



OF MICE AND SUPERMEN: A LOOK BACK AT 30 YEARS OF “SUPERMAN IV”

An exclusive retrospective for CapedWonder.com by Bill Williams

It has been said that the best laid plans of mice and men go awry. The same can be said of “Superman IV: The Quest for Peace.” When the film had been released to theaters on July 24, 1987, the anticipation for the fourth installment had quickly turned sour. Low attendance, coupled with an overall poor critical and commercial response, spelled the end of what had been one of Warner Bros.’ most popular film franchises. And yet its roots were anything but uncertain.

In late 1984 to early 1985, after the middling response to “Superman III” and the failure of the “Supergirl” spinoff, Warner Bros. decided it was time to get the “Superman” franchise back on track. They turned to the two men who helped make the first two “Superman” films a huge success - Richard Donner and Tom Mankiewicz - with hopes of steering the movies to success once again. And they were told just one thing: “Name your price.” After considering the studio’s offer, Donner and Mankiewicz thought it over but ultimately turned down the potential lucrative prospect, having exhausted all of their ideas for the series several years earlier. In a 2001 online interview Donner stated, “It would have been just for the money.”

(Ironically, in the commentary on the DVD for “Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut,” Donner stated that Mankiewicz would have directed III, Donner would have directed IV, and so on, had they remained on the series after the release of the first “Superman” film. Donner would eventually go on to direct the first installment of the “Lethal Weapon” series, and Mankiewicz would direct and co-write the big screen version of “Draagnet”, both of which would be released the same year as “Superman IV.”)

Enter an even more unlikely dynamic duo: Menahem Golan and Yoran Globus. The two Israeli-born cousins had made names for themselves as the heads of Cannon Films throughout the 1980’s, and it was not uncommon to turn on HBO or go to your local video store and find a boatload of cheaply produced films that seemed to find some kind of audience. The “Death Wish” series with Charles Bronson, numerous movies featuring Chuck Norris, and schlocky low-budget horror movies were churned out at a rapid pace in those days faster than the eye could blink. To Golan and Globus, blockbusters and awards were the farthest things from their minds. It was all for the love of the movies.

But by the mid 1980’s, they began considering more mainstream projects. They didn't want to be seen as low-budget producers forever. And one of the projects that they set their eyes on was the “Superman” series. They would buy the rights from the Salkinds for a one-time deal with the hopes of crossing over into serious Hollywood fare. As with all of their other projects, they reached out to foreign backers to get support for the film. And they turned to the one man who they felt would guarantee their ticket to success: Christopher Reeve.

Nearly three years had passed since Reeve had publicly stated that he was through with the role, and that he was more interested in pursuing serious film and stage roles. But enough time had passed, and even his resistance to the part had eased to the point where he felt that he could return to the series if, like Alexander Salkind before him, it would be done right. He agreed under the conditions that he would star in a project of his own choosing and that he would have a chance at story and directorial development. With Reeve back in the part, and his commitment to "Street Smart" in place, "Superman IV" began to take shape. Some of the original cast members - Gene Hackman, Margot Kidder, Jackie Cooper, Marc McClure, and Susannah York - returned to their roles, with new cast members in Mariel Hemingway, Sam Wanamaker, and Jon Cryer added to the lineup.

The story, which Reeve developed with Lawrence Konner and Mark Rosenthal, focused on Superman's attempt to end the nuclear arms crisis of the 1980's and Lex Luthor taking advantage of the situation to find another way to destroy the Man of Steel. The core story had timely inspirations. Reeve had narrated a short film entitled "A Letter to Our Parents," about a group of middle school students expressing their fears about living in a nuclear age. Around the same time, young Samantha Smith, who had piloted a plane from the United States to the Soviet Union on a mission of goodwill, had sadly died. And DC Comics had published an issue of the "Superman" comic which similarly centered around his fears and worries regarding the nuclear arms crisis. It seemed like a solid story at first, despite Tom Mankiewicz advising Reeve not to go through with the idea, feeling that Superman would not focus on shaping the destiny of his adopted home.

Attached to direct the film was Sidney J. Furie, who had helmed the spy thriller "The Ipcress File" and had a minor hit with "Iron Eagle." Photographing the film was Ernest Day, who had provided the beautiful and stunning cinematography for "Lawrence of Arabia" two decades before. And Harrison Ellenshaw, who had worked on the original "Star Wars" ten years before, was tapped to handle the film's many visual effects. Instead of Pinewood Studios, the film would be based out of Elstree Studios in England (which had also been one of the key production studios for "Star Wars"). Warner Bros. would handle the domestic release in the United States and Canada, while Cannon Films would handle the film's international release in numerous markets, among them England, France, the Netherlands, and Japan.

With credentials like these, you would think that "Superman IV" would have been as fun and exciting as the first two films and even better than "Superman III."

Wrong.

Because of numerous financial missteps, including several of their films failing both critically and commercially at the box office, Golan and Globus were left with no choice but to cut the \$40 million budget assigned to "Superman IV" down to just \$17 million. Many key areas of production, including the all-important visual effects, were hit by the reduced budget. It didn't help matters that Cannon threw much of the budget for IV toward what they felt would be the

bigger blockbuster, their film version of "Masters of the Universe." Golan would later state that he would rather make twenty or thirty movies for a million dollars apiece than one movie for \$20-30 million. Toward the end of 1986, Warner Bros. came in to alleviate some of the financial burdens carried by Cannon Films, but even that could not help the film. And Chris Reeve was facing personal issues on the home front, which may have affected his work on the film. Nonetheless, he remained committed to the film from start to finish. At one point it had been suggested during production that Reeve might portray the film's secondary antagonist, the Nuclear Man, but that part went to novice actor Mark Pillow instead (with the character's voice dubbed by Gene Hackman).

With the reduced budget, cast and crew shot the film in Milton Keynes, England, and at Elstree Studios throughout the fall and winter of 1986 and into January 1987. They could not afford to go on location for some key scenes in New York City, even though several spectacular shots of the city are featured throughout. It was around December 1986 that Christopher Reeve made his directorial debut, shooting the second-unit fight scenes between Superman and the second Nuclear Man on the moon. And it would not be until two or three months before the film's release that the subtitle "The Quest for Peace" was added to the film at Reeve's request.

Once the film wrapped, Golan and Globus had intended to bring back yet another key member of the original team: John Williams. While his schedule in composing the score to "The Witches of Eastwick" and conducting the Boston Pops proved to be a conflict with the film, he agreed to write three new themes for the supporting characters of Lacy Warfield, the Nuclear Man, and Jeremy, and turned to long time collaborator Alexander Courage of "Star Trek" fame to handle the final scoring duties. Even then the reduced budget affected the scoring process, with cues very rarely getting a second take. Paul Fishman, son of Cannon music producer Jack Fishman, recorded several pieces of source music for the film, and Warner Bros. Records made plans for a soundtrack album similar to the "Superman III" LP a few years earlier.

Then, without the majority of us knowing, everything about the film fell apart, and what started out as "Superman IV" and what ended up as "Superman IV: The Quest for Peace" are two totally different things.

I went to the Metrocenter Cinema 4, where all of the previous "Superman" films had premiered, to see the new film on opening day, and I had my expectations about the film. I was all of twenty years old, two months out from my twenty-first birthday, and looking forward to my fourth year at Mississippi College. As opposed to having my parents with me, I went by myself. Looking back, I should have realized that something was wrong.

The local newspaper advertised five screenings for the film, as opposed to the usual four. That meant that the film would run somewhere around 90 to 97 minutes. It was shorter than that, a mere 89 minutes in length. At the end of the film, I found myself thinking, "That's it?" There had to have been more than this. After all, the interviews with Christopher Reeve on television and in the Starlog and Comics Scene magazines promised something special. But what struck me odd

was that a group of boys, who had to have been no more than six or seven years old each, were more excited about the forthcoming release of “Robocop”, a film that had been toned down from its original X rating to an R because of the excessive violence. What had happened in the nine years since the release of the original “Superman” to jade young people's perception of good and bad, right and wrong? Those thoughts stayed with me into the early 1990's, as I pursued my degree in education.

And yet the clues were there. Scores of prominent visual effects were used multiple times throughout the film. Editing seemed choppy. The once convincing visual effects, which had earned the first film an Academy Award, looked second-rate at best. Nothing seemed to make sense. Logic seemed to be thrown out the window at times. The final film had all of the quality of a TV movie of the week. At the time of the film's release, Starlog ran a news blurb in one of its issues stating that 30 minutes of footage had been cut from “Superman IV” before its release. That meant that the film had to have been at least two hours long. But it was the critical interview with Sidney J. Furie that seemed to bury the film. Along with numerous photos of scenes that were not in the final film, Furie blatantly stated in no uncertain terms that he didn't care whether or not the film succeeded or failed.

“Superman IV” earned a mere \$15.5 million in its U.S. release, making it the only “Superman” film to fail at the box office both critically and commercially. In interviews conducted in 2006, Ilya Salkind stated, “‘Superman IV’ killed the franchise,” while Annette O'Toole curiously asked, “Was there a ‘Superman IV?’ I never saw it.”

A number of the tie-ins were aborted as well. The planned soundtrack album was cancelled. Scholastic Books produced two paperback books obviously geared toward juvenile audiences. Topps, who had handled the trading cards for the previous films, never released any cards for the new film. DC Comics produced an illustrated adaptation that, while it filled in some gaps, seemed lackluster and uninspiring. The Starlog Press poster magazine fared no better.

Despite its failure, that fall Golan and Globus announced that pre-production had begun on “Superman V,” which was scheduled for release in the summer of 1989. I remember reading that they were considering using a portion of the cut footage from IV for the new film, that Albert Pyun had been suggested to direct the next installment, and that it was possible that Christopher Reeve might be replaced. Even into the first part of 1988, Cannon was sincere in his intentions about a fifth film. Ultimately, the rights to the “Superman” franchise returned to the Salkinds, which would, by the fall of 1993, be bought out in turn by Warner Bros.

By this time the film's two major creative forces seemed to distance themselves from the film. Sidney Furie remained, and to this day remains, indifferent about the film, refusing to discuss it. I had attempted to contact him via his agent in 1998, hoping to learn more about his work on the film. I never heard back from him.

Christopher Reeve was sadly affected by the entire project as well. The rushed quality of the film, coupled with his personal problems during filming and a plagiarism lawsuit in the aftermath of its release, all contributed to him closing the door on the project in later years. When he was offered the possibility of returning for a fifth installment in the early 1990's, he felt that unless the film was a vast improvement upon IV and returned to the quality of what Richard Donner had brought to I and II, he would not consider it. This is why, in his 1998 autobiography "Still Me," he makes a statement that is short and to the point: "The less said about 'Superman IV,' the better." I remember the day after he passed away in 2004, Jim Bowers and I shared thoughts about Chris. He related to me how he had once offered Chris a copy of the extended version of IV, which Chris politely declined. Even in the later years toward the end of his life, Christopher Reeve wanted nothing to do with "Superman IV" anymore.

But even then there lay a mystery, one which I was determined to solve. What happened to the missing footage to "Superman IV?"

Part of the answer came in April 1990, when an extended version of the film premiered on TV. Unlike the Salkind international versions of the first three films, which had aired on ABC and numerous foreign markets, this new extended version of "Superman IV" ran in syndication on my local Fox station and on nationally known stations such as WGN in Chicago and Superstation TBS in Atlanta. Like its theatrical counterpart, the film ran in a two-hour time slot, with a TV Net trailer prepared. Lo and behold, there was footage of Clark and Lacy kissing in the back seat of a car! Where did that scene come from? And there were two new scenes as well, one of Superman saving a little girl (his daughter Alexandra) and her family from a tornado, and one of Superman preventing a nuclear missile going off in the heart of Red Square in Russia. And there were scores of photographs in the film's novelization, poster magazine, and print interviews. But it didn't lead me to any answers.

With the explosion of the Internet in the 1990's, people could now publicly share information with one another on any possible topic. One of the first searches I did was for any information about the "Superman" film series. This led me to a Geocities web page managed by Gregory Oshel about the films. It was here that I first learned about a version of "Superman IV" that ran 134 minutes in length. According to Oshel, the running time was based on a statement made by Harrison Ellenshaw based on a sneak preview of the film shown in Orange County, California, some time before the film's release. Apparently something had happened.

This eventually led me to the Superman Cinema website and message board, hosted by Dharmesh Chauhan, and it was here that more information was shared. Reportedly, people who attended the sneak preview were less than impressed with the film, which led to executives from Warner Bros. demanding that the film be edited to meet its release date. But the whereabouts of that footage remained unknown at that time.

Around then a number of reports also surfaced on the message boards. Reportedly, some people had posted that they recalled seeing the 134-minute version of "Superman IV" on the

SFM Holiday Network, which was defunct by that time. Numerous versions of the same statement popped up on occasion: either the poster or a friend or family member had recorded the film during its lone broadcast, but something happened to the tape - it got recorded over, it got misplaced, they couldn't find it - and they couldn't supply the proof. The stories kept leading nowhere, and the SFM rumor was ultimately debunked as false. Serious "Superman" fans began pursuing every possible lead, and I myself debunked a few leads, including one that supposedly led me to a video store in the Netherlands that claimed to have a 120-minute version of the film. It turned out to be 88 minutes in length. By the early 2000's, I tracked another lead to a seller on eBay who reportedly had a copy of this 134-minute print on tape. All he had to show for it in his posting were two photos both in poor shape. I was hesitant about chasing this lead down the rabbit hole. Good thing I didn't - or I would have lost my money in the process.

But not only did Dharmesh Chauhan post photos of some of these lost scenes from the missing footage, so did Jim Bowers on his then-newly launched website CapedWonder.com. From here other websites, including Steve Younis' Superman Homepage, Martin Lakin's Supermania, the unofficial Christopher Reeve page, and others began to share more information on these missing scenes and the film's production.

With the advent of the DVD format in 1997, it was only a matter of time before the "Superman" films appeared on the new format. Previously, the only versions of the film on home video were the original full screen version on VHS and laserdisc, and an interesting widescreen version of the film on a Japanese laserdisc from Tohokushinsha Video and King Video. This version ran 93 minutes long and contained the additional footage that was shown in the 1990 syndicated broadcasts. It's here that we learned that this was the Cannon Films international version of the film. To this date it remains the only source of the longest known cut of the film. I remember finding it on eBay when I lived in Mississippi, but when I moved to Alabama in 2005, the laserdisc did not survive the move. It had broken in half.

Things began to heat up in November 2006 when Warner Home Video released a massive 14-disc DVD set of all of the "Superman" films (including both cuts of "Superman: The Movie", two versions of "Superman II", and the 2006 release of "Superman Returns"), complete with audio commentaries, deleted scenes, and documentaries. Included in the release were 30 minutes of deleted scenes from "Superman IV" and an audio commentary by writer Mark Rosenthal, who confirmed that the original version of the film was indeed 134 minutes long. Granted, the deleted scenes were taken from a workprint version of the film, but much of what was lost was now available for everyone to consider. The original heart, of Superman's hope for the world as seen through the eyes of a child, is clearly present in the film's original and more optimistic ending. The majority of the film's lost subplot involving Lex Luthor's creation of a flawed prototype Nuclear Man (played by Clive Mantle) is present. Portions of a seriocomic fight between Superman and the prototype Nuclear Man, which was budgeted at approximately \$6 million (a good third of the film's overall budget), are present. Much of Luthor's motivation towards manipulating the sales of nuclear arms to the U.S. and Soviet military forces is present.

An exciting confrontation between Superman and the second Nuclear Man, which nearly brings the U.S. and Soviet forces to their knees, was included. And we have more footage of Christopher Reeve in action as Superman, which is always a pleasure.

In 2007 I took it upon myself to assemble a reconstruction of all of the footage from "Superman IV," using the U.S. theatrical release, a copy of the Cannon international version, and the deleted scenes from the DVD, for the project. Once I was finished, I began to see the original intentions that Sidney Furie and Christopher Reeve had in mind. My reconstruction of the film, with all the footage in place, ran 116 minutes in length. That meant that some 18 minutes of footage remained unreleased. The film still had a cheap quality to it in places, and the visual effects still did not hold up to par with the previous films, but there was something there now. The film began to make sense.

In February 2008 we were treated to another major find, with the release of "Superman: The Music - 1978-1988", a generous eight-disc CD box set containing the complete soundtracks to all four theatrical films and the Ruby-Spears animated series. For the first time we had the complete score to "Superman IV" as conducted by Alexander Courage in May and early June 1987, and we further saw into the original intentions of the film. While the reduced budget affected the scoring process, the final score reveals an even larger canvas and emotional excitement than was seen and heard in the final film. I remember attending an online chat session on Talk City around 1999 or 2000 with Alexander Courage, Dennis McCarthy, and Don Davis, and questions about the score to "Superman IV" were posed to Courage. At that time, he stated that he did not see the need for a soundtrack release to the film, feeling that the music sounded repetitive. While the score does at times hit the same beats, it has a freshness that sounds less like the original John Williams compositions and yet more of how he would have further expanded the musical canvas with the new themes and action music. To this day it remains a highlight of the box set.

With all of this information in mind, I reached the conclusion that, after scoring ended on the film, the complete 134-minute version of "Superman IV" was shown in its finished form to the sneak preview audience in California, with all of the footage, music, and visual effects completed and in place. One only needs to hear the music in two key deleted scenes and consider the finished quality of many of the visual effects in the workprint footage. And we must also consider the theatrical trailers and TV spots for the film, which contained even more finished footage from the film. All of these pieces are crucial to understanding the overall picture. It is still baffling that a major studio would order severe cuts to a film, resulting in a loss of 42-45 minutes of footage only a month before its release. Perhaps their fears about the poor quality of the film were on the money more than they realized.

Thirty years have passed, and we still do not know all of the answers to all of our questions related to "Superman IV: The Quest for Peace." Christopher Reeve, Sam Wanamaker, and Alexander Courage are long since gone. Sidney J. Furie remains tight-lipped as ever. Most

importantly, the master footage from that lone sneak preview remains missing, including some 18 minutes that, with the exception of still photographs, the various drafts of the shooting script production logs, and studio memos, we know very little about. It's a jigsaw puzzle with quite a number of pieces gone. And yet a small niche of fans remains hopeful that Warner Home Video may one day release the complete, original version of the film. We may never see it, and much time has passed, and we must conclude that, unless someone raids the Warner film vaults, the master footage and the rest of the missing scenes are lost forever.

But beyond that, it still has a heart and an intention to it that Christopher Reeve attempted to recapture. It's a guilty pleasure, I must admit, one that takes me back to the days when I was on the cusp of adulthood, yet still with the heart and wonder of a child. I still dream to this day, as I am well in the second half of my life now, though my innocence and home, like Clark Kent faces in the film, are now forever gone. But it's all part of a bigger adventure, one that, like Superman, we all face.