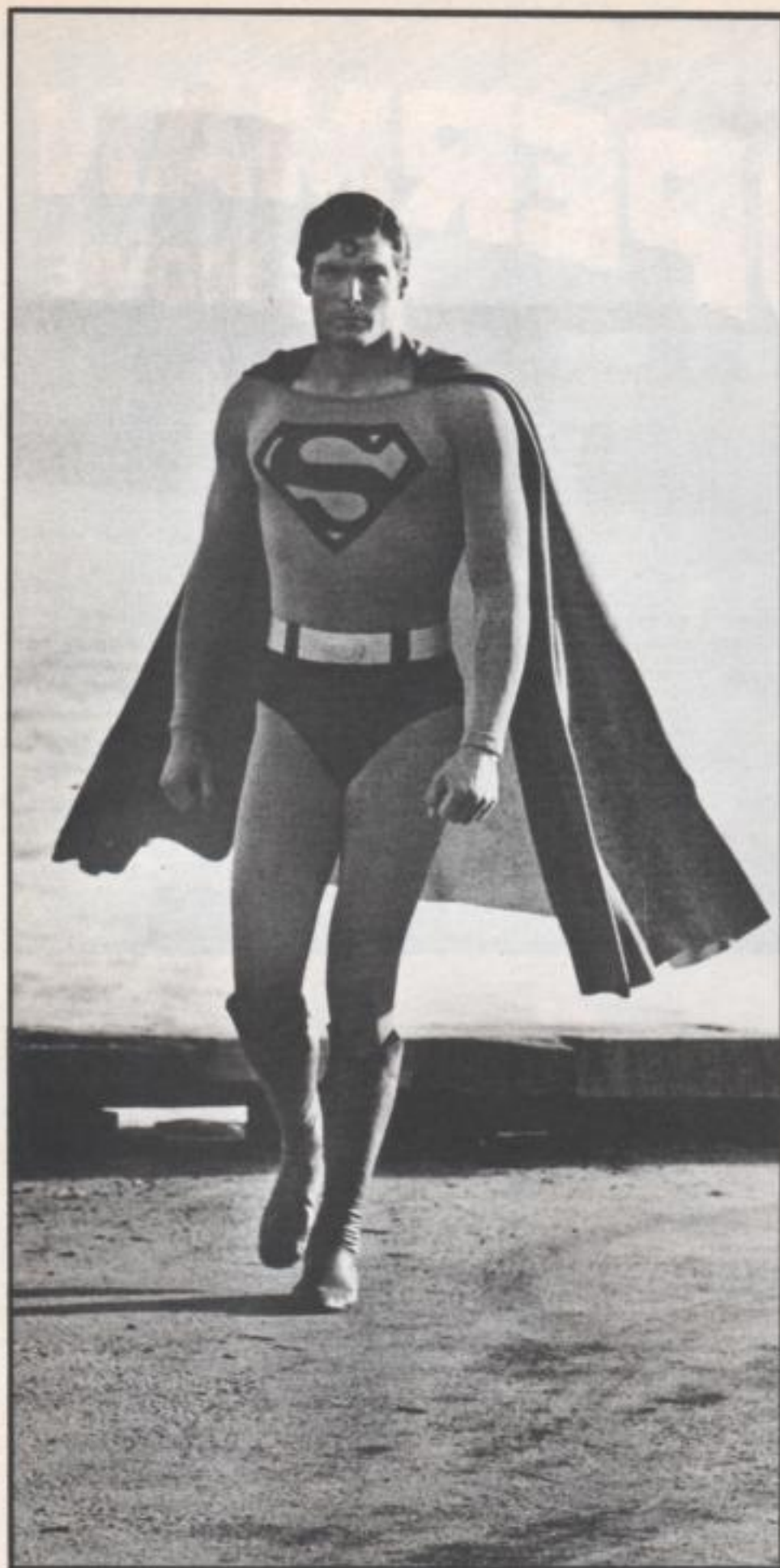
The film's other main strength is Christopher Reeve who plays Superman. He is almost perfect for the part (he's just a shade too young) and I can't think of anyone else who would have worked as

well though I used to think that Clint Walker (TV's *Cheyenne* back in the early 1960s) would have been ideal. And Charles Bronson would be perfect as Bizarro—he wouldn't have to wear make-up.

It would have been so easy for the film makers to have chosen some muscle-man for the job of wearing Superman's blue suit but instead they wisely cast a real actor for the part and then turned him into a muscle man, with the result that Reeves provides a solid core for the movie with both his dignified portrayal of a super being and his subtly humorous impersonation of mild-mannered clumsy Clark Kent... but let's hope he hasn't type-cast himself well and truly for good.



Jor-El (Marlon Brando) and Lara (Susanna York) send their son to earth, so that he will survive the destruction of their home planet, Krypton.



Superman! Defender of the weak and crusader for justice. Above right his mild-mannered alter-ego

Superman is going to be a tough act to follow.

Superman purists will no doubt quibble with the changes that the film makers have made to the familiar Superman legend, and with some justification I feel. The Krypton of the comic book has been turned into an ethereal ice world with most of the population apparently living in a single city within a crystal plateau, all of which looks very impressive ("I didn't want to make Krypton look like a 1938 comic book with the Grecian columns and the gold chairs and the space ships that dropped dust out of their asses as they went by," said Donner). As in the original story, Jor-El's warning that the planet is doomed is ignored by the High Council, but whereas in the comics Krypton was destroyed when its molten core erupted, in the film the planet is destroyed in a collision with its sun. This

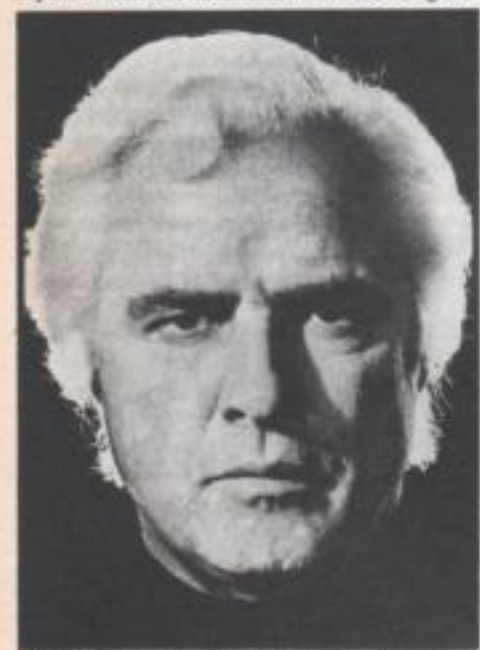


does lead one to ask the embarrassing question as to why all those super brains on Krypton didn't even notice that their planet was heading towards the sun until the actual day of contact. After all, it's not the sort of thing you could easily miss seeing . . .

As per legend Jor-El (a convincingly sincere performance by Marlon Brando) succeeds in sending his baby son off into space towards Earth where he eventually crash lands near a middle-aged American couple called Jonathan and Martha Kent. There is some wince-making dialogue here—on finding a baby in the space vehicle Martha reacts by simply saying: "We've prayed and prayed for the Good Lord to send us a child and now he has . . ." as if this was a common method for human progeny to be delivered. There's then a jump in the narrative to when the baby has grown into a teenager and railing over

the fact that he must keep his powers a secret (there's an embarrassing sequence when we see him out-running an express train—the effect is so unconvincing it makes the Bionic Man's slow-motion runs look good). There's no suggestion of him acting as the Superboy of the comics though Lana Lang, his girl friend in the Superboy stories, makes a brief appearance.

"You've been put on this Earth for a purpose, I know it," Pa Kent (*Glenn Ford*) tells him shortly before dropping dead. This suggestion of Divine Intervention and the mystical tone that the film assumes when young Clark Kent discovers a crystal device containing a message from his father, suggest that the movie may really be about the Second Coming instead of a comic book character. This mood is continued when the youth makes a pilgrimage to the North Pole, throws the crystal into the sea and watches as giant



Above: Marlon Brando plays Superman's father, Jor-El. Above right: Superman soars high above the Metropolis skyline.

crystalline structures magically rise out of the water. This turns out to be the Fortress of Solitude but bears little resemblance to the one we know and love in the comic books. Inside the Fortress the young Superman establishes a kind of spiritual contact with his dead father and is taken on a quick tour of the universe which includes a visit to Krypton's sun . . . we then see him emerge fully-grown from his ice palace and dressed in his Superman gear for the first time (as editor Perry White wonders later in the film: Where did he get the costume?).

Fortunately all this portentous mysticism comes to an end at this point and the movie really gets into its stride with Clark Kent's arrival at the Daily Planet office in the city of Metropolis (which bears a striking resemblance to New York). The sequence where we meet such characters as Perry White (*Jackie Cooper*),

Jimmy Olsen (*Marc McClure*) and Lois Lane (*Margot Kidder*) is marvellous thanks to the excellent performances by all concerned, not least of all by Reeve himself as the bespectacled, shy Clark Kent whose first request to his new boss Perry White is that half his salary be sent home each month to his mother in Smallville, much to the amusement of the cynical Lois. "Are there any more like you back home?" she asks sarcastically. "No, not really," Clark replies. Also great fun are the sequences where Superman reveals himself to the city, first rescuing Lois from a helicopter (great effects!) and then going on a crime-fighting spree, snatching up criminals and delivering them to the police.

It's during this section that Lex Luthor is also introduced and I'm afraid I con-

sider him to be one of the major flaws in the movie. The way the character is written, and the way Gene Hackman plays him, is very enjoyable but he jars with the mood of the rest of the film. With his garish costumes, his bumbling assistant, Otis (*Ned Beatty*), and his sleek female companion, Eve (*Valerie Perrine*), he reminds one too much of one of the campy villains featured in the Batman tv series, like the Penguin or the Joker. He's undeniably amusing—he gets most of the best lines—but it seems a mistake for the film makers, after spending so much of the film's running time on establishing Superman as believable character, to make the chief villain so obviously *unbelievable*. Like Superman, Luthor should have been treated relatively straight and played as a



Is it a bird? A crowd of hystanders cheers as Superman makes his debut to rescue Lois Lane.



Top: *Superman* (Christopher Reeve) eyes Otis (Ned Beatty) warily in the underground lair of Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman). Centre: *Lois Lane* (Margot Kidder) lands an exclusive interview with the Man of Steel. Above: This is a job for Superman. Clark Kent makes the startling transformation.

more overtly sinister character (Telly Savalas would have been my choice for the part...).

One sequence in this part of the film that works particularly well, and which possesses a genuine sense of wonder, is where Superman takes Lois on a night flight over New York and then up through the clouds. Lois's growing exhilaration after her initial fear is successfully communicated by Ms Kidder, as is her sudden shock when she lets go of Superman's hand and suddenly finds herself plummeting earthwards. The flying effects are quite convincing here and the only thing that spoils it all is the rather banal accompanying song.

From then on the movie is concerned with the unfolding of Luthor's plan to cause half of California to fall into the sea by sending a nuclear missile into the San Andreas fault ("We all have our faults and mine's in California," says Luthor). The sequences involving the nuclear missiles, the earthquake and Superman's efforts to avert the catastrophe are all very spectacular (the effects in these sequences vary in quality but some are brilliant) but not really as entertaining as the Metropolis sequences—I would have preferred to see more of Superman's dual life in the city which is really the film's chief source of fun. But there's sure to be more of that in Part 2, along with the battle between Superman and the escaped super-criminals from Krypton who we saw imprisoned within the Phantom Zone at the start of the film (though people not familiar with the comic books may have been somewhat mystified as to what was going on). If Part 2 is as entertaining as Part 1 it's going to be well worth waiting for.

Superman: The Movie (1978)

Marlon Brando (as Jor-El), Gene Hackman (*Lex Luthor*), Christopher Reeve (*Superman/Clark Kent*), Margot Kidder (*Lois Lane*), Ned Beatty (*Otis*), Jackie Cooper (*Perry White*), Glenn Ford (*Pu Kent*), Trevor Howard (*First Elder*), Susannah York (*Lara*), Phillis Thaxter (*Ma Kent*), Jeff East (*Young Clark Kent*), Marc McClure (*Jimmy Olsen*).

Directed by Richard Donner, Story by Mario Puzo, Screenplay by Mario Puzo, David Newman, Leslie Newman and Robert Benton, Edited by Stuart Baird, Photographed by Geoffrey Unsworth, Production design by John Barry, Music by John Williams, Special effects by Colin Chilvers, Optical visual effects by Roy Field, Mattes and composites by Les Bowie, Model effects by Derek Meddings, Makeup and special visuals by Stuart Freeborn, Executive producer Ilya Salkind, Produced by Pierre Spengler, Distributed by Warner Bros. Time: 143 mins. Cert: A

An in-depth article on the *Superman* special effects, including interviews with three of the effects men concerned, is to follow in the next issue of *Starburst*.