

The question has been asked at just about every interview Paul De Meo and Danny Bilson have done. Is *The Flash* on a suicide mission? Can a guy in a one-piece red suit who moves faster than greased lightning overcome the unbelievable wholesomeness of Bill Cosby and family or the biting, cynical hilarity of Bart Simpson and folks?

Well? Can he?

"We're in a very tough spot," admits De Meo, referring to the television bloodbath shaping up for Thursdays at 8 p.m. "We're going up against a couple of shows that have very big audiences. Obviously, it's not the ideal position for our show to be in. But I think we're certainly strong enough to be fighting it out in that slot."

They're preparing to make fast work of a comic book hero:

Night of the Scarlet Speedster

BY MARC SHAPIRO

Helping The Flash See Red

Bob Short wasn't being asked to costume Santa Claus. But the man with the special effects touch was definitely looking for a Christmas miracle when he was picked to create the costume for the *Flash* TV series.

"I was frightened by the fact that the Flash, in the comic books, looked like nothing more than a well-built guy in a red suit," says Short, the *Beetlejuice* veteran who recently created what he calls "a creature effect" for the Arnold Schwarzenegger comedy *Kindergarten Cop* and the hardware for the new syndicated series *Super Force*. "I thought to myself, 'What else can I bring to it? What can I bring to this party?'"

Short wasn't encouraged by the number of costumed superheroes who had already made the transition from four-color flatdom to the more three-dimensional surroundings of film and television.

"Unlike a Batman or Superman, who have things like ears and cape lengths that can be played around with," he comments, "with the Flash, you basically have a guy who looks like he has been painted red. My initial reaction was that I had *nothing* to work with."

Short met with *Flash* executive producers Danny Bilson and Paul De Meo. They made it clear that they wanted a costume with a sinister tone to it, that it shouldn't look like a guy in tights, and, most importantly, it should look like a make-up effect rather than a costume technique.

Encouraged by this blueprint and the costume design work of comics artist Dave Stevens, Short went back to his shop, did a little experimenting and came up with a 10-pound wonder.

"We covered John [actor John Wesley Shipp] with a bit of Spandex," explains Short. "Then, we sculpted foam rubber muscles and applied them over the suit on John's real muscles. We then applied a flexible sealer of electrostatic nylon and sprayed that over the foam rubber and Spandex, creating a surface coating that seals the entire outside of the costume and, when filmed, creates the impression of an odd surface texture that makes it hard to figure out what the suit is made of."

Short claims that he also modified the costume's belt and boots and did a subtle redesign on the cowl line to give the Flash more of a scowl.

"Our concept of the costume," elaborates the FX expert, "was to create an impression of the muscles being on the inside of the suit. We think we've accomplished that by sculpting slightly exaggerated replicas of John's muscles, applying them to his own muscles and giving the impression of actual movement during the action sequences. Some of the construction of this suit is the same kind of stuff that was done with the Batman outfit, but we feel we've given it a more coherent, one-piece look which is the look that the Flash has in the comics."

Short, who read *The Flash* while growing up, feels satisfied that he has helped the scarlet speedster zoom onto television with his comic book roots intact.

"It remains true to the comic book and manages to come across with that *Batman* [movie] look," Bob Short notes. "And I would say that's quite an accomplishment, considering we started out with just your basic superhero in a red suit."

—Marc Shapiro



A long way from an executive's idea to have the Flash run around in a sweatsuit, the costume, designed by Bob Short (far left), is an extension of the actor's body. Here (1), project supervisor Doug Turner and Rikelle Kerr detail the gloves and belts. (2) Turner and Lisa Welton check one of the latex foam leg pieces. These are sealed in electrostatic nylon to give the suit an unusual surface texture. Finally, (3) Dave Atherton airbrushes shading into the outfit to accentuate the muscle tone, completing the scarlet speedster's new "sinister" look.



Paul De Meo and Danny Bilson, the show's executive producers, are right in the middle of doing all the things that producers of a rookie network series have to do—prepping the two-hour pilot, coordinating scripts, and telling anyone who will listen why *The Flash* will be a force to contend with.

"*The Flash* is going to be intense, dangerous and exciting stuff," says a somewhat-less-restrained Bilson. "We've taken the traditional elements of the comic book and are telling it in a very straight manner. We felt that to play *The Flash* the way comic book characters have been portrayed on television in the past would have been stupid. But when Barry Allen gets hit by lightning, goes flying across the room, smashes into furniture and crashes unconscious to the floor, people may feel uncomfortable. But they definitely *won't* be laughing."

TV's *Flash* (whose comic hero counterpart is celebrating half-a-century on the page this year) had its origin in a two-year-old, unproduced De Meo/Bilson script called *Unlimited Powers*. This failed pilot, set sometime in the future, brought the offspring of the Flash and Green Arrow together with Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's mystical hero Dr. Occult and Legion of Super-Heroes member Blok in order to fight for justice in a world where that very action will brand them criminals.

"It was a great idea," laments Bilson, "but it was just too much for television."

"But," continues De Meo, "when Jeff Sagansky [CBS President of Entertainment] took over, he decided he liked the idea of developing a series using an individual character and so we decided to do *The Flash*."

The two-hour *Flash* movie, written by Bilson and De Meo, focuses on police chemist Barry Allen who, as in comic book legend, becomes the Flash when struck by lightning while experimenting with unknown chemicals. While Allen's metabolism shifts into hyper-speed, a gang of motorcycle urban terrorists, led by the psychotic Pike, plots the total destruction of Central City and its police force. When Allen's brother, also a cop, is killed by the gang, the combination of what has happened to him and his brother's death propels Barry Allen into becoming the crime-fighting Flash.

John Wesley Shipp portrays the Flash/Barry Allen. His long-suffering girl friend Iris, who the producers say will drift in and out of Barry's life, is played by Paula Marshall. Amanda (Max Headroom) Pays (STARLOG #140) will portray scientist Tina McGee and *Blade Runner*'s M. Emmet Walsh is featured as Allen's father.

The *Flash* costume (see sidebar) was created by Robert Short from a Dave (Rocketeer) Stevens design. David Stipes



In a revamping of the superhero's life, John Wesley Shipp zooms into the ratings race as the Barry Allen Flash.

handles the visual FX. Heading up the writing team are two *Alien Nation* alums, Steve Mitchell and Craig Van Sickle, and comic book scribes Howard Chaykin and John Moore.

Quick Thinking

One thing that longtime *Flash* devotees will quickly notice about this prime-time *Flash* is that it appears to play fast and loose with comics lore. For instance, in the comics, Barry Allen has long since been killed off and Iris, whom he married, was also thought dead but now in some kind of protracted limbo. The current Flash, Wally West, who was once Kid Flash, is the boy friend of Tina McGee. Get the picture? Bilson and De Meo do.

"Wally West has always been a little too obnoxious for our tastes," laughs Bilson, "and so, we decided to take the longest-running and most appealing Flash, Barry Allen, and use him."

"I would have to say that the show is a little bit of a hybrid," adds De Meo. "We've essentially based the series on the Barry Allen Flash in the sense that he's this police chemist and this accident gives him his power. But we've played around with some things.

"Iris is around, but she's an artist. We've taken Tina from the Wally West Flash and made her a scientist whom Barry goes to after the accident. We've also taken the unpredictability of the Wally West Flash's power, the need to rest and eat a lot, and given them to Barry Allen. It's a mixture of things, but the character is based on what we consider the classic version of the Flash," explains De Meo.

A direct contrast to the *Batman* TV series, *The Flash* will be even grimmer than its comic book source.

And in line with that classic approach, Bilson claims that viewers shouldn't look "for another *Incredible Hulk*."

"It's not that simple," Bilson says. "There's some humor involved, but this show isn't being played for laughs. There's a lot of danger, violence, death, redemption and everything else. People coming into this expecting to see a variation on the *Batman* TV series or *The Greatest American Hero* are going to be surprised. The stories are very real and the villains are totally bizarre and twisted."

But De Meo warns that said villains, which will include such *Flash* comic bad guys as Weather Wizard, the Trickster and the Pied Piper, will not play in any predictable manner.

"What we've found is that if you give your hero extraordinary powers, you've got to give him villains and situations that will be worthy opponents," De Meo says. "No story or adversary will carry over from the pilot. The Flash will face a different villain or situation every week. But this will *not* be the villain-of-the-week-type situation that *Batman* had.

"We'll be adapting the villains the same way we did Barry Allen. If there's another costumed villain running around the city, there will be a specific reason why he's wearing the costume. And while we're mining the comic books for villains like the Trickster, we're going to be taking our own direction with them. We're toying with the idea of making the Pied Piper a female jazz musician who works in a club in the dirty underbelly of the city. The Trickster is going to be a totally crazy person who escapes from an asylum and who has a definite agenda."

Bilson adds, "It's not like the old *Batman* series where Milton Berle was attempting to be bad. Our villains will be *really* bad. We're also pointing toward using many female villains and a few super-villains with extraordinary powers."

Some other specifics, the producers confess, have had to be dealt with as well. The Flash's distinctive red suit, in particular, strikes at Bilson's funny-bone.

"The Flash has been around for 50 years [the Barry Allen Flash for nearly 35], and yet, when it came to designing the suit, we actually had one TV executive suggest that he run around in a *grey sweatsuit*," the co-producer chuckles.

"There have been some *slight* modifications in the basic costume," offers De Meo. "We changed the color of the boots from yellow to red and we've played around ever so slightly with the insignia. We've also added some changes to the cowl to give our Flash a more predatory look. We feel they were important changes because we didn't want to leave

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Art: Mike Collins; Larry Mahliou; Copyright 1991 DC Comics Inc.

Flash

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any doubt in people's minds that our Flash was capable of kicking ass."

And that, recalls De Meo, turned out to be of major consideration in finding the actor to play this superhero.

"We found many people who wanted to do it, but when we showed them a picture of the suit, most didn't have the confidence to even put it on because they felt they would look silly. In John's case, we got real lucky in that not only was he physically the type of person we were looking for, but he was also real enthusiastic about the role."

De Meo, in talking about the suit, explains that as tempting as it was, they decided to skip the old comic book concept of having the Flash costume unfold out of Barry Allen's ring.

"It would have been fun to do, but it would have stretched the sense of reality we're trying to achieve. We feel his carrying the suit folded up in an aluminum briefcase will serve our purpose."

De Meo touches on the subject of the Flash's home base, Central City, and the fact that, while there are some similarities to *Batman's* Gotham City, "it won't be quite as extreme. We're not using many matte paintings and things like that. Our Central City has the look of a slightly altered reality. It's neon lit with a lot of art deco facades. There's a definite film noir look to what we're doing."

All things being equal, *The Flash* seems like a good idea, but it remains to be seen why the Flash should be given his own TV series as opposed to, say, such SF comic heroes as Tommy Tomorrow or J'Onn J'Onzz, the Martian Manhunter.

"Doing the Flash is a good idea at this point in time," says De Meo, "because we have the technology to present the character the way he is presented in the comics. We can show the blurring speed images. We can also show another side of Barry Allen besides his crime fighting, that his normal life happens to include cleaning his apartment in a matter of seconds or running to New Jersey in a couple of minutes. This is something a '90s audience can see and get involved in."

Once again, the question is broached about *The Flash's* realistic chances in a superstar Thursday night battle.

Bilson takes his shot after betting that *The Flash* will ultimately wind up with an 8:30 start time.

"First off, I think *The Simpsons* are going to knock off *Cosby*," he remarks. "But after *The Simpsons*, if you've got the choice of watching that Fox show about three fat women living together [*Babes*], the second half of *Father Dowling Mysteries*, *A Different World* or the biggest, most exciting action show of the past 20 years, which one are you going to watch?"

"Certainly, it isn't going to be the second half of *Father Dowling*." ★

