

COMIC HEROES ON THE SCREEN

Comic book oriented projects are being announced by Hollywood filmmakers with breath-taking rapidity. Alan Murdoch looks at this current trend and notes the idea is not so new.

It comes as no great surprise to hear that, at the time of writing, no less than fourteen movies based on various comic strips are currently in production.

After all, both films and comics rely completely on the interaction of words and sequential pictures to tell their stories.

But this mass migration of Hollywood producers to the four colour realms of the funny pages is hardly a new trend. Long before Superman the Movie was even a twinkle in a Salkind's eye, film-makers

were drawing heavily on the comics for source material.

The first comic character to reach the big screen was Windsor McKay's *Gertie the Dinosaur*, who starred in a cartoon short in 1919.

But audiences had to wait until 1927 for the first feature length film based on a comic strip. For it was in that year that Marion Davies, who later married Hearst of *Citizen Kane* fame, starred as Tillie the Toller from the newspaper strip of the same name. The film, like the comic strip was unremarkable. The following year saw J. Farrell McDonald and Maggie Dressler appear in a feature version of McManus' *Bringing Up Father*.

This opened the floodgates and before the cinema-going public knew what had hit them, movies based on

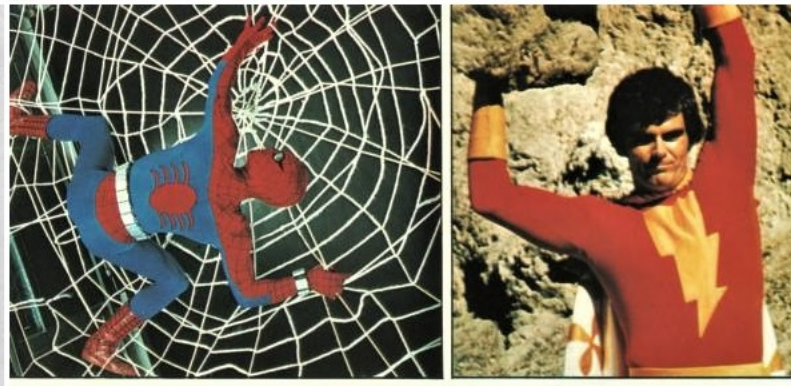
comic strips and comic books were pouring out of Hollywood.

There was *Skippy* (1945, starring Jackie Cooper, who later appeared as Perry White in *Superman the Movie*), *Little Orphan Annie* (1932 with Mitzi Green and 1938 with Anne Gillis), *Joe Palooka* (1934 with Stu Erwin and a series between 1947 and 1951 with Blonie Kirkwood). There was a series of *Blondie* films from 1938 to 1948, featuring Penny Singleton in the lead role. Then, in 1951, James Lyndon appeared in a movie version of the original comic strip soap-opera, *Gasoline Alley*.

Al Capp's *Lil Abner* was filmed twice in 1940 and 1959, the second time as a musical comedy. And between 1949 and 1951 *Jungle Jim*, by Alex Raymond the creator of *Flash Gordon*, appeared in the



Above: A daily strip featuring *Alley Oop* by Hamlin. The character is currently undergoing the Hollywood treatment. Below: A superb example of Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*, which should be coming our way as a film around Christmas 1981. Bottom: Fred Herman's *Red Ryder* turned up as a serial in the 1940s.



Above: Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant* formed the basis for an unsuccessful film version in 1951. Below: One of the most enduring cartoon characters of all, *Popeye the Sailor*.



cinemas with Johnny Weissmuller in the title role.

Another of the great adventure comic strip heroes, *Prince Valiant* by Tarzan artist Hal Foster was adapted to the screen in 1951, with little success.

More recently, we have offered films of *Modesty Blaise* (1966, with which creator Peter O'Donnell was not pleased), *Batman* (1966), *Barbarella* (1967, based on the comic strip by Jean Claude Forest) and of course *Ralph Bakshi's* feature-length cartoon version of *Robert Crumb's Fritz the Cat*.

Then there were the serials. The film serials were a hot favourite of the Poverty

Row film producers between the twenties and the fifties. The serials were in fact just like comic books come to life, regardless of their sources.

There were around 36 sound serials featuring comic characters, running from 1934 (Tallapin Tommy with Maurice Murphy) to 1952 (*Blackhawk* with Kirk Alyn). And in the intervening twenty years serial fans thrilled to the exploits of *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, *Dick Tracy*, *Mandrake the Magician*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Superman* and *The Phantom*.

And now comes the news that besides the obvious comic oriented movies due

for the near future like *Superman 2*, *Flash Gordon*, and *Popeye*, we can also look forward to *Conan* (I'll believe it when I see it!), *Alley Oop*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Annie*, *Brenda Starr*, *The Silver Surfer*, *Dick Tracy*, *Sheena Queen of the Jungle* (originally slated for Raquel Welch), *Mandrake the Magician* and (still very much in the planning stages) *Batman*.

So, although the idea of transferring the comic heroes to the big screen can hardly be considered an original idea, it certainly seems as though the comics are entering a renaissance period in terms of commercial interest.



Superheroes on the screen. Above left: The Amazing Spider-Man as portrayed by Nicholas Hammond. Above: Captain Marvel from the American TV series *Shazam* as yet unseen in this country. Below left: Lou Ferrigno in *The Incredible Hulk*. Below: Peter Van Hooten as *Dr. Strange*, which was aired recently on *Anglia TV*.