

ROBERT HAYS

At the Controls Again in

AIRPLANE II

BY RICHARD LEVINSON

On soundstage 16 at Paramount Studios in Hollywood, a spaceship bearing the word "Pan Universe" sits crash-landed in a moonscape of gravel and papier mâché boulders. The front hatch is open, the emergency slide extended. Passengers are jumping out (sans breathing apparatus) and sliding down to the surface, where they are met by two very alien-looking Hare Krishnas, who wish them a good day and hand them flowers.

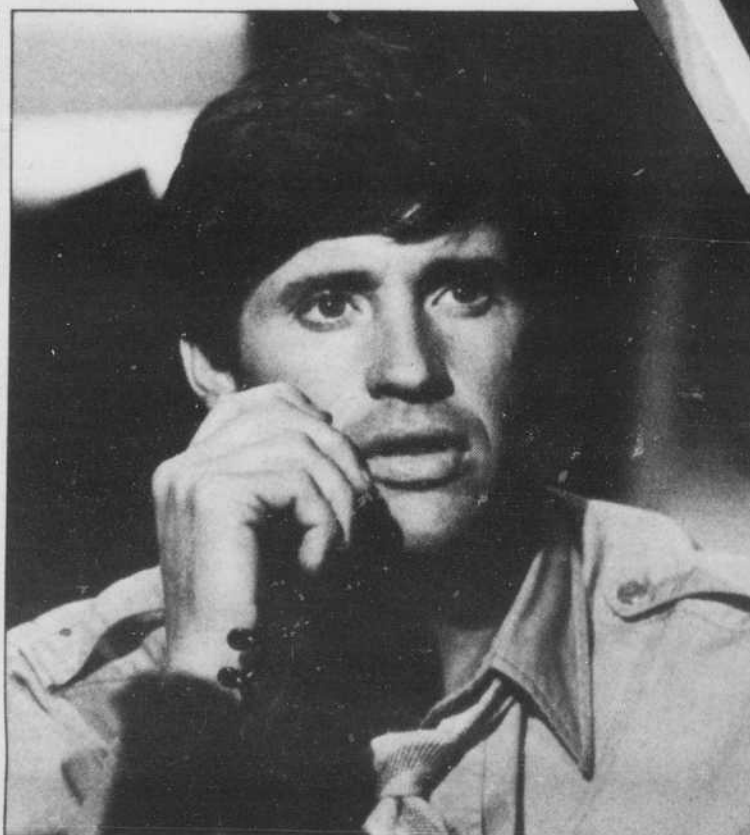
It's the next to last day of principal photography for the comedy *Airplane II: the Sequel*, and writer/director Ken Finkleman is conducting a rehearsal of the lunar escape scene. He's not entirely satisfied with the placement of people and debris, so it's Lights! Camera! Wait a minute! as the crew relocates scenery.

Just outside the soundstage, Robert Hays sits in his dressing trailer, waiting to be called to make-up. As he did in the 1980 hit *Airplane!* Hays co-stars (with Julie Hagerty) as Ted Striker, dashing, if reluctant, hero. (This time, Striker is called upon to save the first commercial lunar passenger shuttle from disaster. Hilarity, of course, ensues.) Hays is a likeable, talkative, outgoing actor who has been described as "strong, sensitive, and devastatingly attractive," as well as "unpredictably wacky."

These days, Robert Hays is also hot. After six years of low-or-no-pay repertory theatre in San Diego, he was cast to appear in a segment of television's *Harry-O*. This led to jobs working on such TV fare as *Love Boat*, *Wonder Woman*, *Laverne & Shirley*, and specials like *The Young Pioneers* and *Mark Twain's America*. Then, a stroke of good fortune landed him in the middle of *Airplane!* which became one of the most successful comedies of all time. (According to Paramount, it has grossed \$158 million so far, surpassed only by *Animal House* in the comedy sweepstakes.) After that came the disappointing *Take This Job and Shove It*, and recent starring roles in three more features due for release soon.

If an actor's career was ever zooming, Hays' is. So, why reprise a rôle in a sequel? "I was real hesitant to do it," says Hays, "but they threatened my family." In addition to which, Hays' press agent, Tony Angellotti, jokingly points out, the release and success of *Airplane II* will make Hays "the richest man in the universe" (huge salary, undisclosed, and a percentage, also undisclosed).

Hays also notes that "it would be difficult to do a sequel without the people who were in the first one."



For *Airplane II*, Julie Hagerty, Lloyd Bridges and Peter Graves are back, but two notable people, Bob Stack and Leslie Nielsen, are missing. It's too bad they're not here."

Three other notable people are missing, too. "The Zuckers" (Jerry Zucker, David Zucker and Jim Abrahams) who wrote and directed *Airplane!*, opted to stay as far away from the sequel as possible. According to Jerry Zucker, it came as no surprise that Paramount wanted a follow-up to the film. "Basically, studios aren't creative organizations, they're financial ones. It makes perfect sense that Paramount would want a sequel to such a successful movie."

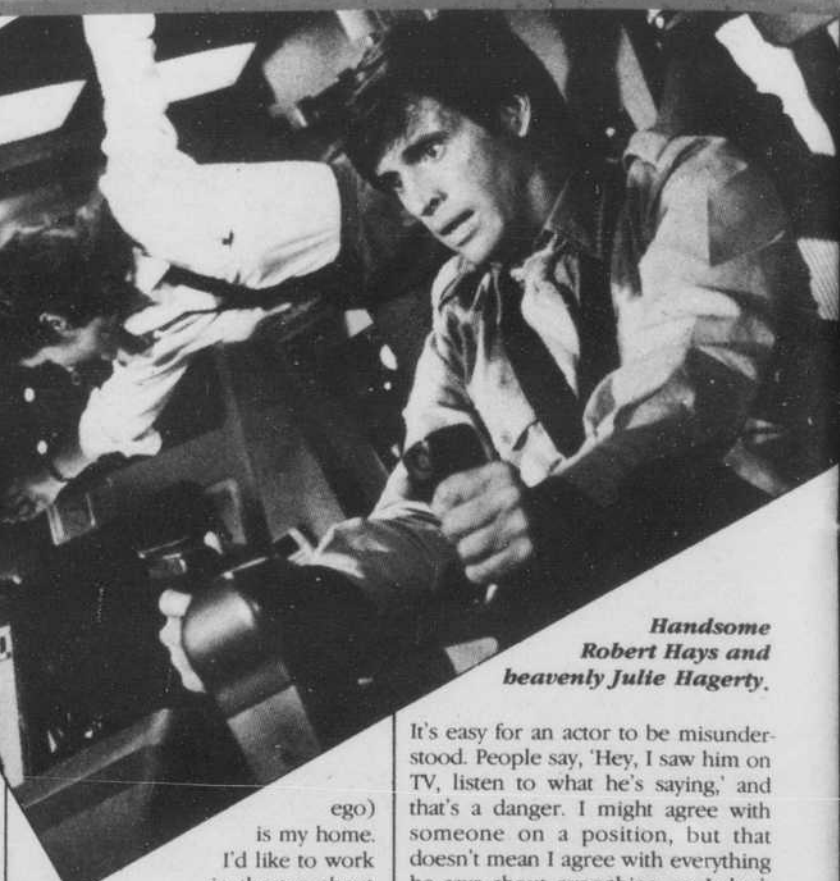
If *Airplane II* is not the Zuckers' film, it is Howard Koch's. Koch, who began his movie career in 1944, acted as Executive Producer for *Airplane!* (allaying some of Paramount's "who are these Zucker kids anyway?" fears), and is producing the sequel. A knowledgeable, active and candid veteran, he provides a vital link between the two films, and has been "first-to-come-last-to-leave" during all eight weeks of filming. If this has caused any friction between him and Finkleman, none is apparent. "If this was my first directing assignment, I'd want someone like me around, too." (Finkleman's only previous big screen credit is as screenwriter for *Grease II*.) Asked if the Zuckers' non-involvement was a disappoint-

ment, Koch says, "Sure. It would have been wonderful if they were here. But Ken's been doing a great job. I've seen about thirty minutes pieced together so far, and it's really funny stuff." Koch goes on to describe how the original film's approach has been maintained with appearances by Raymond Burr, William Shatner, Chad Everett, Chuck Connors, Aldo Ray, Kent McCord and Sonny Bono, either overplaying their well known characters, or, in Everett's case, playing an "against-type" villain.

(If that sounds like a Merv Griffin "Salute to the Vast Wasteland" line-up, that's all right. Part of the charm of *Airplane!* was its use of performers primarily known for their television work. Even more than film, TV "types" actors so completely that placing those well-known personas in a manic comedy worked much better than casting, say, Harvey Korman or, God forbid, Chevy Chase.)

Hays himself had been identified only with television before *Airplane!* "As hard as it is to break into TV, that's how hard it is to break into film from TV" he says. "It's getting better, but there's still the feeling that movies are a sort of Cadillac looking down on the Volkswagen of television."

How about theater? "Heck, yeah. That's what I want to do. For the craft of acting, that's like a revitalization. The Old Globe Theatre (in San Di-



Handsome Robert Hays and heavenly Julie Hagerty.

ego) is my home. I'd like to work in theater about five weeks at a time, but I can't afford to take six months to do a play right now."

"The reality is that I would like to have a career that builds slowly over a long period of time. I want to be around, working, when I'm 70 or 80, and have a nice, steady income. I think a lot of people, not all, but some, are pricing themselves right out of the business. But it's real complicated, because when you're negotiating, they go in expecting you to try to soak them. If you try to beat them up and strangle them, then they say, 'O.K., well, you're all right.' But if you say, 'Hey guys, I just want to make a film,' they say, 'Oh, wow, this guy's a geek.'"

Hays is concerned about being typed. "I don't want to be identified with only one kind of role. I'd like to do a variety. The problem is, there's a certain thing you're expected to play. If you're likeable, or if you're a real evil villain, for example." Still, the roles he chooses (and these days, he can choose) tend to be that "likeable guy." That isn't an accident. "My all-time favorite director is Frank Capra, and Preston Sturges is another great one," Hays says, naming two directors known for their handling of drama with a light touch. "I'm not into gore or any of that." How about angst? "Well, there's nothing wrong with pain and suffering, but it doesn't mean you can't combine it with stuff to make the audience laugh."

It's plain that Hays likes doing comedy, as evidenced by his other upcoming films. He describes one (*Trenchcoat*, with Margo Kidder) as an "international-spy-mystery-comedy-intrigue, or how about a spy-thriller comedy-mystery, or maybe a sci-fi-action-western?" The others, *Utilities* and *Some Sunny Day*, both find Hays as, in the words of Tony Angellotti, "rebels, but not angry young men. Just guys who are affected by inequities in the system, and actively set out to do something about them."

Off-camera, Hays is less active in social causes. "I support Greenpeace and the Cousteau Society with donations, but I'm not much on groups.

It's easy for an actor to be misunderstood. People say, 'Hey, I saw him on TV, listen to what he's saying,' and that's a danger. I might agree with someone on a position, but that doesn't mean I agree with everything he says about everything, so I don't become publicly identified with issues."

The loner in Hays is also apparent in his private life. Rock climbing, skiing and flying (he's a qualified pilot) take up much of his recreation time. Although he is often touted as a "sex symbol" by such touters as *Cosmopolitan* magazine, he says he has never been a "chaser," and is now exclusively involved with a woman he has dated off and on since high school.

Back on the set, the dry ice machine has been turned on, and crew members are busy moving fans around to blow the mist in the proper direction. Koch walks by, and shares a joke with Hays.

Koch goes on to talk a little about the release of *Airplane II*. "I think we're pretty much already booked. There's about 17 or 18 states where the theatre owners have to see the film before they can bid on it, and we'll have it ready to show them in August or September. You know, there's always comparisons. Some people have even compared *Young Doctors in Love* to *Airplane!* But this one's great, with all the talent, and when Bob and Julie come on, we've got 'em." Koch asks if I have everything I need, and ambles off to check on the progress of the crew. "I'll be happy if we can just get this shot," he says.

In the "Production Information" package for *Airplane II*, the original *Airplane!* is described as "making an unprecedented impression on the American psyche." Allowing for a bit of indulgence by the publicity department, that's not altogether fanciful. A relatively low-budget, certainly oddball film, *Airplane!* achieved both critical and public acclaim for its performances, parody, and outright silliness. Whether *Airplane II: the Sequel* can re-capture the comedic feel of the original won't be discovered until its release in December. But if *Airplane II* even comes close to the success of its parent, Howard Koch won't be surprised, Robert Hays will be the richest man in the universe, and audiences will have something to really laugh about.