



Article and Interview by **KARL WHITEZEL**

LARRY "BUSTER" CRABBE WAS A TRUE 20TH Century American icon. An Olympic Gold Medalist in swimming, and a hero on the silver screen, he wasn't bigger than life—he was as big as life could be. Although, early in his career, he shared the role of Tarzan with fellow Olympic hero, Johnny Weissmuller, he was known to several generations as the personification of both of America's first science fiction heroes, Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers.

In his later years, he shared reminiscences of his life and screen careers with author Karl Whitezel, who has gathered them into a wonderful volume titled *Buster Crabbe: A Self Portrait* (see ad on page 13). *Filmfax* proudly presents this excerpt from that book on the making of those classic serials, *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*, as told in the words of the star, himself—Buster Crabbe.



BUSTER CRABBE

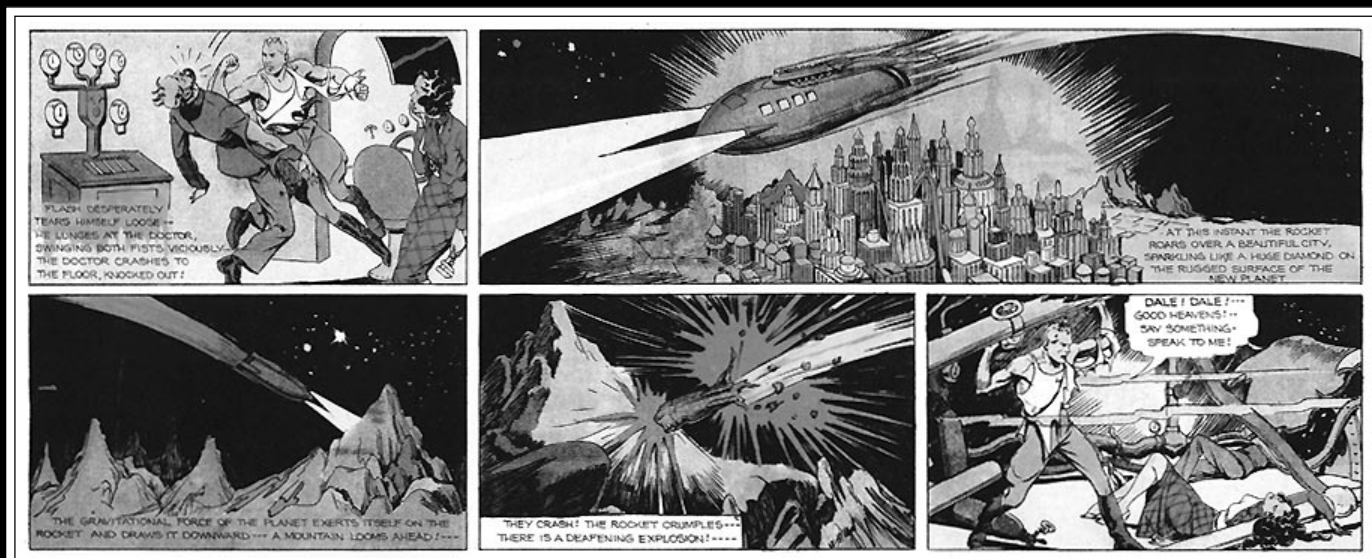
AN ALL-AMERICAN IN OUTER SPACE!

MORNING FLASH

I had breakfast late one August morning in 1936—one of the few times I wasn't up at the crack of dawn to work on a film. I browsed through the morning newspaper, working my way toward the comics section while enjoying my orange juice and coffee. Comic strips were a basic form of entertainment to many people during the depression, an art form that continued up to the 1950s, before television reduced its impact. Comics provided escape from the everyday routines of living.

50 **FILMFAX**

Flash Gordon was the brainchild of Alex Raymond back in the early '30s. *Buck Rogers* rode a high wave of popularity in American newspapers at that time, and had outer space all to himself. King Features, a syndicate with a stable full of artists, writers, and cartoonists working in the comic strip field, had been searching for a spaceman character to compete with *Buck Rogers*, and all ideas had failed until Raymond came onto the scene. Alex worked as a scenarist on canvas, but unsuccessfully. When King Features went outside its organization to find some-



Above: Early panels from Alex Raymond's Flash Gordon strip, documenting Flash, Zarkov, and Dale's crash-landing on the planet Mongo. Opposite page top: Buster Crabbe (left) as Flash. Rare one-sheet poster art (right) for the first chapter of the 1936 serial.

one to create a space hero, Alex was already looking for a way to put his artistry to more profitable use. He developed *Flash Gordon*, and King immediately put him under contract.

Flash became an instant hit that quickly caught up with the popularity of *Buck Rogers* in competing newspapers. Alex Raymond was a great artist, respected in the industry as one of the finest, whose bold outlines, use of vivid colors, and strikingly hand-

some characters, grabbed the attention of many readers, myself included. It didn't take *Flash* long to exceed the popularity of *Buck* and, within a year or two, King put Alex Raymond to work on another special project: to find a character to compete with the popular *Tarzan* comics. Alex's answer to



Buck Rogers artist, Dick Calkins, in character and at work, surrounded by artifacts from the future.

the form of *Jungle Jim*, who possessed less of the savagery, and a more contemporary approach to jungle justice than *Tarzan*.

Like *Flash* had done earlier, *Jungle Jim* fit the bill at King Features and was accepted by readers, although it never ⇒



Classic poster artwork for Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars.

approached the popularity of *Tarzan*. It's an interesting coincidence that Johnny Weissmuller and I, having once competed for the *Tarzan* lead, eventually came to dominate all four of these roles in the movies. Johnny and I both played Tarzan at the beginning of our careers, but he became *the* Tarzan, and when he grew too old for the rigors of the series, he became Jungle Jim—the *only* Jungle Jim. On the other hand, I became Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. In short, Johnny ruled the jungle, and I was master of outer space.



Flash Gordon artist Alex Raymond at work in his studio.

thought, with bleached hair, he'd be great. The other actor I recognized was Jon Hall. He was a swimmer and an athlete with a nice physique, good looking features, and also would have been good in the role.

I recognized two of the actors right away. One of them was the guy I thought would make a perfect Flash, a fellow named George Berganian. He was a health nut who was good looking and had played in several bit parts around town. I'd worked with him a couple of times and, as I looked at him, I

to borrow you."

He kept his eyes on mine, as if trying to read my responses before I spoke them. I looked back at the stage.

"You've got some pretty good talent up there now." "The part is yours if you want it," he said matter-of-factly, continuing to wait for my consent.

"What makes you think I'd fit the part?"

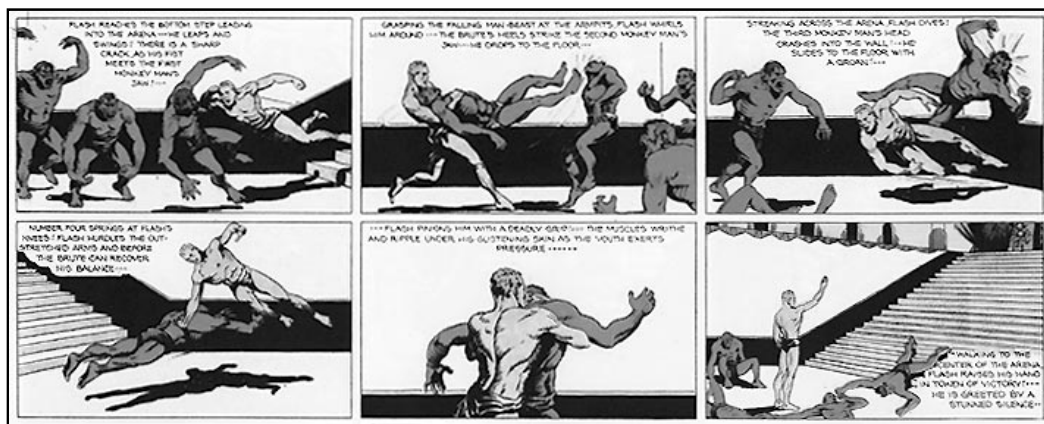
"I've seen some of your features. Alex Raymond and I discussed what qualities to look for in casting the lead, and from what I've seen of your work, you fit the bill."

"But I haven't even tested for the part."

"It's yours if you want it." Somehow I got the impression that if I flat out said "No," he'd have persisted.

"That's up to Paramount. If they say you can borrow me, then I'd be willing to play the part."

After finishing my paper that August morning, I relaxed in the living room with a copy of the *Hollywood Reporter*, the trade journal of the movie industry. I happened across an article stating that Universal Studios was going to make a serial called *Flash Gordon*, and they were in the process of testing for the lead. I was kind of curious. I had followed old Flash in the papers for some time, and I pictured several actors in my mind who I thought would make good Flash Gordons. A guy on another planet was a way-out theme in those days, but still interesting enough to tickle the imaginations of adventurous souls. I wasn't on call that day, so I decided to run out to Universal and watch the testing.



Six panels from the original Flash Gordon strip, detailing Flash's wrestling match with the Red Monkey Men of Mongo.

I stood around for half an hour or so, watching the actors jump around the stage, speak a few lines, and perform whatever actions the director requested. Some were excused after the first run-through while others were given more time and kept to one side for another look. The producer of the picture was there, Henry MacRae, and at one point in the testing he walked over to where I was standing and introduced himself.

"You're Buster Crabbe, aren't you?" he asked.

I smiled and nodded, shaking his hand.

"Are you here to try out for the part?"

"No, sir. I read about the testing and I had nothing better to do, so I thought I'd come over and watch. Is it okay?"

"Sure. Glad to have you," he said. He was silent for a minute, standing beside me as we both watched an actor go through his routine on stage. "How would you like to play the part?"

"Me?" I knew who he meant, but I hadn't come to get the part. My interest was only in satisfying my curiosity. I honestly thought *Flash Gordon* was too far-out, and that it would flop at the box office. God knew I'd been in enough turkeys during my four years as an actor; I didn't need another one.

"I'm under contract to Paramount," I said.

"I don't know what plans they have for me."

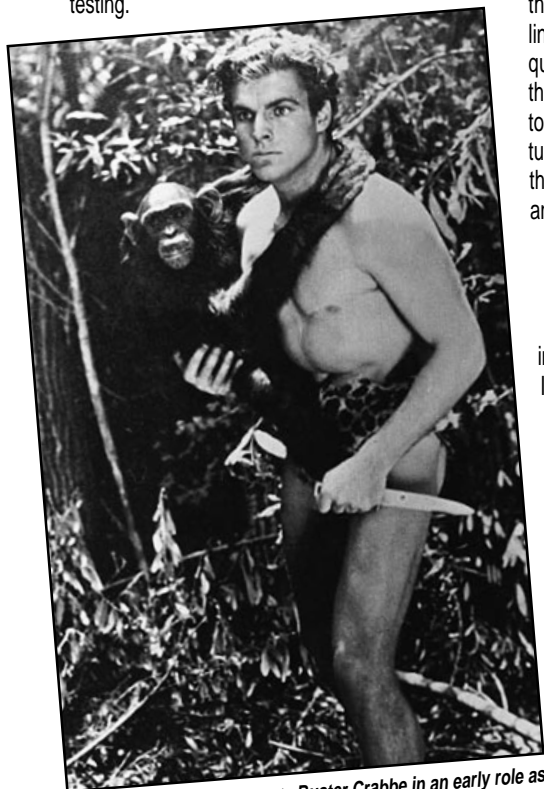
"I know about your contract. We'll arrange

On that note, we shook hands, said good-bye, and I left. On the way home, I reflected upon the conversation. I kind of hoped my boss would say, "No, Buster wasn't available," that, instead, I was going to be used in a DeMille, class-A production.

I didn't test for the part, nor was I ever asked to. Within a month after my conversation with Henry MacRae on the Universal sound stage, I got a call from my boss at Paramount, informing me that I had been loaned out to do the *Flash Gordon* serial. The production crew and cast were among the best talents available for what was going to be a B-movie.

With my advance copy of the script, I went over it page by page, marking the places that pertained to Flash. I didn't have to memorize the dialog, like I would for a stage play, but I wanted to be familiar with the story-line so I could read Flash's moods and feel the part. If I knew how the story went, I could handle my lines when the time came. It never took me more than a few minutes to commit my sentences to memory. After all, *Flash* was an action picture; we never talked anyone to death. Plotting out the action sequences was usually more difficult than doing the dialog.

Just before Universal began filming the serial, I had to report to a hair dresser on Hollywood Boulevard to have my hair bleached. Having always looked out at the world from under a dark brow, it was an



best thing we had at the time. Glenn Strange was the actor who dragged the Gocko around. He eventually became a well-known character actor in Hollywood, playing the part of Frankenstein's monster during the '40s, and Sam, the bartender on the *Gunsmoke* television series.

Flash was trapped in a [cavern] on Mongo, with the Gocko closing in for the kill, spurring fire at me as it approached. Surrounded on three sides by sheer [rock], there was no way out and, as usual, I was weaponless. It moved closer and closer as I pressed back against the rock, the fire raging toward me. With a final zoom of the telephoto lens into the jet of flames, the chapter ended with the audience supposedly unnerved by my impending destruction. Obviously, on the set, we didn't stop our action at the place where each chapter was to end. We continued on with the scene to its logical (or illogical) conclusion, and stopped only when we were finished with either

Ray sold his services to our producer for the part of the Orangupoid—a gorilla with a huge horn on its forehead. The ape and I had a fight scene that lasted all of a minute and a half on the screen, but the gorilla costume was so heavy that every time Ray would take one or two swipes at me, he'd have to go sit down, remove the gorilla head, and rest. A few minutes later, we'd start rolling again. Ray would grunt, lumber toward me, then sit down to rest again. The director thought the short battle would take only a half hour to film, but Ray managed to stretch it to a day and a half! After about the fifth time we stopped, I couldn't help laughing at Crash's exhaustion.



That's stuntman Ray "Crash" Corrigan in the Orangupoid suit, wrestling with Buster Crabbe.

back to the set for more shooting until ten at night or so, or whenever it was convenient to quit. We did this day in and day out, week in and week out, only taking Sundays off if we were on schedule. I usually got home at eleven at night, went right to bed, and arose the next morning at six or earlier. Those of us who had home lives during that time almost became strangers to our families.

Flash Gordon was an ambitious project for 1936, when you consider the \$750,000 budget we had to work with. Even Cecil B. DeMille didn't use much more than that for his class-A films in the mid-1930s. But **Flash** required the use of a lot of extras, and a lot of footage to make 13 chapters, plus many special effects that would help



The fire-breathing, lobster-clawed, cavern-dwelling Gocko, as seen in the *Flash Gordon* serial (left) and the original Alex Raymond strip.

the scene or the set-up. Time was at a premium because we had only six weeks to do the entire 13 chapters of the serial. So long as the Gocko and I were in position, the camera man zoomed back, and the action continued.

My face was moistened to make me look sweaty from the heat, and I flinched and grimaced in response to the implied pain. The closest Glenn got in this contraption was about 30 feet but, by utilizing different camera angles, it looked like I was being scorched. As the succeeding chapter began, I was saved by Prince Barin in the nick of time. He blasted the dragon with his ray gun, from a ledge above me, and we got back into the business of trying to stop Ming's conquest of Earth.

Ray "Crash" Corrigan, a stuntman in our **Flash Gordon** serial, became a class-B cowboy hero of the 1940s as part of the Three Mesquiteers (with Max Terhune and John Wayne, before the Duke was replaced by Robert Livingston). Crash was somewhat of an inventor, as well as an actor and stuntman. He spent years hand-making a gorilla costume, complete from head to foot, sewn horsehair by horsehair until the suit was completed. The entire costume ended up costing him \$5,000, so whenever Crash wasn't working in the suit, he had some other man work it for him.

"How much does that thing weigh?"
"About 100 pounds too much. The biggest problem is I didn't ventilate it properly. It's hotter than hell in this get-up."

Director Frederick Stephani ranted endlessly throughout the wasted afternoon. "Who hired that stupid ape? Why the hell couldn't we have hired a real gorilla?" None of this did Crash's ego any good, but once we were committed to the scene, there was little to be done but proceed with it as best we could. Along with a little pride, Crash probably lost 20 pounds by the time we finished the scene.

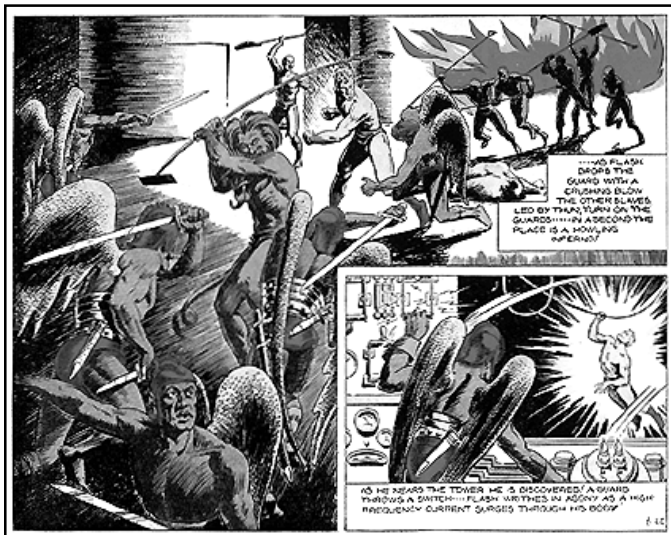
When the filming began, we were on the set at seven each morning, broke for half an hour at lunchtime, then went back to work until five or six. We'd break for an hour to have dinner at the studio commissary or a nearby restaurant—depending on how we were costumed—and then reported

make outer space seem realistic. A lot of the success of the serial was owed to Eddie Keyes, the director of special effects at Universal.





Above: Flash, Thun, and Prince Barin protect a fallen comrade from a Hawk Man in the atom furnace room. Right: Alex Raymond's illustrated version of the furnace room revolt.



He introduced to motion pictures such phenomena as ray guns, flying rocket ships, fire-breathing dragons, bridges of light that actors could walk across, and walls that Clay men could walk through. His was a world of making the unbelievable believable. While monsters and dragons and death-ray demolitions were part of the scenes we actually worked among, much of Eddie's magic was done in the film processing and editing rooms, where the effects were often added in the post-production stages.

In one of the episodes where Flash witnessed the disintegration of a stone idol when Ming blasted it with his ray gun, it was Eddie Keyes who developed the method of making the statue melt on cue. He made a plaster-of-Paris mold from an original clay sculpture. Once hardened, he lined the inside surfaces of the mold with tiny steel shavings that were held together by electromagnetic current running through a steel plate on the table. When the shavings had been sprinkled to the desired thickness in each half of the mold, he closed the two halves to form a whole statue, then removed the mold. Each particle of steel clung to the other by magnetic force. With a non-metallic knife and tweezers, he removed all traces of the joining seams and touched up the detail. Finally, a light coat of paint was sprayed over

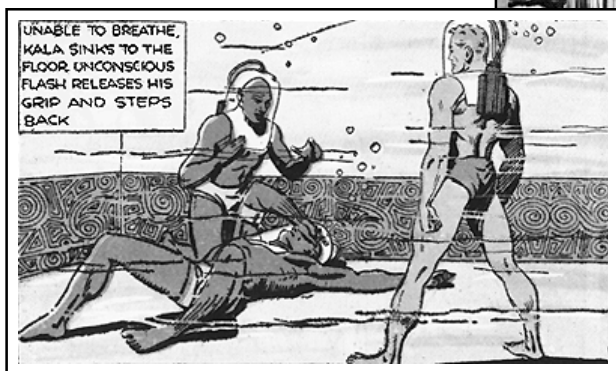
the hollow, steel idol, to make it resemble stone.

On cue from the director—which coincided with Ming's firing of the ray gun—Eddie pressed a switch to cut the magnetic current, and the hollow steel statue collapsed, making it appear like a stone statue melting. He even had a fail-safe mechanism built into the table, in case the paint on the statue set too firmly or residual magnetism lingered in the metal shell: a vibrator jiggled the table with enough force to make the statue melt. Even today, in an age of actual space exploration, I find Eddie's technique fascinating. It doesn't seem likely that any other effect, short of an actual ray gun melting real stone, could produce a more convincing illusion than was developed by him in 1936.

A lot of planning went into each scene in order to take advantage of the make-up and sets that were being used on any given day. We stole a lot of existing sets from other movies—otherwise, our picture easily would have exceeded a million dollars. We

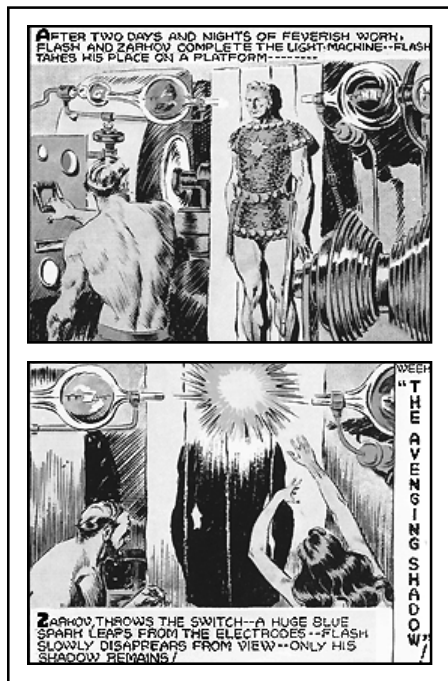
acted in front of sets that Charles Laughton used in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (the walls of that church were the outer walls of Ming's castle), and we used the interior of the opera house from Lon Chaney's *Phantom of the Opera*. If a set wasn't being used on the Universal lot, our crew found some way to fit it into the script, so long as it was appropriate. Preparing all the extras in make-up was the most awkward part of the scheduling.

We had Clay men, Lion men, Monkey men, Tree men, monsters, and humanoids of every description, running through the plot. Universal had a battery of make-up assistants who spent hours, every morning, preparing the cast and extras for the day's shooting. Because of the time and expense, the director tried to shoot every possible scene that required actors in make-up of a particular kind within that day. If the shooting log had Clay men scheduled, every scene in the script that had Clay men was shot consecutively, until all scenes featuring them →



Opposite page, bottom: Buster Crabbe and Jean Rogers as Flash Gordon and Dale Arden. Above: Flash defeats Kala, King of the Shark Men in the Alex Raymond strip, and (right) in the 1936 Flash Gordon serial.





Left: Flash is rendered invisible in the original comic strip. Above: Flash reassures Dale as Zarkov and Barin watch on.

were done. Compartmentalized, chopped, and shuffled, the 13 chapters didn't make a lot of sense while we were shooting them, but in the editing room, it was all pieced into proper chronology.

The first *Flash Gordon* was wrapped up in six weeks, just before Christmas of 1936. There was no cast party, as often is done for class-A movies. Some of the actors went across the street to a bar, to celebrate the end of our long ordeal. The director might pat us on the back and say, "nice job, guys," but that was it.

All-American Olympic swimmer Buster Crabbe emerges from the pool after a workout.



I'd done six movies in 1936—all class-B fare—and I still yearned to get into a class-A picture. Action was fun and the pay was good but, for all the acting practice I was getting, I wanted to see how good I could really be.

My contract was renewed in 1937, at \$500 a week, but the extra money did little to off-set the rising frustration in me. My family already was living pretty well and we had plenty of money in the bank. Another \$5,000 a year didn't mean all that much to me. I romped around in such classic pap as *Murder Goes to College* and *Sophie Lang Goes West*, without half trying to act. It was only stock stuff that the studios ground out like so much grain in a mill.

When *Flash Gordon* hit the theaters in early 1937, it turned out to be a big hit. According to Universal's front office, *Flash* grossed the second-biggest income the studio had that year. At the time, I wasn't aware of the impact *Flash* would have on my life. I was very pleased with the reception audiences gave to the serial, but in the back of my mind was the thought—the fear—that I might never get out of my secondary acting role.

I did seven movies that were released in '37, none too exciting. One was called *Thrill of a Lifetime*, with Judy Canova, Betty Grable, and Carol Matthews. It was the first—and last—time I ever sang in a movie. Paramount hired Franchon and Marco, a song and dance team from Broadway, to produce and choreograph the musical numbers. Franchon—who I thought was a peach of a gal—talked me into singing a song in the movie, titled, "There Oughta Be a Moonlight Savings Time." It was a light-hearted ditty sung to Betty Grable. Franchon took a lot of time with me to get the song just the way she wanted it, and to show my limited singing ability to its best possible advantage. I thought it was fun, although it wasn't a part of

my career that promised me immortality. My movie work ranged through a spectrum of musicals, westerns, gangster films, and general suspense, none of it Academy Award stuff.

When 1938 came, and Paramount boosted my salary to \$600 a week, I took what consolation I could from the fact that I was working and earning good money, even though I felt like a stable actor, locked in a lackluster career. Our second daughter, Susan, was born on April 3, 1938, another beauty who gave me a renewed sense of satisfaction that even if I couldn't take pride in my movies, I could in my offspring.

When Universal borrowed me to make a second *Flash Gordon* serial in 1938, using the same cast of supporting characters as the original, I was pleased. Pleased because, even though it wasn't a class-A film, Flash lent me a degree of identification; fans knew me as Flash Gordon. It was like a family reunion when we gathered on the set for the pre-production staff meeting. I had my hair bleached again, but I didn't mind so much this time. Chuck Middleton, Jean Rogers, and Frank Shannon were back in their original roles, although Jean played Dale as a brunette instead of a blonde, because she was working on another movie at the same time.

We started the routine of long days and short nights again, to grind out what would become a lesser product than the first had been, quality-wise. The producer took short-cuts, such as reusing some of the rocket ship footage filmed earlier, and replaying some of the landscape shots, assuming that audiences wouldn't know the difference. It was released that same year, and I never attempted to learn how well it did for Universal. Judging from the fact that, two years later, I would be called back for a third *Flash Gordon* serial, I assume it was almost as successful as the first had been.

I hadn't forgotten about swimming. After working during the day—especially if it wasn't a long



Above: Sonja watches as Flash confronts Azura, Queen of Magic, in her throne room. Right: The original comic strip.



shooting day—I usually stopped by the Hollywood Athletic Club to swim, play handball, or lift weights, because of the convenient location to Paramount. The habit of swimming for speed and stamina in a 30- or 45-minute work-out each day had stuck with me from my childhood. While I was no longer associated with the AAU, I still engaged in competitive swimming when circumstances permitted.

After doing *Red Barry* for Universal late in 1938—my fourth serial, about a detective in Chinatown—my contract year came to an end at Paramount. Assuming that I'd be picked up again for 1939, it came as a mild shock to me to learn that I'd been given my release from the studio. Finally, I had come to the point where I could make a decision about my own future: either fade off into law school, or look for another studio to take me on. While my career had shown as much progress as a hamster in an exercise wheel, I had developed a certain number of fans as an actor. So when I faced the decision to chuck it all, at age 31, I realized that a lot of time had passed since I'd last promised myself a law career. I was no longer sure it was a good alternative to acting.

I tenaciously clung to the belief that I could be more of an actor than I'd been given a chance to show. Having dedicated six years of my life to the profession, I felt that I owed it to myself to test the waters of my future more thoroughly. My experience and name might give me an in at another studio, and an opportunity to star in a quality picture that had been denied me at Paramount.

I did some readings for 20th Century-Fox, hoping to pick up a contract with them. They gave me a screen test, with tears and all, and while the crew complimented me on my reading, nothing came of it.

Darryl F. Zanuck headed up Fox at that time, and he didn't make many films that didn't at least recover production costs. The fact that I'd recently done a part in Fox's *Sailor's Lady*, which played at all Fox theaters, was probably instrumental in getting me the screen test. But Zanuck, after seeing the test, commented, "He's a character actor! We can hire all of them we need..." I didn't get a contract.



Double-bill ad for the retitled theatrical releases of the first two serials as feature films.

Morrie Small, my agent, wasn't geared to furthering my career as an independent, so we parted company. I had been approached by Lou Snitzer to represent me as an agent, so I signed with his company in the hopes that whatever he stirred up for me would be either good enough to sustain my present level of income, or of such quality that my acting would blossom into a worthwhile pursuit. Having an excellent knowledge of the production roster in Hollywood, Lou got me the lead role in Universal's serial, *Buck Rogers*.

Lou certainly had my best interests at heart. It was when we signed to do the *Buck Rogers* serial that I discovered how much Paramount had exploited me while I was under contract to them. During my six years at Paramount, earning from \$500 to \$600 a week, they were making several thousand dollars a week from lending me to other studios. As their property, I was sent to other studios to make nine films, in addition to the 26 I did for Paramount, and by computing my salary and fees, my six years cost them absolutely nothing. It didn't cost them a cent to keep me, because of the big returns I brought to them on loan-outs. I felt cheated. I was only an expediency to them. I think it would have pleased me to know that my salary was at least part of their overhead, but it wasn't. I came free. So my agent went out and began to pick up some of that money, which made my salary jump to \$1,000 a week in 1939.

Buck Rogers was the fifth serial in my career, a 12-episode affair directed by Ford Beebe and Saul Goodkind. It was a story about two Earthlings frozen in suspended animation (a fore-runner of cryogenics?) who are awakened in the 25th century. A battle between the forces of good and evil had erupted in the universe, and the destiny of Earth hung in the balance. Although the art of rocketry and laser weaponry had reached a very advanced state, the American government of the future was quick to recognize the superior intelligence of Buck Rogers, and persuaded him to champion their cause at the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Buck was a brunet, like me, which was nice for a change. Jackie Moran played the part of Buddy, my 20th century companion, which gave us a sort →



a dial, Kane could observe every part of his city from a control panel in his office. He even had the ability to zoom in for close-ups. (No fan ever asked where all the TV cameras were supposed to be located, and Universal didn't labor over



Across top: Original Buck Rogers comic strip art. Above, top down: Prince Talon, Buck, and Buddy subdue one of Killer Kane's henchmen. The three companions take cover. Kane lackey in an amnesia helmet.

58 FILMFX

of Batman and Robin relationship, while the love interest was provided by Constance Moore in the role of Wilma, 25th century American (see Constance Moore interview on page 60). Killer Kane (Anthony Warde) sought to overpower the American stronghold—a last bastion against Kane's dictatorship—from America's hidden city, buried snugly within a mountain range.

Kane's principal weapon—other than the omnipresent disintegrator pistols—was a contraption known as the amnesia helmet, a device that, when affixed to a captive's head, made him robot-like and easily manipulated. Kane's robot slaves worked in the dynamo room, supplying power to run his city. Both sides maintained rocket ships as their major source of transportation and warfare (no one knew what a ballistic missile was, in those days, so warfare of the future was perceived as being from manned vehicles). As with *Flash Gordon*, similar rocket ships were used; slow, bulky, and symptomatic of human gastrointestinal distress in sound effect.

Buck instinctively knew the right side from the wrong, and volunteered his services. With the battle on Earth at a stalemate, Kane sought alliance from the creatures of Saturn, so Buck, a natural diplomat, raced to the ringed planet with a similar idea in mind. The two antagonists became locked in a struggle for the foreign ally—Kane promising wealth and a share of Earth in return for help, while Buck tried to achieve *detente*. I offered the all-American principles of truth, justice, and morality—ideals that didn't go very far when it came to feeding hungry Saturnians—so Kane won Saturn to his side for an episode or two. With unruffled galactic poise, Buck continued his diplomatic maneuvering until he succeeded in causing enough vacillation to keep Saturn neutral. With that attained, Buck switched to leading the assault on Kane's city. The Americans had to find a way to penetrate the dynamo room.

Kane's domain was protected by a television monitoring system. By manipulating

trying to explain it. It was all ahead of its time, anyway, so who would be the wiser?)

Buck, in order to gain access to Kane's city, utilized the anti-gravity belt—a rocket kit, attached to his back, which enabled him to fly through the air *a la* the "real" Buck Rogers in the comic strip. However, Universal used them primarily for descending, rather than for flying around the set, since a downward motion was easier to facilitate than an upward or lateral one. We confined the belts to jumping out of buildings or disabled ships, because shooting such scenes was a slow process, and therefore costly.

In one scene, Buddy and I were gyrating through the atmosphere in a rocket ship when we were attacked by Kane's forces. Blasted out of the sky,



Buddy and I jumped to safety by using our belts. A shell of the rocket ship was elevated on the sound stage about eight feet above the floor. A film loop of clouds rushing by was shown on a back-screen to give the illusion of a rocket hurtling through the sky, and wind from a large fan furthered the deception as we crawled out onto the rocket's stabilizers. One at a time, we jumped to a padded area below camera range. The director would cut, the ship's shell would be rolled out of the way, piano wires would be attached to our "anti-gravity" belts, and the cloud film would become stationary. Hoisted 15 feet up, the cameras would roll again and we would be lowered by "rocket power" slowly to the Earth.

In the end, Buck triumphed, taking over the dynamo room and using the amnesia helmets to work against Killer Kane. For his valor, Buck was promoted to full colonel, and given the hand of lovely Wilma Deering. The serial was subsequently shown under a variety of re-released titles, as a feature movie called *Planet Outlaws*, *Rocket Ship*, and *Destination Saturn*.

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A die later too with complete Plastic Moulds and Lead. Large 100% figure of Buck, Wilma and Killer Kane. Includes moulds, clamps, handles, large supply of lead, moulds for making moulds, a generous case of paint, and 2 brushes. Shipping box in New Zealand only.

Buck Rogers Caster is Made by the Makers of JUNIOR CASTER

Left: Title card from Planet Outlaws, the theatrical release of the Buck Rogers serial. Above: This Depression-Era ad for the Buck Rogers lead figure casting kit put a unique spin on its sales approach: "Make Money with these Popular Toys." If they only knew!

By early Spring of 1940, Universal was faced with the decision of whether to make a second **Buck Rogers** serial or a third **Flash Gordon**. Once they compared the revenues of the two serials, the choice became an easy one: I was contracted to star in my sixth career serial, and third **Flash Gordon**, at a flat fee of \$25,000 for the one serial. I was well on my way to becoming the king of the serials, with virtually no one in Hollywood coming close to that number as a leading man. Many actors shunned working in the action episodes, thinking such roles belonged to second-rate actors. Most "name" stars at Paramount, RKO, and even Universal thought serials were for the birds, just "kiddie" stuff, and wouldn't be caught dead in one. But I was making a better living than most corporate executives and, while it was true the roles didn't call for exceptional acting, I was glad my independent status was sustaining itself.

I didn't like the final **Flash Gordon** serial. We used a lot of scenes that we'd done before, the uniforms were the same, the scenery was the same. Universal had a library full of old clips: Flash running from here

to there, Ming going from one palace to another, exterior shots of flying rocket ships and milling crowds. It saved a lot of production time, but I thought it was a poor product that was nothing more than a doctored-up script from earlier days.

There were other differences, too. Dick Alexander, who played Prince Barin in the first two serials, was replaced by Roland Drew; Priscilla Lawson was replaced by Shirley Deane, as Aura; and Jean Rogers dropped out for other acting roles, leaving Dale Arden in the hands of Carol Hughes. Flash didn't seem much like Flash anymore, surrounded by strangers, cheated out of original scenes, and deviating from Alex Raymond's original concepts. Being a perfectionist, I regretted that we couldn't remain true to either the creator's intentions or the prototype series that had been so successful. I guess my instincts were borne out, because that was the last **Flash Gordon** movie made, not what Universal would call successful at the box office.



Buster Crabbe mans the controls of his rocket in the third serial in the trilogy, **Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe**.

Following the filming of **Flash Gordon** in 1940, I took the rest of the year off to star in Billy Rose's Aquacade show. Johnny Weissmuller had just completed a string with the New York showman, and I signed to take his place opposite Eleanor Holm as one of the lead swimming attractions.

Just before Christmas of 1940, I went home to Virginia and our two girls. We had purchased a lodge in the mountains at Lake Arrowhead earlier that year, and looked forward to spending our first Christmas with the children among the snow-crowned pines by the lake that sat 80 miles east of Los Angeles. Singing Christmas carols in front of the roaring fireplace seemed a proper way to close out a successful year. My income—even though I made only three pictures as an independent actor—far surpassed my salary while I was at Paramount, and I was back at swimming again, this time for added profit. I wasn't much concerned about the new year or what it would bring for me. We were comfortable, financially. At age 32, I was very contented. Ω

For more on **Flash Gordon**, see the feature in *Filmfax* #45, and an interview with Jean "Dale Arden" Rogers in *Filmfax* #46.



Slick poster art for the final **Flash Gordon** serial.