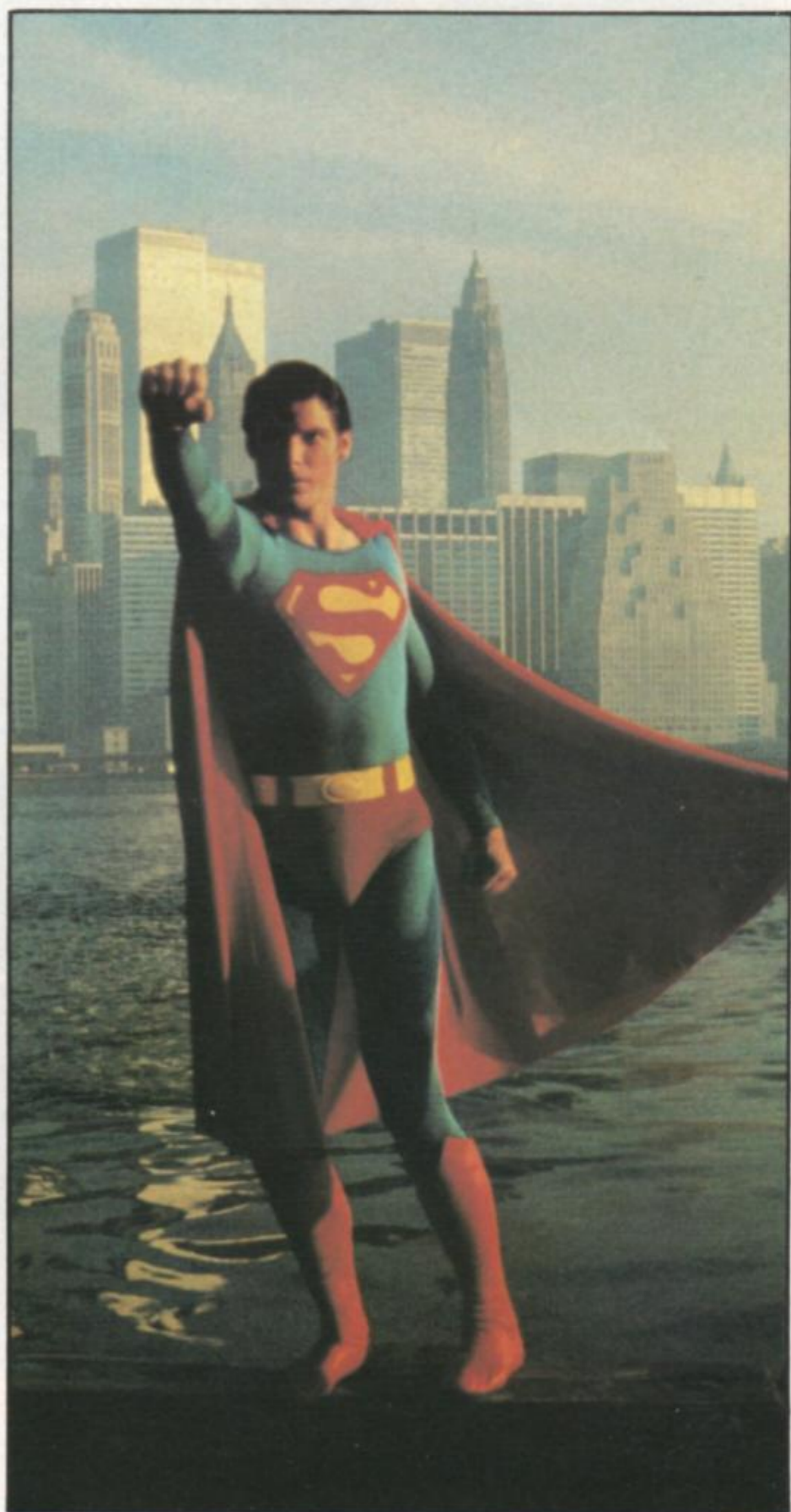
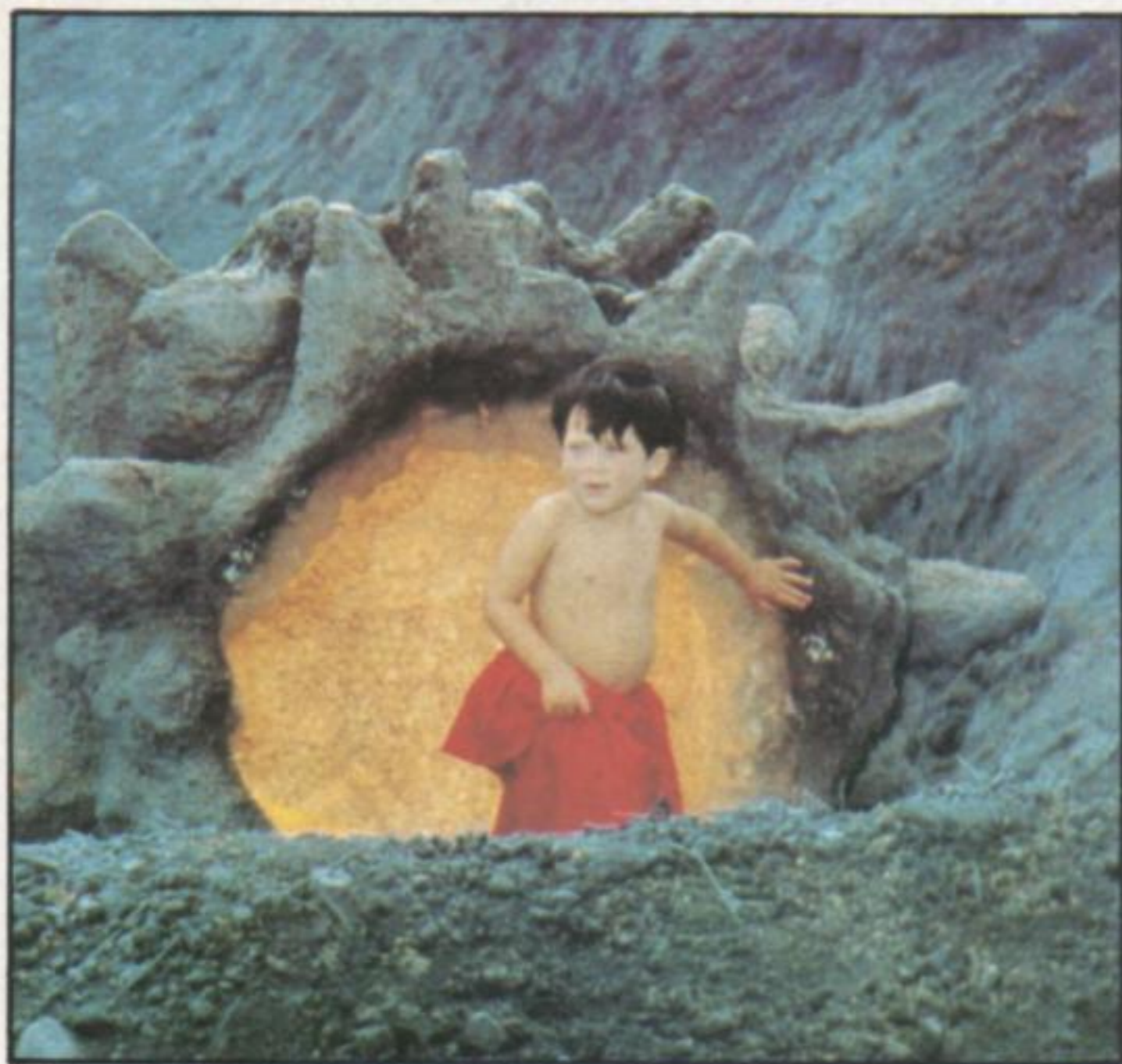


# SUPERMAN THE MOVIE



With *Superman: The Movie* set for a December 15th London release, David Castell, editor of *Films Illustrated* and former presenter of BBC tv's cinema showcase programme *Film Night*, takes a look at the progress of the movie from the initial concept to the completed film.

In 1933, the fourth year of the Great American Depression. A dreamy teenager named Jerry Siegel wiled away a hot, summer night thinking up a character for a story he was toying with. The next morning he took his idea to a close friend, Joe Shuster, an aspiring cartoonist. Between them they thrashed out the details. Their hero would be "like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men we have ever heard of, all rolled into one," said Siegel. "Only more so," added Shuster. They called him *Superman*.

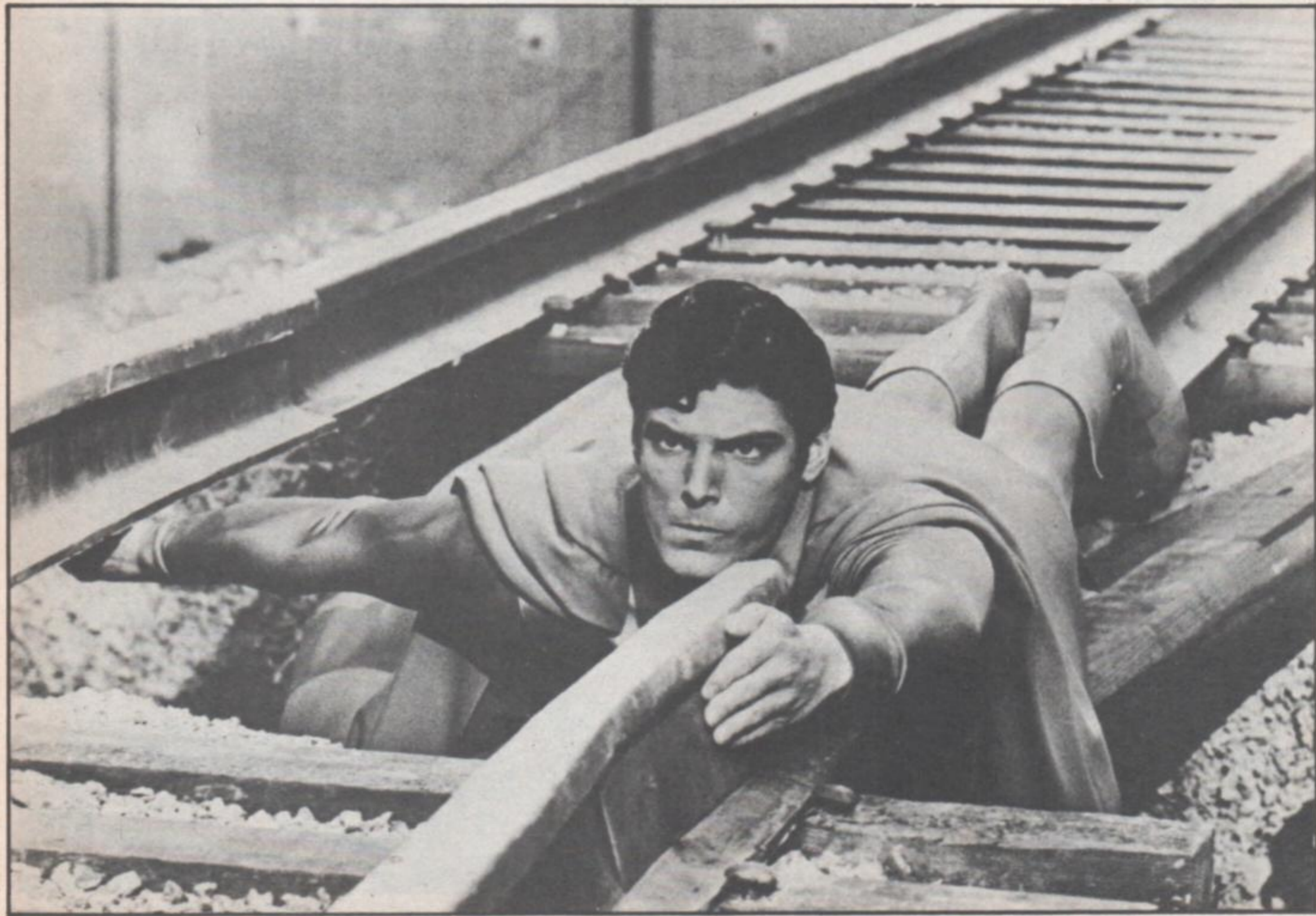
Forty-five years later, the Man of Steel was being born again, for *Superman: The Movie*. Not so casual this time, for the interim years had built a detailed mythology around Superman. He had become one of the most durable of the American legends, outlasting Betty Grable, outselling the Bible. During World War II, *Superman* was standard issue in GI duffle bags. Goebbels attacked him publicly as being "a Jew-monger". He had been the central figure in *Action Comics*; in a syndicated newspaper strip; in a serialised radio programme from 1940 onwards; in three years of Paramount cartoons from 1941.

The following year, George Lowther presented him in novel form. *The Adventures of Superman* television programme started in America in 1954, more animated cartoons in the '60s and a Broadway musical in 1966. The guy got around.

You might think that the decision to make a major movie would have been a momentous one, taken with cigar-belching enthusiasm around a Hollywood boardroom table. Wrong. It was in May 1974, in a sidewalk Paris cafe that producer Alexander Salkind turned to his son, Ilya, and family friend, Pierre Spengler, both in their twenties, are asked what they were going to do next. The trio had just had a resounding success with *The Three Musketeers* and were delighted to have its sequel, as well as *The Prince and the Pauper* in the pipeline. "What next? What about *Superman*?" asked Ilya. Alexander had never heard of him, but his son described the incredible feats of the Man of Steel in a way that excited the older man's imagination. "It would have to be big. . ." he mused, suggesting that he go to his backers and see if the idea tickled their fancy. Indeed it did. They wanted star names, the best special

effects and agreed to a big budget. The sky was the limit. Would \$25,000,000 be enough? Spengler and Salkind Jr swallowed hard. Yes, they said, that would be enough. Wrong again. *Superman: The Movie* ultimately burst its financial banks to the tune of an *additional* \$40,000,000. The start date was put back and back. And once the cameras rolled, as late as March 1977, the thirty-week schedule stretched to sixty-five.

The gestation period was elephantine. Pierre Spengler negotiated the rights with DC Comics. The Salkinds were unknown to the publishers so all manner of things were written into the contract. Among the clauses was one agreeing that the film would not be a send-up, another that it would not be pornographic (not so bizarre a condition when you think of the fairy tales and children's classics that have lately been revamped into soft-core sex material). Spengler's business nose told him that they were sitting on a veritable goldmine—not a single film, but a *Bond*-like series that could last a decade and hinge on four central characters. They would be Superman himself (and, of course, his earthly



Grimly determined, the Man of Steel (Christopher Reeve) braces himself to bridge a gap in a railway line with his own body.

alias of newspaperman Clark Kent); Lois Lane, the girl reporter who is secretly in love with Superman, but has little time for the gauche Kent; newspaper editor Perry White; and the cub photographer, Jimmy Olsen.

Scripts come before casting, so the Salkinds set out to woo Mario Puzo, then red hot after the success of *The Godfather*. Eager to get away from the connection with violent drama and organised crime, Puzo agreed. Eleven months after the first Paris dinner conversation, they took the idea to the Cannes Film Festival, the great market place of the movie industry. Every hour, on the hour, an airplane circled the bay. Behind it trailed a banner that was to become a legend at Cannes. That year it read: "Superman, Salkind, Puzo". Twelve months to the day, the plane flew again. This time the banner read: "Superman, Salkind, Hamilton". Guy Hamilton was a well-known director who had made a colossal impact with such James Bond films as *Goldfinger*, *Diamonds Are Forever* and *Live and Let Die*. Hamilton wasn't enamoured of Puzo's script. He thought it would make a good novel, but not a great movie. So in came David and Leslie Newman with Robert Benton, the team that had been involved in the Broadway musical *It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman!* Work got underway at the huge



Cinecitta Studios in Rome. Production designs were approved, sets constructed, costumes assembled. The millions began to pump away like life's blood.

Time enough now, they said, to start worrying about the cast. There was already concern on the part of the money-men (and the film industry moguls who had shown keen enthusiasm at Cannes) over the delays.

After all, many producers had gone away and finished whole films in the time that *Superman* had taken to find a director. And, where money-men are concerned, stars are insurance policies. There began a bizarre hunt (against Ilya Salkind's better judgment) for a big name to play the Man of Steel. Top athletes and footballers were considered, along with Burt Reynolds, James Caan and Robert Redford. Some were turned down by the Salkinds, some got their "no" in first. Then, by one of those quirks of fate for which the production was overdue, Salkind heard that Marlon Brando was preparing to leave his Pacific hideaway island and come into the market place to earn a little money—well, a few million anyway.

The paunchy, ageing superstar was clearly no Superman, but some swift revisions built up the role of Jor-El, Superman's scientist father from the planet Krypton. For a fee in excess of \$4,000,000 and 11.3 per cent of the eventual profits, Brando could be counted in. Superman could be up, up and away. Twelve days work, but he didn't want to do them in Rome, as there was a suspended prison sentence hanging over him after charges brought there against the controversial *Last Tango in Paris*.

A move abroad (it had to be England and the biggest stage in the world, built



*Mishap in the Planet office, Superman, in his secret identity of mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent, runs up the dry-cleaning bills with Daily Planet co-workers Lois Lane (Margot Kidder) and Perry White (Jackie Cooper).*



*Come fly with me. Superman (Christopher Reeve) and Lois Lane (Margot Kidder) take a spin round the stratosphere.*

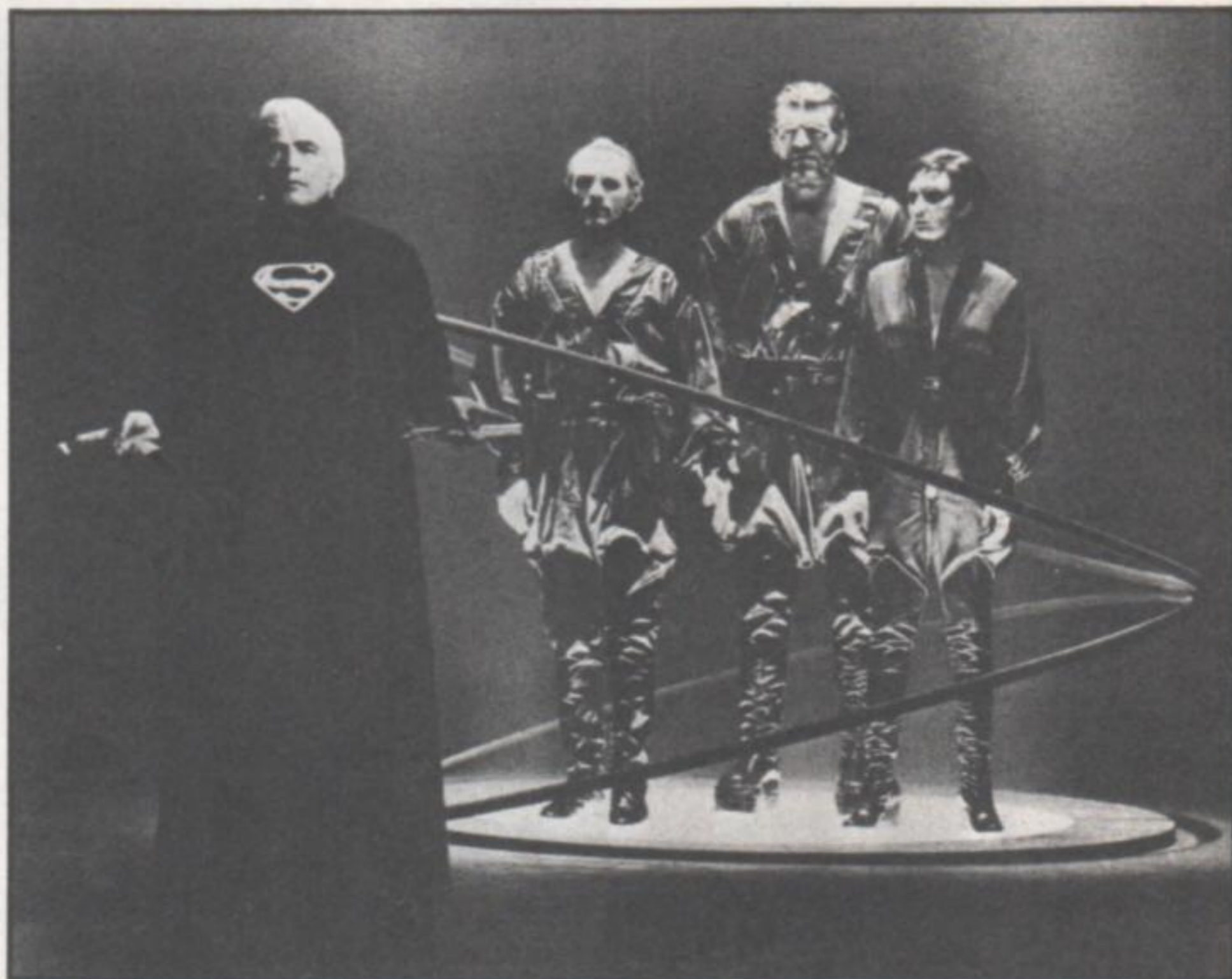
specifically for *The Spy Who Loved Me*) would ensure Brando, but it would lose Guy Hamilton whose tax position would not allow him to work in Britain for the necessary length of time. Brando won out. Hamilton quit the project, all the Cinecitta work was scrapped and an American director, Richard Donner of *The Omen* fame, took the helm of what was threatening to turn into the *Marie Celeste* of movies.

Casting was now coming together nicely. Gene Hackman was the evil Lex Luthor, Ned Beatty his dim-witted assistant and Valerie Perrine his seductive lady-friend. Glenn Ford and Phyllis Thaxter were to play the couple who adopt the infant Superman when he arrives from Krypton. Terence Stamp, Sarah Douglas and Jack O'Halloran were to play the three villains from Krypton. Canadian actress Margot Kidder had landed the choice role of Lois Lane, Marc McClure was set as Jimmy Olsen, Jackie Cooper as editor Perry White. Still no Superman? Well, some things take time. Only it was now nearly three years since the idea was hatched.

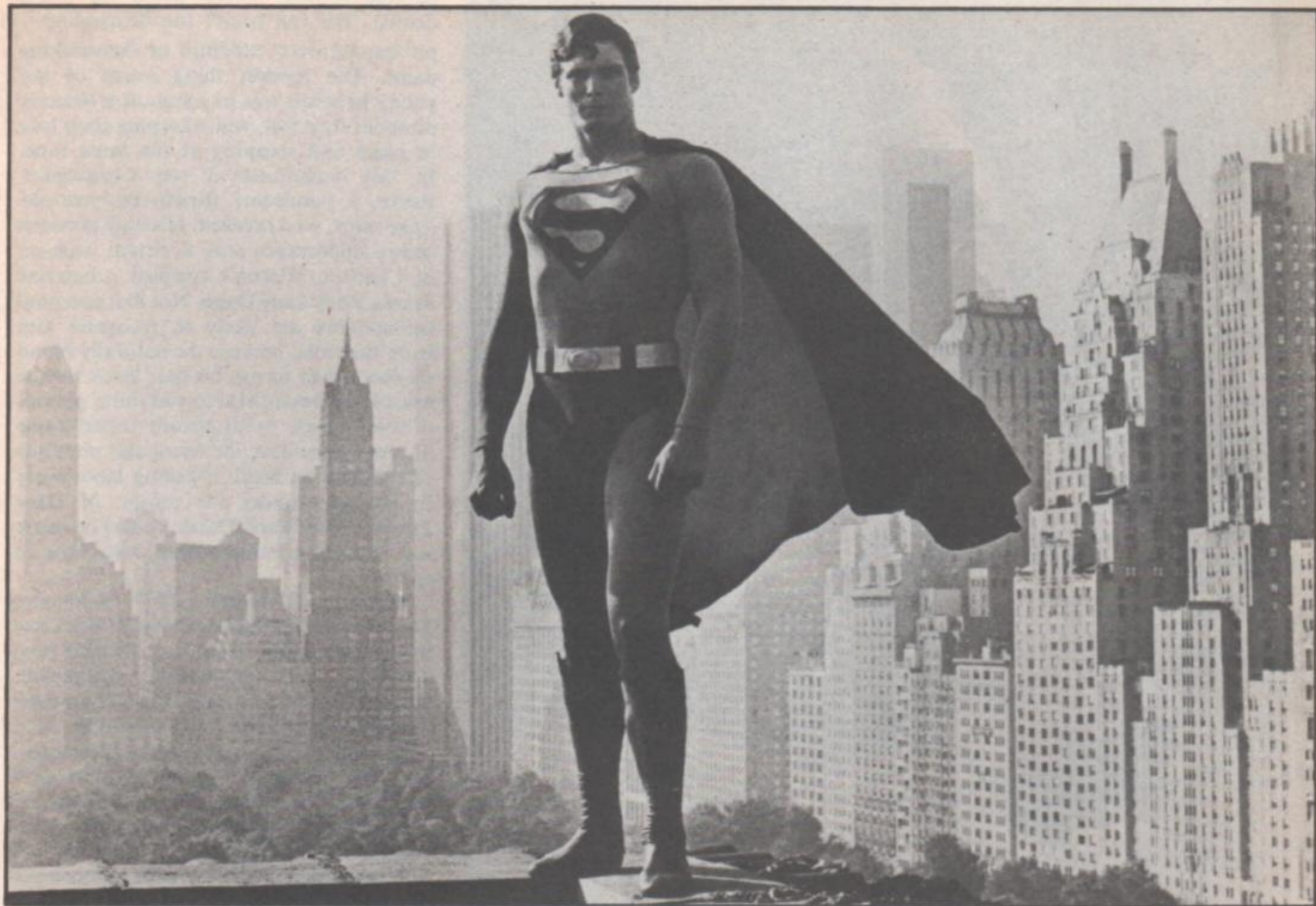
The whole air fare row could well have been triggered by the traffic of hopefuls jetting in and crestfallen rejects flying out. And, yes, it is true that at one point Ilya

Salkind actually screen tested his wife's dentist. The test wasn't too demanding—no leaping over buildings or demolishing dams. The hardest thing asked of the young hopefuls was to jump off a balcony of about four feet, while keeping their hair in place and speaking at the same time. In this department it was Christopher Reeve, a handsome twenty-four-year-old stage actor, who excelled. His only previous screen appearance was a virtual walk-on in Charlton Heston's crippled submarine drama, *Gray Lady Down*. Not that potential star-spotters are likely to recognise him from that role, because the naturally blond six-footer had to dye his hair black for the role of Superman, also to add thirty pounds of solid muscle to his already broad frame in order to achieve the triangular physique of the Man of Steel. Working laboriously in the gym under the tuition of Dave Prowse (*Star Wars*' Darth Vader) he made the physical transformation with time to spare.

Monday 28 March, 1977. 8.30 am. Donner and a hundred-strong British crew made last-minute adjustment to their sets, costumes and Panavision equipment. Brando, wearing a heavy wig and an even heavier black cloak, sat dejectedly in a corner clutching an outsize box of Kleenex. He had arrived at London Airport with jet-lag and a heavy cold and made his usual curt announcements to the press. He was not interested in this film, he had said. He was doing it solely to raise money to support and aid the American Indians. The earth, which had trembled in anticipation of his arrival, now moved again. The temperature on the set, even at that early



*Jor-El (Marlon Brando), father of Superman, sentences three Kryptonian criminals (Terence Stamp, Jack O'Halloran and Sarah Douglas) to imprisonment in the Phantom Zone.*



*Superman, Earth's mightiest hero, stands vigilant over the Metropolis skyline.*

hour, was 105 degrees. Brando, clearly unwell and imprisoned inside a thirty-pound costume, had a ten-minute monologue as his first scene. They got it on the first take, Brando reading his lines off cue cards. Everyone relaxed just a little.

The schedule (planned for seven months) was bisected by eight weeks on location in North America, New York City and Niagara Falls. The British aspect of the production, begun at Shepperton, moved into Pinewood and the massive 007 set on its return from location. The vast stage now housed The Fortress of Solitude, Superman's Arctic hideaway and probably the most spectacular single set in John Barry's production design.

By now **Superman** was forging ahead; not ahead of schedule (it was already behind), but at least ahead of budget. Plans for an autumn completion and a spring delivery to the distributors had to be abandoned. So, too, did any ideas of a summer 1978 release. On the day the movie was originally scheduled to have opened in cinemas across the country, a group of concerned technicians were still fretting over the niceties of the flying sequences. A decision had to be made—and fast.

Alexander Salkind listened to all the arguments like a seasoned, unflappable professional. Then he went to his backers with the news that made even the gnomes

of Zurich blanch. **Superman** needed those most costly of cinematic commodities—more time and more money. Even at that point, they could have hurried, cut corners, compromised on quality. But the credo of "Do it big and do it right" which had become the company's watchword, was to



*Superman's arch-nemesis, Lex Luthor, is played by Gene Hackman.*

be observed even in this extreme situation. The budget stood in excess of \$65,000,000.

Much of that money had gone into the effects side of the film. There is hardly a set that someone doesn't smash into or crash out of. There is virtually ten times as much trickery as in any of the Bond films, demands that have taxed the patience and the imagination of people like production designer John Barry, make-up wizard Stuart Freeborn and the two men in charge of special effects, Roy Field (opticals) and Colin Chilvers (mechanicals). But what exactly, at the end of the longest day, have they got for their money?

The rights to *Superman* sewn up for all time. A two-hour movie. 80 per cent of **Superman 2**. Options on the four main players (Reeve, Kidder, Cooper and McClure) for further pictures. The possibility of a series that could stretch on for ten or twelve years. Guarantees? No such thing in the film business. The stakes may be the highest ever in world film production but, as Pierre Spengler so rightly says, it's still all down to a roll of the dice.

