

“Superman: The Movie” (1978)

By Chuck Koplinski



“You will believe a man can fly.”

So promised the movie poster for Warner Brothers’ “Superman: The Movie” an audacious claim producers Ilya and Alexander Salkind had yet to figure out just how to achieve. Yet, this cart-before-the-horse approach was exactly what was needed to complete this then unprecedented Hollywood production. From the start, the Salkinds made no small plans, their seemingly bottomless pockets attracting A-List talent to a risky project, while exuding confidence that throwing money at any problem that came their way would result in a solution. And while this method taxed many on the production team and led to an acrimonious split with the film’s director Richard Donner, the astounding \$300 million brought in at the box office – against a \$55 million budget - and the critical success of the movie seemed to justify their approach.

The Salkinds, Mexican film producers, secured the rights to the Man of Steel from D.C. Comics in 1974 and quickly showed they weren’t afraid to spend big bucks to attract the biggest names in the industry to help them in their quixotic endeavor. Mario Puzo was paid \$600,000 to pen the screenplay, while Francis Ford-Coppola, William Friedkin, Sam Peckinpah(?) and George Lucas, among others, were approached to direct. Previous commitments or a reticence to tackle the material prompted them all to pass before Richard Donner, coming off his success with “The Omen,” was hired to helm the film and its sequel simultaneously. The Salkinds were nothing if not optimistic.

Finding an A-list star to don the iconic big red “S” proved equally challenging. Seemingly every actor with a pulse was approached or considered, the producers obviously looking for a big name in which to sell the film, regardless of if they were right for the titular role or not. The mind boggles at the notion of James Caan, Lyle Waggoner, Christopher Walken or Nick Nolte as the Last Son of Krypton. All were offered the part and all, thankfully turned it down or were ultimately deemed inappropriate.

Instead, the Salkinds placed their bets on Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, casting them as Superman's father Jor-El and his arch enemy Lex Luthor, respectively. The thinking was these names

were big enough for them to sell the film overseas, a gamble that cost them an initial outlay of \$5.7 million combined. Brando's profit-participation deal ultimately netted him a total of \$19 million for a mere 12 days of work.

And while their contributions were significant, the success of the film hinged on the work of Christopher Reeve. A relative unknown, his most important work up until that point was in the Broadway play "A Matter of Gravity" with Katherine Hepburn and a recurring role on the soap opera "Love of Life." One among hundreds of unknowns considered, he impressed Donner during his audition, though he refused to wear a muscle suit while filming it. Trained by bodybuilder and future Darth Vader David Prowse, the 188-pound, 6 ft 4 in actor bulked up to 212 pounds of lean muscle. While the realism provided by his physical transformation was important to bringing the hero convincingly to life, more importantly was Reeve's approach to the dramatic demands of the role. Basing his portrayal of Clark Kent on Cary Grant's performance in "Bringing Up Baby," for Superman he brought a sense of sincerity and gravitas to the role that made a comic book character – an alien no less – relatable.

And while the cast – filled out by Margot Kidder as Lois Lane, Jackie Cooper as Perry White, Glenn Ford as Pa Kent and Valerie Perrine, Ned Beatty, Susannah York, as well as Trevor Howard in key roles – proved to be a relatively easy thing to assemble, the special effects necessary to make the poster's claim a reality, proved vexing. Groundbreaking technology was invented, while cutting-edge techniques were coupled with old-school effects to create the illusion that, indeed, a man could fly. Wire riggings and blue screen effects were used while Zoran Perisic invented what was to become known as the Zoptic System. This employed separate lenses on the film camera and projector that were simultaneously zooming in and zooming out to create a sense of the background receding, as Superman flew closer. Compare this to a 55-gallon drum being filled with gasoline, set on fire and photographed from above, the circular image used as the planet Krypton, and you get the sense that nothing was off the table to bring this story to life.

And while the effects were convincing and the cast gave solid performances across the board, none of that would have mattered if the film didn't have heart or a relatable message. So much of this is due to the contributions of screenwriters Robert Benton and David Newman, who were brought on board to tweak Puzo's script. The appreciation for the grassroots sensibilities of the American people that appear in their work is evident in the Smallville sequences and are invaluable. Though taking up less than 15 minutes of the movie's 143-minute running time, these Norman Rockwell moments provide an emotional and historical foundation the audience could connect with. Images of rolling plains of wheat, and a rustic Kansan farm amidst a soft-focus 1950's aesthetic created an idealized sense of America the audience had been conditioned to long for.

And against this backdrop is told a quintessential American story, that of an immigrant who finds himself in a new world, brimming with possibilities, who reinvents himself to represent the very ideals of his adopted land. Only George Stevens' "Shane" is as unabashed in the mythmaking on display here, Donner tugging at our heartstrings -aided by John Williams' lush score – yet able to deliver a sense of wonder along with a dash of humor to make this concoction go down easy. In a sense, the filmmaker's ability to make us believe in Superman and what he represents in the post-Watergate era, is much more impressive than making us believe he could fly.

Chuck Koplinski has been working as a film critic for over 30 years, writing for various independent newspapers in Illinois and appearing on WCIA-TV weekly to review films. He's offered a wide variety of courses and talks regarding a wide range of cinematic topics through OLLI courses offered in conjunction with the University of Illinois and has been a guest speaker at the Ebertfest film festival. A member of the Chicago Film Critics Association and Critics Choice Association, his reviews can be found at www.reeltalkwithchuckandpam.com. He is currently working on an extended study of "The Island of Lost Souls."