



# THE FIGHT FOR SUPERMAN

STORY JAMES CRISTIE

# IT

**A tale of two Dicks: Richard Donner and Margot Kidder talk exclusively to Hotdog about the Superman II you've never seen**



**B**

ryan Singer is a man under pressure. Responsible for bringing the long, cinematic sabbatical of a revered pop culture icon to an end, the director's shoulders carry the enormous weight of expectation from

moviegoers around the world, not to mention the burden of one of the biggest global marketing onslaughts in history. If the former *X-Men* helmer appears calm, it's likely because of the creative mantra that has guided him throughout the making of *Superman Returns*.

"We're taking off from the first two *Superman* films with Christopher Reeve," unveiled Singer at the start of production in 2005. "He lost his powers in *Superman II* and now he has the powers back." The banishing of screen instalments *III* and *IV* (in which Reeve soared less like Concorde and more like a Bognor Regis Birdman) straight into the Phantom Zone seems to have inspired fresh belief in a property dogged by a series of tortuous and highly expensive false starts for nearly two decades. And with a hefty,

Kryptonian-style shove, it has placed *Superman II* firmly back into the spotlight - making it the official back-story to the movie event of the summer.

Only Superman could have two Dicks. During the controversial making of *Superman II*, he got them. Dick Donner and Dick Lester that is, two highly talented and successful filmmakers whose vastly contrasting styles merged to create the original return of the Man of Steel. It was Donner who had been charged with the heroic task of lensing *Superman* and *Superman II* simultaneously back in 1977, but after budget coffers dried up for the films' financiers, European father-and-son producing team Alexander and Ilya Salkind, shooting was suspended with three-quarters of the epic sequel in the can. When episode *I* made its record-breaking bow in December 1978, Donner stood poised to complete his vision of *II*. Instead, he was duly fired -

a result of his complex and often volatile working relationship with the Salkinds.

Richard Lester, who served as a mediator between the feuding parties on *Superman*, stepped into the directorial vacancy with less of a giant leap, and more of a tentative half step. Ilya Salkind tells us, "Richard was not so excited about comic books. The man

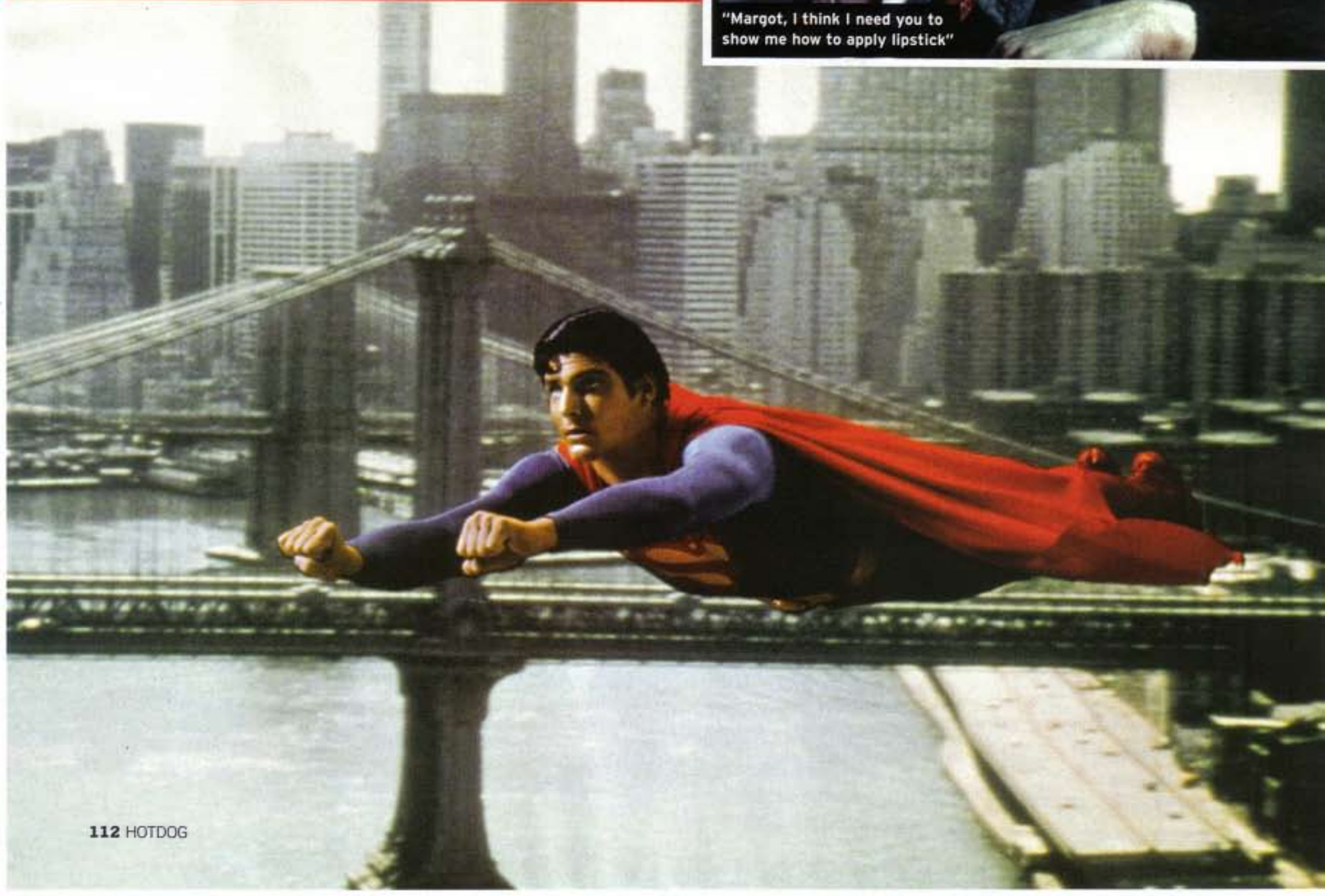


**FACT OF STEEL**

Bizarre as it sounds, Siegel and Shuster's creation was once source material for a musical comedy. It's *A Bird, It's A Plane, It's Superman*, opened on Broadway in 1966, and closed after 128 shows.



"Margot, I think I need you to show me how to apply lipstick"



was resistant, we almost had to convince him to do it."

Lester's metier was observational comedy, his reputation built on films that amplified the funny side of an everyday situation. He had never read a comic. "He is a terrifically talented director," says Tom Mankiewicz, the creative consultant for both pictures, "but this was not his meat and potatoes. To do [*Superman II*] successfully you needed to have that wonderful childlike belief in the myth that Donner had. I don't think Lester believed in Superman." Two films originally intended to be two parts of the same whole would, in the end, bear far more difference than the simple addition of a roman numeral.

**LESTER** recommenced shooting on *Superman II* in July 1979. Even accounting for



"Just because you can bend twigs, doesn't mean you can be in my gang, pal"



the resounding box-office triumph of its predecessor, the Salkinds remained heavily in debt. "We owed money," recalls Ilya. "It was not a nice situation at all... We had creditors."

Monies would need to be recouped during the making of *II*. Alexander Salkind decreed that Marlon Brando, who had starred as Superman's father Jor-El, and whose scenes for the sequel had already been shot, would now not appear in the finished film. Should he feature in a single frame of footage, the actor's financial deal was rumoured to entitle him to 11 percent of domestic theatrical grosses, and 6 percent

Kent as Superman, and cutting an infamous "blank bullets" scene set in a Niagara Falls hotel suite, when the cape is finally lifted on Clark's alter ego. Regardless, significant portions of Donner's work would remain in the finished picture, including all scenes in which Gene Hackman appeared as Lex Luthor.

Recalling the making of *Superman II* is to inspire strong emotions and sharply polarised views. Some, including Kidder, remember a production lensed faster than a speeding bullet. "There were two or three cameras at once and lighting that was quick [to set up]," she offers. "It was just fast and loose, as opposed to the care and love that was in the first *Superman*."

In his capacity as mediator on the original film, Lester accompanied the production on a

**"There were things shot by Donner that we really didn't like much. We used the best stuff he had" — Ilya Salkind**

abroad. Instead, replacement scenes were shot with British actress Susannah York reprising her role as Superman's mum.

In Donner's version of *Superman II*, audiences would have witnessed Jor-El committing suicide in the Fortress of Solitude in order to return his son's super powers. "It was such an effective scene," waxes Mankiewicz. "I've nothing against Susannah York, who's a lovely person and a wonderful actress, but the two scenes don't compare."

For reasons pertaining to personal creativity, Lester chose to make further un-enforced changes, omitting an opening sequence in which Lois Lane (again played by Margot Kidder) leaps from the top of the *Daily Planet* building in an attempt to unveil Clark

location shoot to New York. Mankiewicz remembers, "Dick was shooting in front of the *Daily News* building [which doubled for the *Daily Planet*], and he was trying to think of a shot to do. Lester said to him, I think really trying to be helpful, 'You know, there's a way to do this in one.' Dick said, 'No. There's a way you would do this in one.'"

Even Ilya Salkind concedes that "Richard [Lester] has the brilliance of wanting to shoot faster than what is planned", although he flatly refutes any suggestion that *Superman II* was shot cheaply. "They [the Salkinds] paid us more money on the second one," confirms visual effects photographer Paul Wilson. "Nobody cut our budgets down. If we felt we had to do something a particular way, they ☺"

gave us the time to do it. And time is money."

Still, Lester was not a director who enjoyed filming special effect-based sequences. "He's not the type of person who has the patience or understanding for that kind of technical shoot," says camera operator Peter MacDonald. "I've got a feeling that Richard Lester would have been happy if Superman never came out of the phone box, if he'd just stayed in there as Clark Kent."

Lester was enthusiastic to inject more humour. Whereas Donner had treated his subject matter with wholehearted sincerity and dignified reverence, Lester opted for a lighter tone, even incorporating several trademark sight gags into the movie. "He was very witty and clever, and winking at the audience as he did it," states Kidder. "[His direction was] not as emotionally truthful as Donner's. It came from the head and not the heart."

Even if Lester's approach failed to win over some, upon release *Superman II* proved another huge success. In the eyes of Ilya Salkind, the critical and commercial response was vindication for difficult decisions made. "There were things, frankly, that were shot by Dick [Donner] that we really didn't like that much," he says today. "We used the best stuff he had." Paul Wilson - admittedly a close colleague of Lester's - concurs. "I honestly can't remember something outstanding that I felt was a loss not to put into the picture."

In contrast, Peter MacDonald remembers that, "I was disappointed that so much stuff seemed to be missing that we had shot [during the first film], and I remember being absolutely disgusted that Donner wasn't acknowledged." With all the acerbic subtlety of Simon Cowell, Tom Mankiewicz bluntly offers, "I don't intend to be mean to Richard Lester, but I didn't see anything significant in *Superman II* that I enjoyed that he shot."

**IN 1981**, few would have known of *Superman II*'s controversial origins. Yet thanks to immensely popular websites like [supermancinema.co.uk](http://supermancinema.co.uk), a British site visited by thousands of fans daily, many more are now fully cognisant of its cinematic bastardry. On this and other sites, fans have long campaigned for the unearthing of lost Donner footage, which they believe would offer a more authentic continuation of the tone established by the fondly remembered and highly regarded original film.

First came the online sharing of copies of obscure television airings from Australia and Denmark, which featured limited unseen Donner footage in their broadcasts of *Superman II*. Then there was the ambitious 'Restored International Cut', a fan tribute featuring the same footage, albeit professionally restored and distributed on DVD. It became a bootleg phenomenon. Finally, a group of the most powerful comic book movie webmasters colluded in a bold attempt to rattle the branches of power, writing directly to Warner Home Video president Jim Cardwell to demand an official *Superman II* special edition DVD.

After years of concerted campaigning, the announcement fans had almost given up hope of



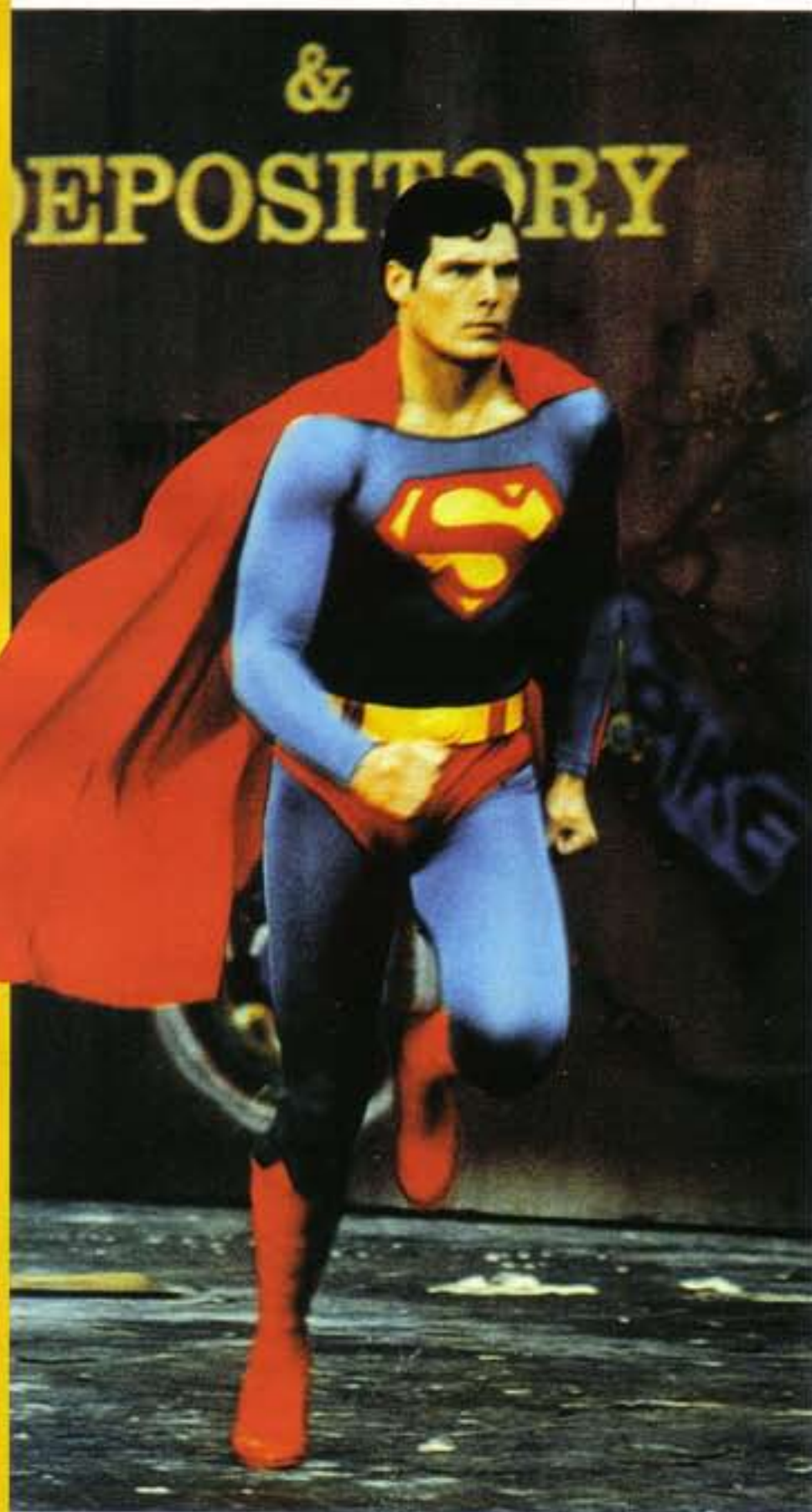
**"This wasn't Lester's you needed that"**

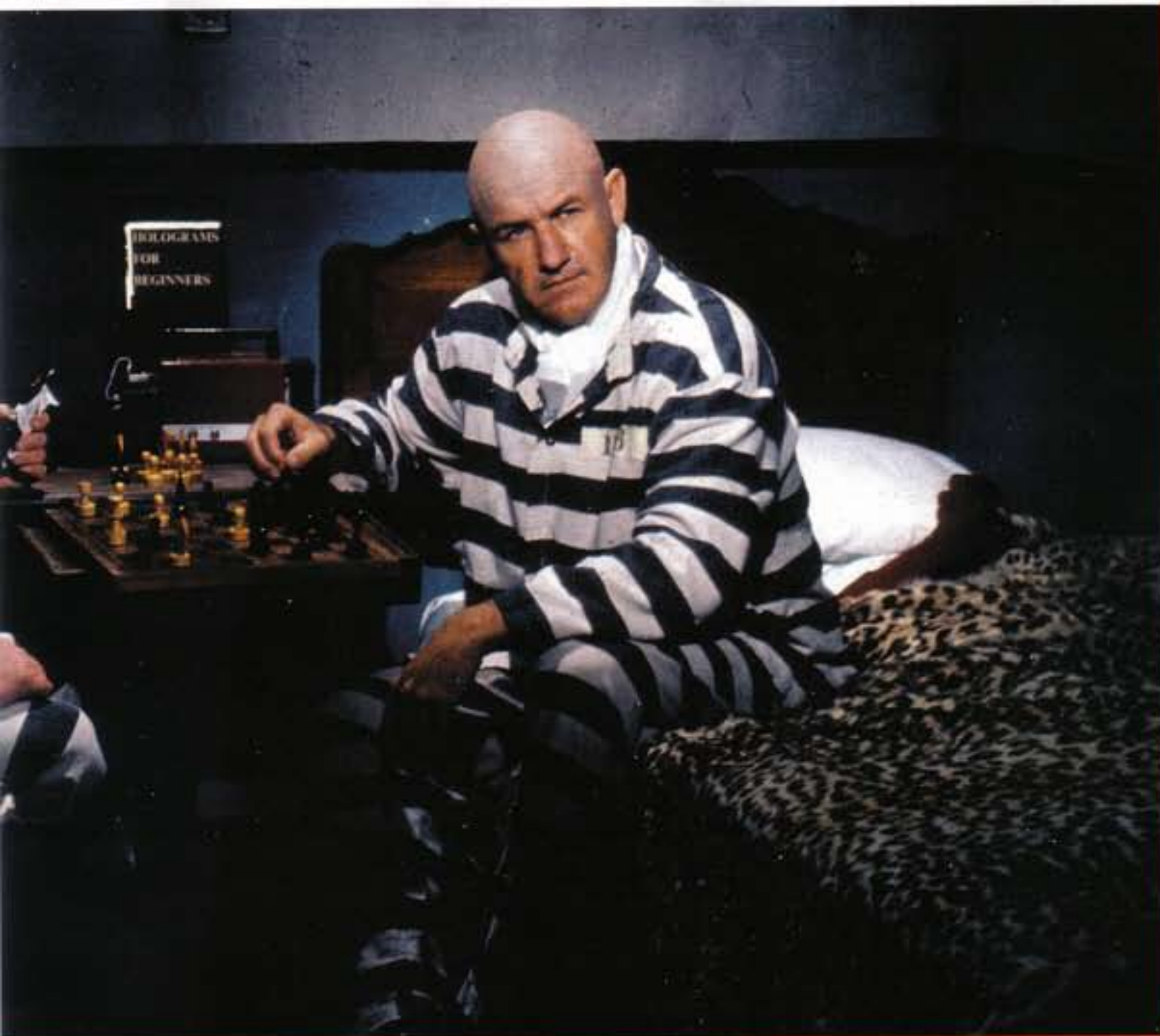
hearing was made toward the end of last year. As part of its 'Year of Superman', Warner Home Video is to release a new version of *Superman II* in November 2006, for which the studio has located all but one of the missing Donner scenes in question. The project is currently being assembled by filmmaker Michael Thau, the man behind the 2001 restoration of *Superman*.

Speaking via telephone from his office in California, Donner confided to *Hotdog* his thoughts regarding the new release of old work. "Honestly, I always felt that if the Salkinds had suppressed and replaced my work with that of the other director, that no one, much less myself, would ever get to see it. I'm thrilled to see it, and actually a little embarrassed. That was many years ago and we've all progressed. I look at the new assemblage and say, 'Boy, was I naïve.' But we all learn and grow, and I'm actually thrilled." Sadly, the one scene that will not make it onto the new DVD is the

**FACT OF STEEL**

Long before everyone knew his name, Cheers' John Ratzenberger appeared in a minor supporting role in *Superman: The Movie* (as did future *Dallas* star Larry Hagman).





**meat and potatoes. To do *Superman II* childlike belief in the myth" – Tom Mankiewicz**

"blank bullets" sequence – Donner's personal favourite. Thau has, however, come up with a unique solution. "The fact that Michael Thau found test footage for both Margot Kidder and Christopher Reeve," continues Donner, "and was able to edit them together as one piece, was gratifying. The public will finally get to see the essence of how Tom Mankiewicz and I approached the reveal of Superman to Lois Lane." Tentatively dubbed 'The Version You Never Saw', this ultimate


PHOTOS © WARNER BROS COURTESY ALLSTAR/MOVIESTORE



"Don't worry dear, one day they'll invent digital cameras"

edition of *Superman II* will feature new special effects, and will be introduced by a title card authored by Donner and Mankiewicz, explaining their overall vision. The pair are also likely to team up for an audio commentary.

Twenty-five years on, *Superman II* remains a powerful and enduring force. The current internet buzz is such that, for many, nothing can usurp the sense of anticipation for its rebirth on DVD – even Bryan Singer's much vaunted and highly publicised new addition to the franchise. Offers the editor-in-chief of [supermancinema.co.uk](http://supermancinema.co.uk): "This isn't just an extended version, it's virtually a new Christopher Reeve film featuring over 75 percent of material which the majority [of people have] never seen! As far as I'm concerned, *Superman Returns* is only the starters. Donner's *Superman II* is the main course, the dessert and the dance."

As we said before, Bryan Singer is a man under pressure. A lot of pressure indeed... 

*The restored cut of Superman II will be released on DVD later this year*

## KNEEL BEFORE ZOD

**HOTDOG PAYS ITS RESPECT TO SUPERMAN'S FINEST FOE**

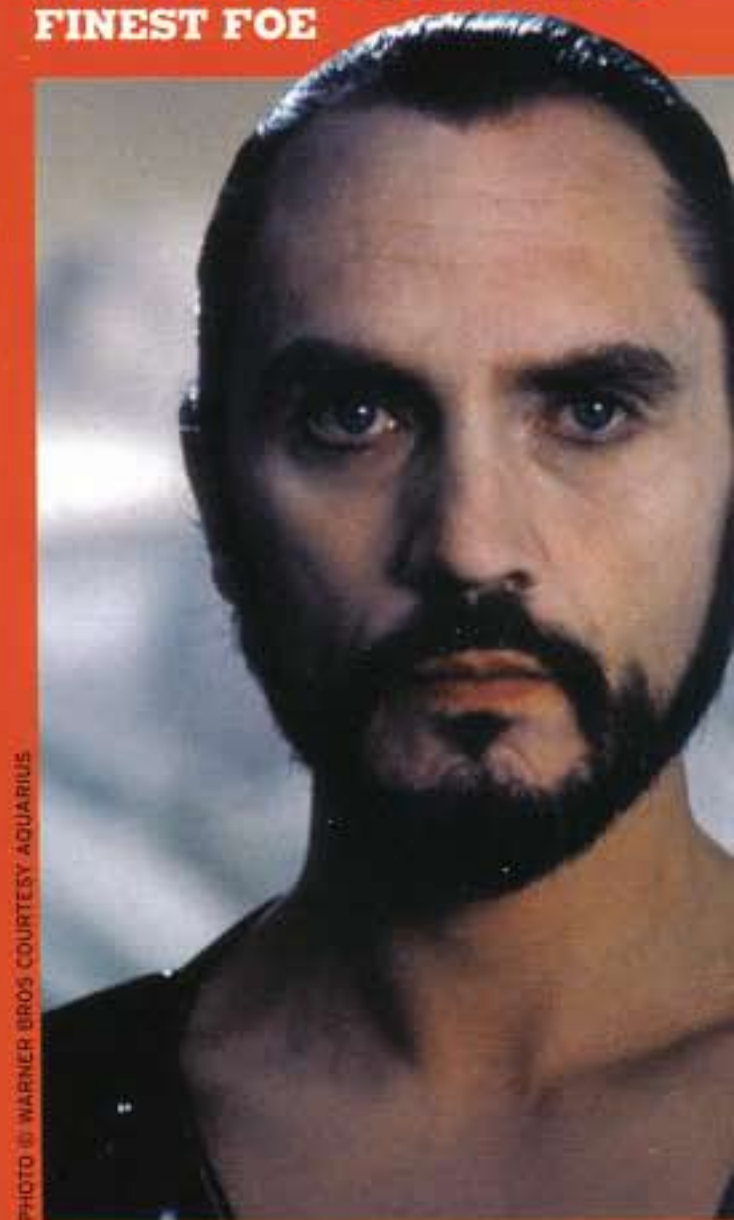


PHOTO © WARNER BROS COURTESY AQUARIUS

There aren't many men who can gently caress a finely sculpted beard, while simultaneously dressed top-to-toe in black PVC, and not look like a member of The Village People. If anyone can, it is the mighty General Zod – the destruction-craving Kryptonian rebel with a cause and scenery-chewing star of *Superman II*. With the Man of Steel busy getting his end away with Lois Lane, the deliciously diabolical General might have spent an eternity exercising his new order from the comfort of the Oval Office, spouting such glorious lines as "These humans are beginning to bore me" and "Kneel before Zod!" with devastating straight-laced aplomb. Of course, there was more chance of the mute sidekick 'Non' scoring a record hit with his version of the children's lullaby 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' than Zod permanently ruling the Earth, but lest we forget how close he actually came to total world domination.

According to Terence Stamp, the original movie script would certainly have given him and his Kryptonian cronies more of a fighting chance. "Originally, they were a lot tougher. There was a diabolical quality to them... [but] they ended up just like three freaks, with General Zod the most diabolical and therefore the most powerful." Not wishing to pay for our own defiance, *Hotdog* humbly bows down and swears eternal loyalty to Zod.