

PREVIEW

# POPEYE

Tony Crawley reports on

Robin (Mork) Williams' movie debut as... Popeye the Sailor-Man.

**T**he curtain of total secrecy — a literal security-blanket, in fact — about the Popeye filming, currently over-schedule in Malta, is finally beginning to lift. Just the odd smidgen half-inch or two. And we've got the first news... and the first colour rendition of Robin Williams morking his big screen starring debut as E.C. Segar's muscular sailor-man.

He certainly doesn't much resemble Mork from *Ork* anymore. Will you look at those forearms...!

The film — a musical-comedy, it says here; script by Jules Feiffer, music from Harry Nilsson — ended up, just before shooting, as a combined Walt Disney and Paramount co-production. So is the new fantasy film, *The Dragon Slayer*. Many are the top Hollywood studios and film-makers now knocking on the Disney door for co-producing deals... since the Disney company is literally rolling in the greenstuff via the vast takings daily at Disneyland in California and Disneyworld in Florida.

Putting *Popeye* on film — with live-action, not animation — is the idea of the former Paramount production chief, Robert Evans. It's the sixth project for the sometime actor, disc-jockey and gents' clothier. He turned producer in his own right with the highly successful Polanski film, *Chinatown*, in 1974.

Since the comparative failure of his fourth film, *Players* — "not only a disappointment but a disaster on every level" — Bob Evans is in need of a hit. First report of Robin as Popeye seems to assure just that. Plus Evans' inspired choice of director, M\*A\*S\*H and *Nashville* man, Robert Altman.

There is, in fact, as many Altman regulars in the movie as there are Italians helping to make it. The cinematographer is Fellini's favourite, Giuseppe Rotunno... Well, Italy is close to Malta. But why Malta, I hear you cry? Me, too.

The reason (not always so simple) is that the movie needed water and a village. Malta usually supplies water-sequences. The always-in-demand tank has been used in scores of British and American movies — *Warlords of Atlantis*, for example. This time, the little island country supplies everything, including housing for a cast and crew of almost 300 people.

Director Altman is a great believer in ensemble casting, and has his own semi-regular company of players that stay with him in most

of his movies. A goodly bunch of them are on hand in Malta.

Almost as inevitable casting as Williams in the lead role, is Shelley Duval as Olive Oyl. In more than one review of her films (eight with Altman, alone), she has been referred to as an Olive lookalike. And while she was shooting Kubrick's version of Stephen King's *The Shining* with Jack Nicholson in London, Altman called her and told her: "I've got you the role you were born to play..." Shelley didn't have to ask which that was.

It was Altman's casting man who discovered Shelley for his *Brewster McCLOUD* film, in 1970. "How'd you like to be in a movie?" she was asked. "Oh, I'm not an actress," she replied. "Yes, you are... yes, you are." And now she is, with Cannes and other festival awards for films like *Three Women*, *Thieves Like Us*, *Nashville* and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*. Once *Popeye* is in the can, she's kicking into her first venture as an associate producer, with her movie of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. A fun girl is Shell! She says she lives "in Beverly Hills or in the hills or on a hill in Beverly Hills."

The man we loved to hate in *Midnight Express*, Paul L. Smith, is the great casting for the bearded bully, Bluto — all 320 lbs and 6ft 4ins of him — not to mention his 72% inch



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neck and size 12 shoes. Almost unknown to Hollywood until playing that sadistic Turkish jailer, Smith has spent 15 of the last 20 years filming in Israel, Spain, Germany, Italy and France — and of course, Malta before for *Midnight Express*. In Italy he made five thud 'n' blunder, knock 'em/shock 'em actioners about a gentle hero — and suggested the series' stunt man Robert Massino, from *Casablanca*, as *Popeye*'s stunt co-ordinator.

"Actually, despite what people think, it was *Midnight Express* that got me the Bluto role," says Paul. "Bob Altman saw the trailers for those five action films... and Bob Evans fell for me after a clip of me carrying a horse!"

Paul Dooley, is Wimpy — he's as much a part of Altman's rep of strolling players as of Jules Feiffer. Altman saw him first in the off-Broadway version of Feiffer's play, *Hold Me*, and he also starred in Feiffer's *The White House Murder Case*. Before turning to acting, he'd wanted to be a cartoonist — and in fact, co-scripted his last Altman movie, *Health*.

But I nearly forgot *Sweet 'pea*, the baby winning the hearts of *Popeye*, Olive Oyl, and yea verily, even the stone-cold heart of brutish Bluto. *Sweet 'pea* is eight months old. Difficult to cast? Not for Altman. His grandson was born just at the right time and has been making a great impression — usually with a hammer in his hand — in the Malta shooting.

But centre of attraction on and off the film set, as he spends his tele-hiatus with the film break of his young life, is, naturally, Robin Williams. The man who introduced "shazbot" and "Na-no Na-no" to an estimated 55,000,000 people following each week of its spaced-out fast-speed *Orkian* philosopher, has conquered television since *Mork* and *Mindy* first aired in September, 1978. Last June, he conquered discs with his first comedy album, *Reality... What a Concept*, which has rapidly gone Platinum, as they say. He has furthermore conquered stage in such comedy clubs around LA as the *Comedy Store*, not to mention his New York gigs. And now he's all set to take over movies. Bob Altman is entranced with the maniacal guy. So is Malta, which has not yet become a victim of Mork. Come Oscar night, 1980, or so they insist on Malta, there's one 'only favourite for the big award. As long as he keeps eating his spinach.

Robin, quite plainly, doesn't want the filming to stop. He's having a ball. In typical Altman fashion, the director has Robin's wife, dancer-choreographer Valerie Velardi, in a small role. And that's not just looking after the top star. Paul Smith's girlfriend, actress Eve Knoller, is among the *Sweetheaven* townspeople... so is MacIntyre Dixon's actress wife, and their young son. Altman believes a contented cast and crew is the best way to make a happy film. And from all reports, *Popeye* is looking not just good, but great. Now all Bob Evans has to do is persuade them to stop getting a good time, quit shooting... and go off the island, before he has to buy the entire country.



Above: Paul Dooley, a regular performer with the Altman troupe, does an excellent impression of Wimpy, the hamburger king. Right: The man himself! Robin Williams in the title role... Popeye the Sailor-Man. Below right: A family portrait. Popeye (Robin Williams), baby Swee'pea (Wesley Ivan Hurt) and Olive Oyl (Shelley Duvall). Below: The villain of the piece, Bluto, is played (with panache) by Paul L. Smith.

