

Films

Flash Gordon
Starring Sam J. Jones, Max Von Sydow
Directed by Mike Hodges
Cinema World

A comic book in the hands of a kid is a source of endless enjoyment. Never mind that the story is memorized — every rehash is fun.

Flash Gordon has been regurgitated many times in many forms since its Sunday comic page premiere in 1934. It's doubtful *Flash Gordon's* creator Alex Raymond had any inkling of the popularity his strip would have. He hadn't even planned on being a comic artist — even though he worked in the art department of the Kings Feature Syndicate, assisting Chic Young, the creator of *Blondie*.

Not until Kings Feature start-

ed recruiting ideas for new strips did Raymond attain creative license. He ran with it. His peers told him it was foolish to lavish as much detail onto a strip as he did with *Flash Gordon*.

The strip quickly gained a reputation as one of the best drawn comics on the market. Flash and his companions Dale Arden and Dr. Hans Zarkov gained much popular support battling Ming the Merciless, in terms of readership.

So much so that Universal plucked characters, stories, and costumes from the newspaper and splashed them across the screen in a 13-episode serial beginning in 1936. Betting on Flash's popularity, Universal sunk a whopping million dollars into production, even while commandeering sets, props, and music from other films. It

paid off. With Buster Crabbe in the title role, *Flash Gordon* is remembered as one of the most popular serials ever.

In the wake of a formidable background, *Flash Gordon* is dashing across the screens again; this time delivered by producer Dino de Laurentiis, and, not surprisingly, Universal.

There are a few changes: Flash is a New York Jets quarterback, and leading man Sam J. Jones was a former Playgirl centerfold instead of a swimming champion; the music is by Queen instead of Tchaikovsky.

The few alterations merely tailor the movie for a new generation. The material is the same. Even the spaceships look like Raymond's renditions of the thirties.

Flash Gordon is wonderfully tacky. It's like the musical in Mel Brooks' *The Producers*: so bad

it's hard to hate.

The costumes and sets are bright and garish: everything glitters, glows, and bangles. The sky is forever swirling with intense hues of blue, pink, orange, and purple. The special effects are terrible, with unsteady motion, visible matte lines, and strings attached. But, we've all been spoiled by *Star Wars*. Somehow this *Flash Gordon* wouldn't be incredible enough, or faithful enough to the original if it did have top-notch effects.

It's a sense of reckless abandon that makes the film so much fun. The battle scenes lack the tactical logic found in *Star Wars*. The only tactic in *Flash Gordon* is "damn the torpedos," and everyone just goes in blasting. This makes *Flash Gordon* a more violent film than the basically bloodless *Star Wars* movies. The blood may be green on Mongo, but it's there.

The makers of *Flash Gordon* obviously knew this stuff couldn't be taken seriously, and they've made little effort to present it as such.

The most serious scenes always have a comic element. Dr. Zarkov, strapped to a table with a formidable looking apparatus looming overhead, asks Ming what they're going to do. They're going to empty his mind, Ming explains simply, and Zarkov protests earnestly that he just spent his whole life trying to fill it up.

In another serio-comic scene, Dale Arden is forced to marry Ming, having successfully avoided him as an imperial concubine. In the serials they called it a fate worse than death. Ming recites vows to the effect that he will use and abuse her until he sees fit. Outside, spaceships fly by trailing banners reading "All creatures will make merry — Under punishment of death."

As usual in films like this, the most basely evil character is the most interesting, and Max Von Sydow as Ming seems to savor his role. His voice is marvelously controlled, and his lower lip has an ever-so-slight twitch that makes him seem always on the verge of a rage.

In contrast, Flash is dull. Sam Jones has the expression range of a rock. He has some fun fight scenes, though. A team of Ming lackeys get the best of him in his first battle until Zarkov throws him a football-sized melon. Quarterback instincts take over as he hikes the fruit and barrels into the bad guys while Dale cheers from the sidelines.

The film is full of corny charm brought from straight lines like "I have to rescue my friends and save the earth," or "Keeping our word is one the things that

make us better than you," as Dale sweetly assures Ming's daughter Aura.

Flash Gordon appeals to the kid in everyone and succeeds in its appeal. It's like a Bismarck sweet roll: you know what the surprise is, but it's still fun to bite into it. Likewise with a comic book: enjoyment is gleaned with every re-reading.

By Richard Laliberta

Coming Events

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- Dance Works sponsors an original theater performance by David Schein, *Improvisation and the State of the Heart* on Friday, Jan. 30 at 8:30 p.m. Tickets are \$3. Schein will also conduct a workshop in improvisational acting; call 344-9817 or 686-8578 for further information.

- Holly Near arrives in the EMU Ballroom on campus with Adrienne Torf Friday, Jan. 30 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$6.50 and are available at Book & Tea, Mother Kali's, House of Records, Lane Community College Women's Center and the University Women's Studies office. The performance is wheelchair accessible and is American Sign Language interpreted.

If you are not staying in the lovely Willamette Valley in the next two weeks, but are bound for Portland in the near future, there are a few musical and dance-oriented shows coming to the area you may want to check into. The Portland Civic Auditorium houses them all.

- Sunday, Feb. 1 brings Christopher Parkening, America's leading virtuoso of the classical guitar at 8 p.m. Tickets are on sale at the Ticket Place at Frederick and Nelson in Portland, or try calling the Eugene store at Valley River Center (485-8011) and ask to be connected with the Portland store; tickets are also available at all G.I. Joes stores in Portland.

- Bob Fosse's hit Broadway musical *Dancin'* opens Tuesday, Feb. 3, at 8:15 p.m. The musical, which is on a 5-month, 55-city national tour, is made up from classical ballet to modern dance to every form of show business and disco dancing. The show runs through Saturday, Feb. 7. Sponsored by Celebrity Attractions, tickets are available at the office, 1010 S.W. Morrison Street, Portland; call 226-4372 for additional information.

- Abbey Simon, one of the most distinguished concert pianists of international reputation makes his debut performance in Portland under the auspices of Celebrity Attractions on Friday, Jan. 30 at 8:15. Tickets are available at Celebrity Attractions.

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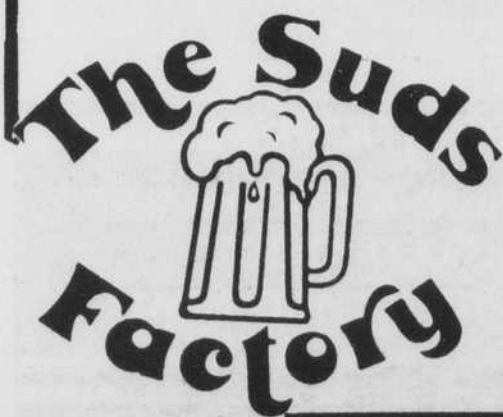
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