

Preview by Phil Edwards

Way back in **Starburst 23** I interviewed Stephen Lisberger while he was in England promoting **Animalympics**, a full-length feature pasted together from several shorts which Lisberger had made to be shown during the American televising of the Olympic Games. Despite its fragmentation **Animalympics** displayed Lisberger's talents as an animation director of considerable imagination. When I asked the young American about his next project he told me, "It's called **Tron** and is about a man who falls into, and becomes part of a computer."

At that stage **Tron** was to be a relatively low-budget, full-length animation feature, employing a certain amount of computer technology (Lisberger had made some experimental films with the famed pioneer of the technique John Whitney Jnr) as well as back-lit animation a process which gives a more glowing, less flat result than standard overhead animation stand lighting.

But somewhere along the way **Tron** became something else. Picked up in pre-production by Walt Disney the movie is now a multi-million dollar live-action adventure and would appear to be yet another attempt by the Disney organisation to break into the adult fantasy film market. **The Black Hole** proved to be a stinker of monumental proportions and the co-production with Paramount, **Dragonslayer**, despite an "adult" ad campaign failed to click at the American box office.

Recently, **Tron** producer Donald Kushner was in London overseeing the recording of the score by Wendy (Walter) Carlos of **Clockwork Orange** and **The Shining** fame. I asked Kushner what sort of film **Tron** now was. "I think it's an action adventure picture in a futuristic fantasy setting. It is kind of tongue in cheek at times in the same way as **Raiders of the Lost Ark** and **Star Wars** are, although it's also very heavily effects-orientated. There's about fifteen minutes of computer generated images, there's about sixteen minutes of what we call the electronic world which was filmed in black and white and is going to be re-photographed and coloured again with black gels."

I asked Kushner how the story had developed with the move to a major studio and production.

"The story has evolved as the film has evolved. It's about a computer genius who gets drawn into a computer world and is sentenced to die as a video game player. Along with a couple of his cohorts he goes on an adventure to destroy the evil overlord of this new, electronic high tech world."

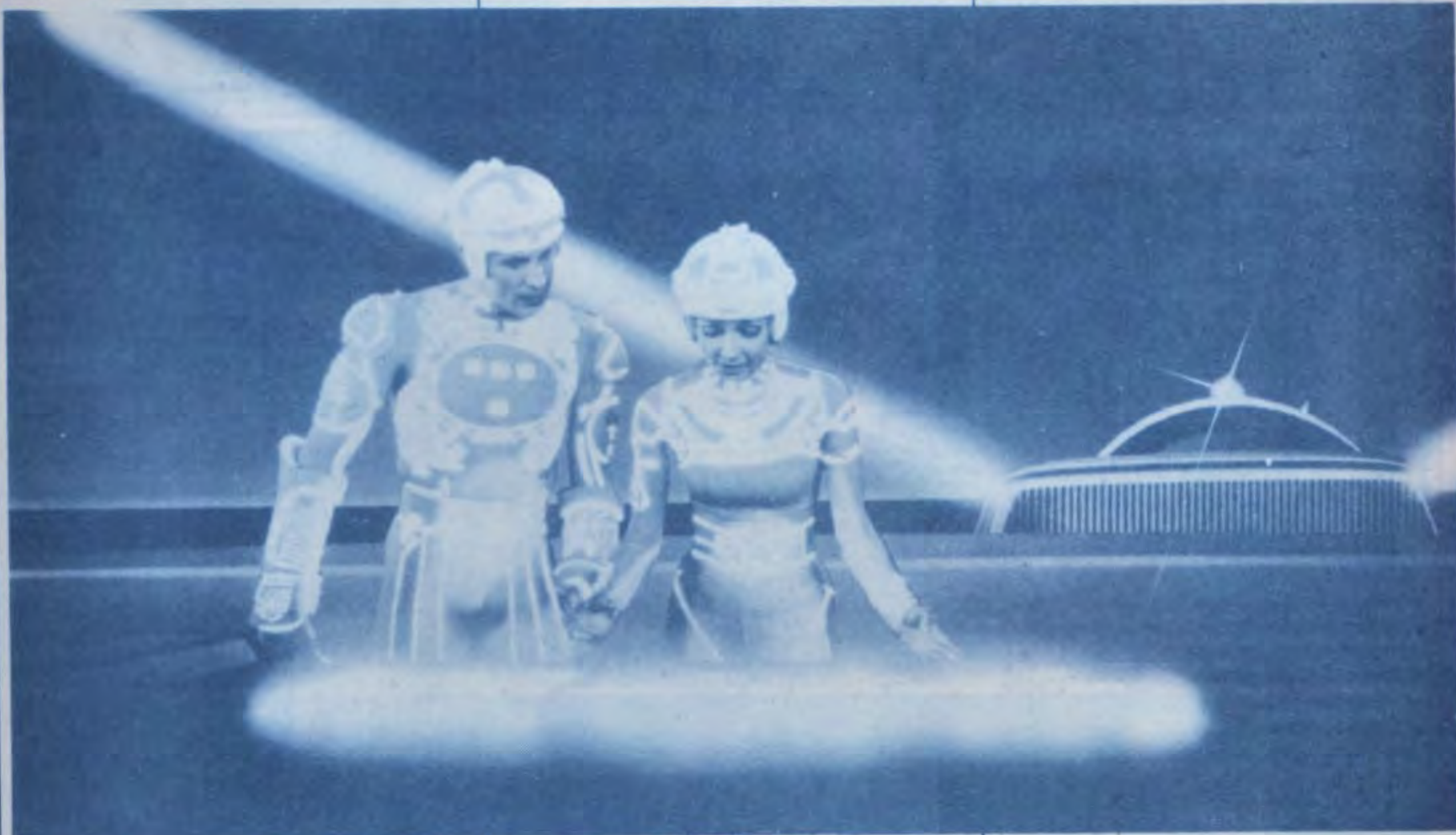
Of course a feature as complex as **Tron**, with its mixture of live action and animation effects must have had its problems. Kushner: "Yes, we've had a lot of problems everywhere, particularly trying to get the film done in time for a Summer (in USA, near Christmas for England) release. Just the sheer force of dealing with 750,000 elements and four or five hundred people working for

several months. And dealing on the edge of technology and not knowing where you're going to go. For instance, using computer-generated images."

With the knowledge that computer gaming is among the highest grossing entertainment industries, beating out even **Star Wars** in takings, I asked Kushner what sort of an audience he was looking for with **Tron**. "We're not looking for a traditional Disney audience. I think it's going to hit more of the teenage market, from people in their early twenties through to people in their middle thirties. This film deals with a computer programmer who creates an alter ego in the programme he is creating. He interfaces with the computer. So we hope that as everyone's lives are touched by computers, then they will go to this film because it's dealing with that."

Tron boasts a fine roster of talent on the special effects side. As well as acting as associate producer, Harrison Ellenshaw is co-supervisor of special effects. After earning a degree in psychology in 1965, Ellenshaw apprenticed in the matte department at Disney under the guidance of his father Peter Ellenshaw. He has contributed matte paintings **The Man Who Fell to Earth**, **Star Wars**, **The Black Hole** and was part of the team that won the optical effects Oscar for **Empire Strikes Back**.

Assisting Ellenshaw in effects supervision is Richard Taylor who heads the Entertainment Technology Group at Information International Inc. Taylor's ►



PREVIEW

TRON

department is the design and programming of the computer animation seen in the film.

Backing up Ellenshaw and Taylor's special effects are a brace of top line visual consultants and designers. Jean 'Moebius' Giraud, one of the founders of *Heavy Metal* magazine has contributed to the design as has high-tech commercial artist Peter Lloyd. Also working on *Tron* is Syd Mead whose \$1500 a day salary obviously didn't phase the Disney organisation one bit. Mead is an industrial designer whose most recent cinematic accomplishment is *Blade Runner*, the brilliant new sf thriller from Ridley Scott.

Tron stars Jeff Bridges, David Warner (fresh from his triumph in *Time Bandits*), Bruce Boxleitner and Cindy Morgan ●

