



Spaced Out

Mel Brooks Launches His Own Star Wars Defense System . . .

BY RICHARD LEVINSON

Mel Brooks' new film *Spaceballs* may do to science-fiction movies what his *Blazing Saddles* did to Westerns: make it forever impossible for an audience to sit through one without laughing in all the wrong places.

"I guess I got fed up with space movies," Brooks said. "I thought, 'Audiences want to see some guy in a black helmet with make-believe swords that come up like flashlights?' Still, something in me appreciated the professional work that went into them. The special effects were miraculous. But there was something else in me that said, 'What are they talking about? Is this a children's hospital?' It didn't make any sense to me. As a filmmaker, I was probably very jealous. So now, ten years later, we've got Rick Moranis in a black helmet."

Spaceballs also has Mel Brooks as the president of the United States and a two-foot-tall gnome named Yogurt; Daphne

Zuniga (also featured in this issue) plays "Her Spoiled Highness" from the planet Druidia (a Druid princess—get it?); Bill Pullman (*Ruthless People*) is a roguish space pilot named Lone Starr, and the whole thing is neatly wrapped up with the line, "May the Schwartz be with you." Pronounce it Schvartzuh, and it just might be.

Brooks' raspy New York accent, the slightly disheveled, harried look and the darting, manic eyes have all become part of his public persona, and he is now an easily recognizable celebrity, thanks to his movie

roles in *Blazing Saddles*, *High Anxiety*, *Silent Movie*, *The Twelve Chairs*, *To Be or Not to Be* and *History of the World, Part I*. But Brooks' presence also looms large as a behind-the-scenes force. He was a writer on the seminal *Your Show of Shows* in the early '50s. He was the co-creator of *Get Smart* and wrote, co-wrote and/or directed all of the comedy films mentioned above plus *The Producers* and *Young Frankenstein*. Add to that his classic album, *The 2000-Year-Old Man* (with Carl Reiner), and you've got a walking compendium of much that was funny in the last 30 years.

His company, Brooks Films, is also responsible for bringing to the screen *The Elephant Man*, *Frances*, *84 Charing Cross Road* and *My Favorite Year*, the latter a comedy based on Brooks' early experiences with television.

This afternoon, in his large corner office on the 20th Century Fox lot, Brooks looks just a little tired. Not weary, just a little tired, the way you might feel after a long day's work when by rights you should be able to put your feet up and relax.

"We're in the beginning of the furious editing mode on *Spaceballs*," Brooks said. "That is, everything stinks that we shot, nothing is good, and then, on second viewing, everything is wonderful and we're embarrassed by a surfeit of riches."

"I'm somewhere between Alfred Hitchcock [who was said to re-write, re-shoot and re-edit everything numerous times] and Mrs. Cohen." *Mrs. Cohen?*

"Mrs. Cohen is somebody I keep where I should have my superego. She's in a quadrant of my brain. She's a very smart woman, came from Russia when she was 13 years old. I usually bring her in for the rough cuts. She's always right. Actually, Mrs. Cohen is common sense. What I mean is, it's better to be simple and clear, rather than brilliant but murky. Mrs. Cohen straightens me out. She's the voice of reason."

But Mrs. Cohen isn't in there alone.

"In addition to Mrs. Cohen, there is sort of a . . . Kenneth Tynan demanding brilliant nuance. So, for every three I give to Mrs. Cohen, I give one to Kenneth Tynan."

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Mel Brooks the director:
"My job is to make people laugh."