

Best TV adaptation of an action comic ever lives up to its hype



John Wesley Shipp as THE FLASH, the Warner Bros TV series on CBS, based on the long-running DC comics.

THE FLASH

A CBS-TV presentation of a Pet Fly Productions' film, in association with Warner Bros, 9/90, 120 mins. Director, Rob Iscove. Producers, Steven Long Mitchell, Craig W. Van Sickle & Gail Morgan Hickman. Executive producers, Danny Bilson & Paul De Meo. Director of photographer, Sany Sissel. Editor, Frank Jiminez. Production designer, Dean Mitzner. Music, Shirley Walker. Sound, Kim LaRue. Screenplay by Bilson & De Meo, based on characters from DC Comics.

The Flash/Barry Allen..... John Wesley Shipp
Tina McGee..... Amanda Pays

by Dan Persons

In advance publicity, CBS made much of THE FLASH's \$6 million budget. Considerable attention was also directed to the program's blood-link to last year's BATMAN, emphasizing its dark mood and the alternate-reality design of its fictional Center City. It seemed like a lot of trouble to go to for what could be considered one of superdom's lesser lights, the kind of hero who, in his print incarnation, gets picked off the newsstand only if all copies of *Action* and *Detective* are sold out. Somewhat surprisingly, the show lived up to its hype. THE FLASH proved to be the best adaptation of an action comic to ever hit the

home screen.

After such programs as THE INCREDIBLE HULK, SUPERBOY and the late-'60s BATMAN—all of which veered violently between sheer camp and out-and-out juvenilia—only THE FLASH comes anywhere near providing both the exhilaration of the best action comics, and scripting tight enough to provide guilt-free watching for anyone over the age of twelve. Yes, those \$6 million helped, with nearly every dollar making it onto the screen in polished production values and cleverly restrained special effects. Who'd've thought that so much visual capital could be made of a super power that, in real life, would render the hero invisible to the naked eye? And we do have BATMAN to thank, if only for having established some new rules regarding the way superheroes are translated to the screen.

Both CBS and FLASH developers (and co-scripters) Paul De Meo and Danny Bilson have well heeded those rules. The characters (given good performances by lead

John Wesley Shipp and sidekick Amanda Pays) carry a little more emotional weight, the humor is sharper, and more pungent ("I realize how an unhappy childhood led you to all this," says the Flash to one malefactor just before beating the guy to a pulp, "but that's no excuse."). De Meo and Bilson have even added a few well-conceived chinks to the Flash's armor, saddling him with both a ravenous appetite (it's somehow reassuring to know that, after breaking the sound barrier, Flash's alter ego Barry Allen has to sit down and recharge with a stack of TV dinners), and a mega-case of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome that often leaves the superhero vulnerable at the worst possible moments.

Though the pilot ends with the promise that these weaknesses would be cured—no doubt giving the writers of upcoming episodes an easy escape hatch) the producers will forgive me for hoping that they find people skilled enough to appreciate and capitalize on these very humanizing flaws.

Maybe they'll also find people

Behind-the-Scenes of THE FLASH, filming the Comic Book

By Mark Dawidziak

The \$6 million price tag on September's two-hour opener of CBS's THE FLASH made it one of the most expensive pilots in TV history. With a weekly budget of \$1.5 million per episode, the series represents Warner Bros

Television's most ambitious entry in the network's prime-time ratings derby. Encouraged by huge merchandising possibilities and lucrative foreign sales, Warners is pushing the network to give the series every possible chance. Executive producers Danny Bilson and Paul DeMeo are confident THE FLASH will streak to a different time period when anticipated low ratings against NBC's THE COSBY SHOW and Fox's THE SIMPSONS at 8-9 p.m. Thursdays warrants a move.

Bilson and DeMeo—authors of Disney's big-budget, Summer 1991 feature THE ROCKETEER—say their series is closer to the dark spirit of Michael Keaton's BATMAN movie than *The Flash* comic books published by DC, which is celebrating the character's 50th anniversary this year. DC, also the publishers of *Batman*, is owned by Warner Bros. "So it's all family," Bilson said. "I would say that BATMAN being made got us the kind of financial support we've gotten from Warner Bros."

It's no coincidence that THE FLASH tries to duplicate the

humor and hard edge of BATMAN. The series has "the same influences as the BATMAN movie," Bilson said, "which are the comic books of probably the last six or seven years: *The Dark Knight* by Frank Miller; *American Flag* by Howard Chalkin, who happens to be our story editor; and *The Watchmen* by Alan Moore... where comics have gone much more to an adult format. That's what Paul and I followed. That's where we drew our influence from."

Their star is John Wesley Shipp, a two-time Emmy winner for his work on the daytime soap operas AS THE WORLD TURNS and SANTA BARBARA. The Virginia native plays brilliant forensic scientist Barry Allen, the second and longest running of the three Flash



Shipp as the Flash poses with costume creator Robert Short. Inset: Molding the suit to Shipp's frame.



who can work up some new plot-lines. For all its advances, the pilot was an almost by-the-numbers reiteration of your standard "origins" episode. It didn't help that the central heavies for the kick-off were an anonymous band of motorcycle toughs, headed-up by a predictably megalomaniacal leader (Michael Nader). If the idea is to put a human face on our superheroes, why not give them something more than cardboard to knock down?

And why not drop the comparisons to **BATMAN**, while they're at it? Deliberately shoehorning in parallels—such as adding a shot of a shorting transformer whose arcs form the flash symbol over a full moon, or having the hero scream, "You made me!" to his brother's murderer (which, in this case, isn't even an accurate statement)—is as ludicrous as it is obvious. True, the attempt to ape Tim Burton's ground-breaking film leads to some attractively composed night shots, but there's more to *noir* than just wet streets and chromatic lighting (especially when, in the light of day, the locations devolve back into the generic, L.A. street scenes we've seen in countless other cop shows). □



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and flexibility," said Short. "It's a seamless costume that can be used over and over again." Short made four suits for the pilot at a cost of \$100,000 (including research and development). Short said that eight suits, half for stunt work, will be needed for a full 22-episode season.

Although a \$6 million budget may be stunning for a two-hour TV movie, it's peanuts compared to doing **THE FLASH** as a feature film. But budget limitations are no problem for Bilson and DeMeo, who made their names as a writing/producing team on low-budget science fiction features for Charles Band, such as **TRANCERS**, **ZONE TROOPERS** and **THE ELIMINATORS**. **THE FLASH** is the team's fourth attempt to take a pilot to series. Failed concepts included **KUNG FU: THE NEXT GENERATION**, **CYBERFORCE** (developed with Peter Wagg, creator of **MAX HEADROOM**) and **THE HUMAN TARGET**, which ABC might still pick up as a midseason replacement.

There were about 103 effects shots in the two-hour **FLASH** pilot, which, Bilson said, "is probably five times what we should have if we were sane." Each episode will boast about 25 effects shots, most involving illusions of speed. "There's an image in the comic book of a streak," Bilson said. "That's what we wanted to achieve on film." The effect is accomplished by undercranking the camera on Shipp, filmed against black velvet and composited into the scene.

"The Flash's image is literally streaked in a video paintbox technique," said Bilson. "The computer does that." Sometimes Shipp and a double are filmed simultaneously to increase the illusion, as in the pilot's sequence of Allen cleaning up his apartment.

Most of the show's shooting is done at night, an added expense, because the producers believe "that the suit and the mystique of the character only works at night when we can control the light," Bilson said. "We're not going to put him out in the bright sunlight. It's not effective." □

comic book incarnations, published during DC's "silver age" (from the '50s to the mid-'80s). Allen took over for the original Flash, John Fox. The current comic book Flash is Wally West, who was once Kid Flash.

The series' special effects supervisor is David Stipes (NBC's **V** miniseries). Robert Short, an Oscar winner for the afterlife creatures of **BEETLEJUICE**, designed the Flash costume and is in charge of special makeup effects. "When we were assigned the show," Short said, "Shipp's biggest concern was that the costume not look like a silly red leotard. But we also wanted to avoid the **BATMAN** movie, which got away from the skin-tight outfit and replaced it with body armor." Short's answer to this dilemma was to build a suit with foam appliances that would exaggerate Shipp's muscles. "It's essentially John's body," DeMeo said, "only slightly exaggerated so that it looks like it does in a comic."

Short's suit consists of about thirty foam rubber appliances, glued on an underlying cool suit. "An electrostatic process and nylon coating give it durability

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