

NOVEMBER 27, 1978

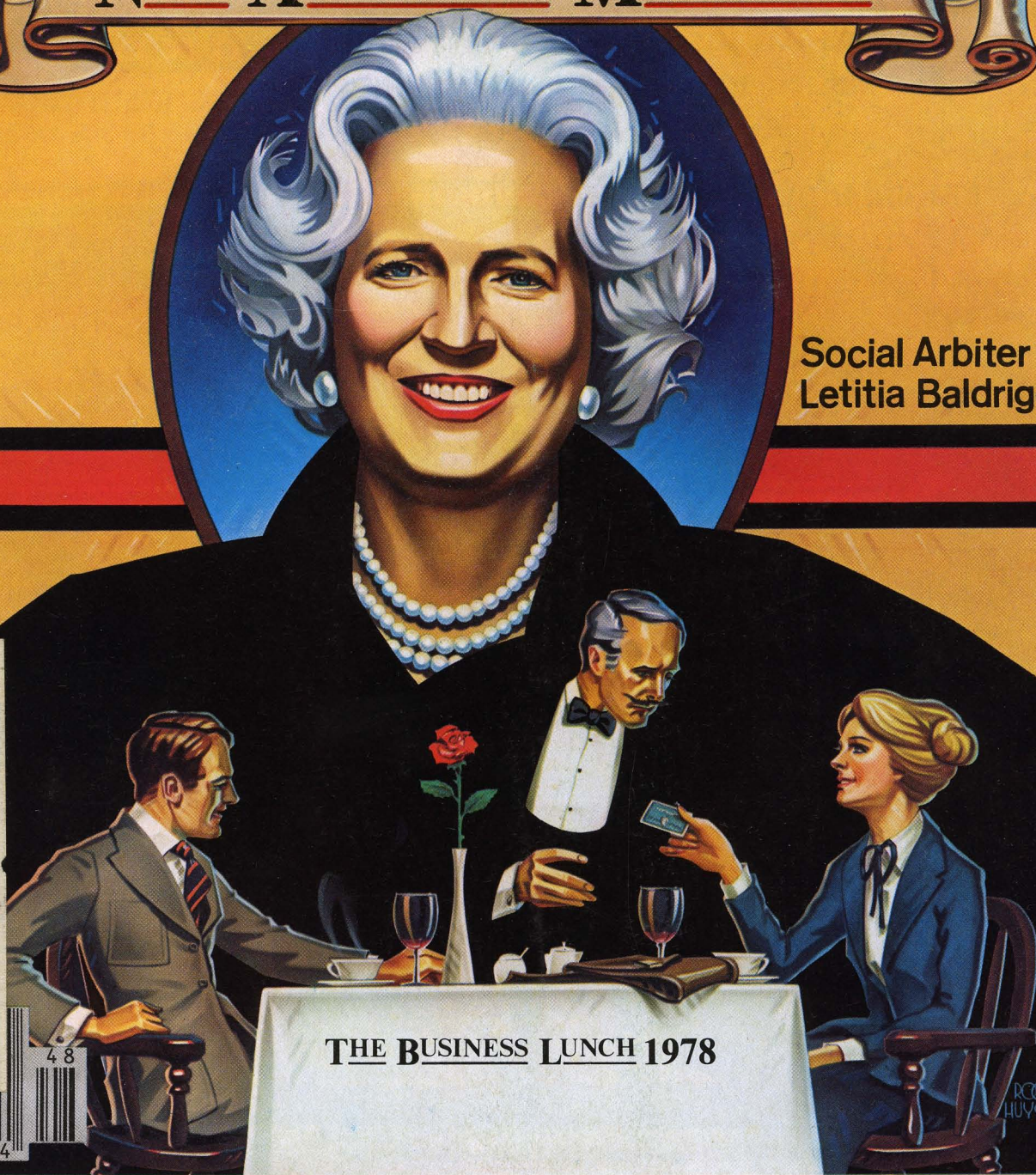
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Here Comes
SUPERMAN!!!

TIME

NEW AMERICAN MANNERS

Social Arbiter
Letitia Baldrige



THE BUSINESS LUNCH 1978

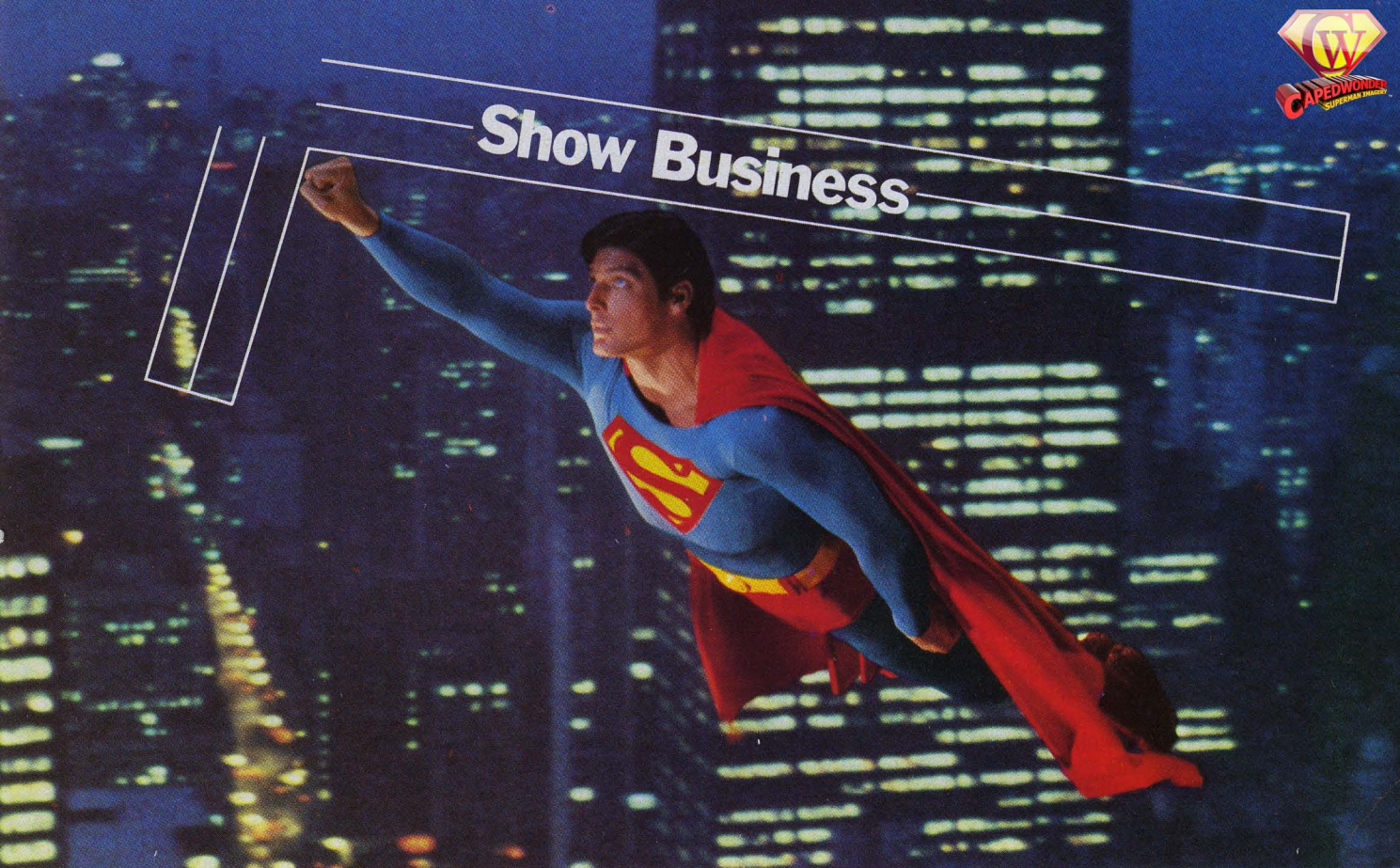
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"The Man of Steel," played by Christopher Reeve, leaping the tall buildings of Metropolis at a single bound

Here Comes Superman!!!

It's a bird, it's a plane, it's a film that's fun for everyone

In May 1974, at 5:30 in the afternoon, cocktail time at the Cannes Film Festival, an airplane flew over the strip of beach trailing a long banner announcing a new movie called *Superman*. In May 1975, three planes flew along the beach, and the announcement was repeated. In 1976, same time, same place, same message—but now there were five planes, two helicopters and one blimp buzzing above the overpriced sand, and in the water opposite the Carlton Hotel, where the big-money deals are made, bobbed a flotilla of eight boats, each with a different letter painted on its sail: S-U-P-E-R-M-A-N. By 1977, the *Superman* squadron had become something of a joke, and by 1978, it was a tradition, like topless starlets and surly waiters. Whatever else he was, this Superman was obviously not faster than a speeding bullet.

What May 1979 will bring is hard to say, because now, 4½ years after he was announced, Superman is finally arriving.

By May there probably won't be a kid on the block or *rue* or *Strasse* who has not seen him soar at least once. Not since *Star Wars*, the alltime champ, has there been such an entertaining movie for children of all ages. It has a few flaws, but *Superman* is nonetheless two hours and 15 minutes of pure fun, fancy and adventure.

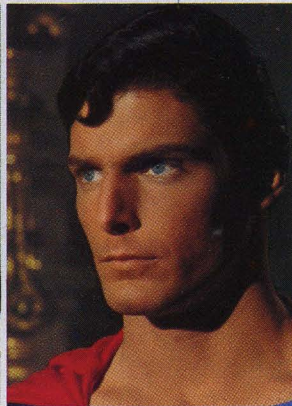
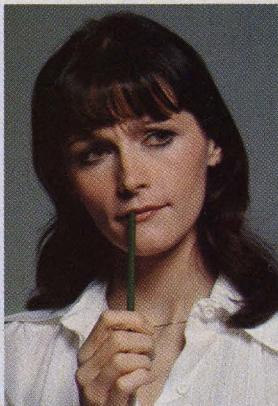
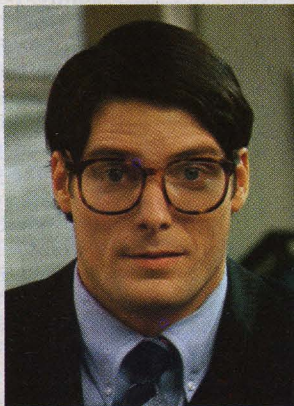
It has, moreover, one very special special effect: human flying. In *Star Wars*,

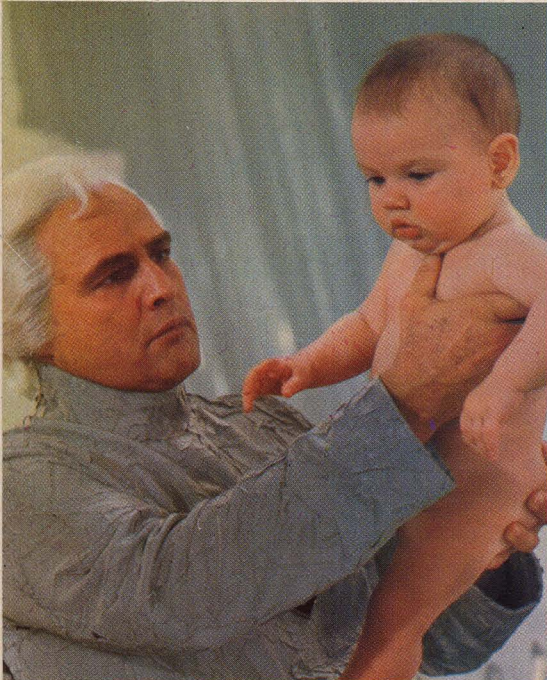
audiences wanted to see space flights and talking robots. In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, they wanted to find out what flying saucers and extraterrestrial beings might look like. In *Superman*, they will want to see if modern movie technology can make a man fly convincingly. "The film stands or falls on whether the characters appear to fly," says Terence Stamp, who plays the villainous General Zod. "If they do, the picture is a success." By Stamp's definition, at any rate, the movie will be a smash. Superman not only flies better and faster than any bird or plane, but he does aerial acrobatics that would cause an eagle to fasten its seat belt.

Superman will almost certainly be this year's big Christmas movie. There will be a gala opening in Washington on Dec. 10, followed by a royal premiere in London on Dec. 13. The film will then open in 700 theaters in most of the English-speaking world, and the rest of the globe will wait until early next year. "It's a kids' movie that adults will go to that kids will like," is the rather convoluted way that Director

Richard Donner, 48, explains *Superman's* appeal. "No," says Producer Ilya Salkind, 31, who often disagrees with Donner. "It's an adult picture that kids will see." No, again, says Co-Producer Pierre Spengler, also 31, who sometimes disputes

Margot Kidder, as Lois Lane, flanked by Underachiever Clark and Overachiever Superman





Papa Brando bouncing Superbaby; the supertyke emerging from his spaceship
But Father might have been a green suitcase or a bagel.

Salkind and almost always disputes Donner. "It's a kids' movie made for adults."

Whatever it is, it is expensive. *Superman* has cost about \$35 million, according to Salkind, or roughly four times its original budget. This strained the considerable ingenuity of Ilya's father Alexander, who finds the backers and has veto power on major decisions. The project has gone through three infusions of scriptwriters, two directors and a change of location from Rome to London, after many sets had been constructed in Italy. At one time a money shortage almost caused production to stop. Marlon Brando had walked off with his \$3.7 million for playing Superman's father, but Stamp was told that he could not be paid on time. Tempers were frayed, and Donner and Spengler stopped speaking to each other. With the film in the can and a potential fortune in sight, the old bonds have been renewed. Donner, for his part, is only afraid that there has been too much public buildup. Says he: "It's like a comedian getting up before a houseful of other comedians and saying 'I'm going to tell you the funniest joke in the world.'"

He may be right, but it is at least a joke that nearly everyone has heard. Superman, along with Lois Lane, Cub Reporter Jimmy Olsen and Editor Perry White, comes close to being a mythological figure, not only in the U.S. but around the world. "You can't mess about with a myth," says Designer John Barry, who also did the sets for *Star Wars* and *A Clockwork Orange*. "Too many fans would be at your throat."

Though some cinematic liberties are taken, the movie mostly follows the story line laid out in Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster's comic books, starting 40 years ago. The planet Krypton is about

to explode, and Superman's father Jor-El (Brando) sends his infant son in a spaceship to the distant earth. His touchdown nearly kills a Midwest farm couple, the Kents, as they are driving through wheatfields in their truck. Because little Superman has a denser molecular structure, he shows his powers at once. His landing has blown one of the Kents' tires, and the superboy helps out his new, adoptive father by lifting up the whole rear of the rig for the wheel change. At school, Clark, as he is called, can kick a football into the next county. When he is 18, he discovers a magic crystal that Jor-El had put in his crib and is able to talk with the spirit of his dead father, who reveals to him that his mission is to battle evil.

And where is there greater evil than in Metropolis, the image of Manhattan right down to the grit on the sidewalks? Clark Kent (Christopher Reeve) lands a job on the *Daily Planet*, where he can keep a watch on crime and corruption, and then, with cape on and horn-rimmed glasses off, swoop down on crooks everywhere. The city is agog, and *Planet* Reporter Lois Lane is assigned to find out all about the flying miracle worker. As

played by Margot Kidder, Lois is not the starchy spinster of the comics and the TV serial of the '50s. She is feisty and gutsy and reckless enough to need Superman's constant attention.

Just when he is getting Metropolis in shape, a real villain emerges in the person of Luthor (Gene Hackman), who lives in splendor 200 feet below Metropolis' railroad station. Luthor, who has a moronic aide (Ned Beatty) and a voluptuous moll (Valerie Perrine), is played strictly for laughs. He plots to set off an atomic device on the San Andreas Fault and thereby dump the California coast into the Pacific (he owns the land that will remain). "You've got your faults," he tells Superman, "and I've got mine." And so on.

The picture unfortunately shows at times that it passed through many hands. The early scenes in Krypton and Kansas, for instance, are in dead earnest, with a strong overlay of spiritualism and Christian symbolism. The tone shifts abruptly when the action moves to Metropolis, which, along with evil, abounds with sight gags and fast back chat. Luthor adds still another tone, that of high camp, somewhat reminiscent of TV's old *Batman* serial. On their own, the Luthor scenes are funny, but they almost seem to have been brought in by mistake from another movie.

Taken as a whole, however, *Superman* works, and works well. That is all the more surprising because, despite the years of hoopla over Cannes, real production work did not begin until January 1977, when Donner was brought in as director, Barry, 42, was hired as set designer, and Tom Mankiewicz, 35, was asked to do a third rewrite of the script (after Mario Puzo and the team of Robert Benton and David and Leslie Newman).

Barry had the most immediate problem: he had only eleven weeks to design and build Krypton, or "Chez Brando," as he calls it.



Superman and Lois Lane talking things over on her terrace
And afterward, a sweet swing over the city.



The Kents getting a lift from their new-found son; Superman saving a dam

Getting Brando to walk was nothing compared with getting Superman to fly.

Searching for ideas, he happened upon a book of crystal photography, which had exactly the futuristic-looking shapes such a planet might contain. On the screen, Krypton looks like a giant ice palace, an all-white world fit for the advanced, abstract-minded folk the Kryptonians are supposed to be.

Donner's problem was more personal: Brando himself. Brando had been the key to the film because his magic name had brought in other stars and, more important, other investors. But now, reported one of his friends, Agent Jay Kanter, Brando felt he should play Jor-El "like a green suitcase." "A green suitcase?" asked Donner. "Yes," said the friend. "Marlon wants to put a green suitcase on the sound stage and let his voice come out."

Jor-El as a trunk caller was not quite what Donner wanted, and he and Salkind asked for a meeting with Brando in Los Angeles. When they arrived, the green suitcase had been forgotten. "Maybe the people on Krypton should look like bagels," said Brando. Salkind, who is edgy at the best of times, suppressed his hysteria as he envisioned his project, his reputation and his bank-book being swallowed by some great blobbish bagel. "I was almost banging the knee of Dick, begging him to say something," he recalls. Finally Donner interjected that all the kids, including Brando's own, who had read the comic books would know that Superman's father was not a bagel. Brando admitted the logic of that and decided to play Jor-El as Marlon Brando.

Getting Brando to walk, however, was nothing compared with getting Superman to fly. There was simply no movie precedent for Superman's maneuvers in the air. Donner and his technicians devised several ways to

fool the audience. For long swooping flights, tracks were embedded into the stage ceiling, and Reeve was pulled along by wires, painted to make them invisible against the background. For closeups, Reeve was hung on a horizontal pole that lay against his spine. For quick trips, plaster casts were made of Reeve's body and then shot out of a circus cannon.

To learn to fly, or rather look as if he were flying, Reeve, 25, spent ten weeks working out on trampolines, practicing his takeoffs and landings. "I worked on my landings based on what I had seen in the comic books," he says. "Superman usually came in sideways the way a hockey player stops. But if you land from 75 yards in the air, it takes some practice. You come in at about the same speed as a parachute jumper." Takeoffs were different, and when the wires began to pull, Reeve leaped with them. "I wanted to convey the feeling that Superman was slightly dull on the ground, like a fish out of water. But as soon as he took off, he was at home." So confident was Reeve of his ability that at times, he admits, "I felt invincible."

Reeve came by the square Superman

jaw and his 6 ft. 4 in. naturally, but he had to work for the rest. Donner thought that he was too thin, and so for two hours every day Reeve lifted weights. That, coupled with four meals a day, added 20 lbs. to his weight and 2 in. each to his arms and chest. He has to look like Superman, of course, but he must behave like both Superman and Clark Kent. The easy authority with which Reeve handles this double role is the real surprise of the picture. "I used both sides of my personality," he says. "Superman was me when I am most open, relaxed, friendly, poised and unself-conscious. When I played Clark Kent, I went to the other side of my character, the nervous, shy, clumsy, insecure guy who two years ago was trying to get a job and three years ago was trying to pick up a girl, neither with any success."

Though he was virtually unknown, except to fans of the soap opera *Love of Life*, Reeve was treated like a star from the beginning. He received \$250,000 for the role. For the projected sequel he will get more, perhaps much more. "If the first one hits the roof, who knows?" says Ilya Salkind, in a rare burst of optimism.

In fact, much of *Superman II*, which will be released in the summer of 1980, has already been shot. Estimates on just how much vary, but at least 60%, and perhaps as much as 85%, is now on film. Three Kryptonite villains, who, like Superman, are survivors of the doomed planet, have major parts in it. Also, Superman and Lois Lane go to bed together, in a PG sort of way. "When we start making love, I am supposed to say, 'Oh, Superman! Oh, Superman!'" giggles Kidder. "Chevy Chase told me to say, 'Oh, Superman! Oh, Super, pooper, dooper, man!'" But then what does that leave for *Superman III*, *IV*, *V*, and *VI*? All of which Reeve is already optioned to play in and which will take him to about the year 2000, or 2001? ■



As the evil Luthor's henchwoman, Valerie Perrine is down to no good

Thriving in vulgar splendor 200 feet below the city's railroad station.