

STARBUCKS



CHRISTOPHER REEVE & RICHARD PRYOR IN
SUPERMAN III



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RICHARD LESTER



I'm about to reveal something remarkable about Richard Lester, associate producer on *Superman 1* and director of *Superman 2*: he once immigrated to Australia.

Yes, it's true. Disturbed by Britain's involvement in the Suez crisis of 1957 he and his wife decided to leave the country and immigrate to Australia. "But we only lasted out there for about 7 weeks," he admitted. "I'm afraid we weren't too impressed by the place. And I also felt so far away from things that I recognised and understood. I began to feel increasingly desperate and paranoid as our money

dwindled. We kept saying, "Well, we can still afford to leave if we want to..." but as it got closer to the point where we would have to cash in one of our return tickets we began to feel, well, *trapped*...

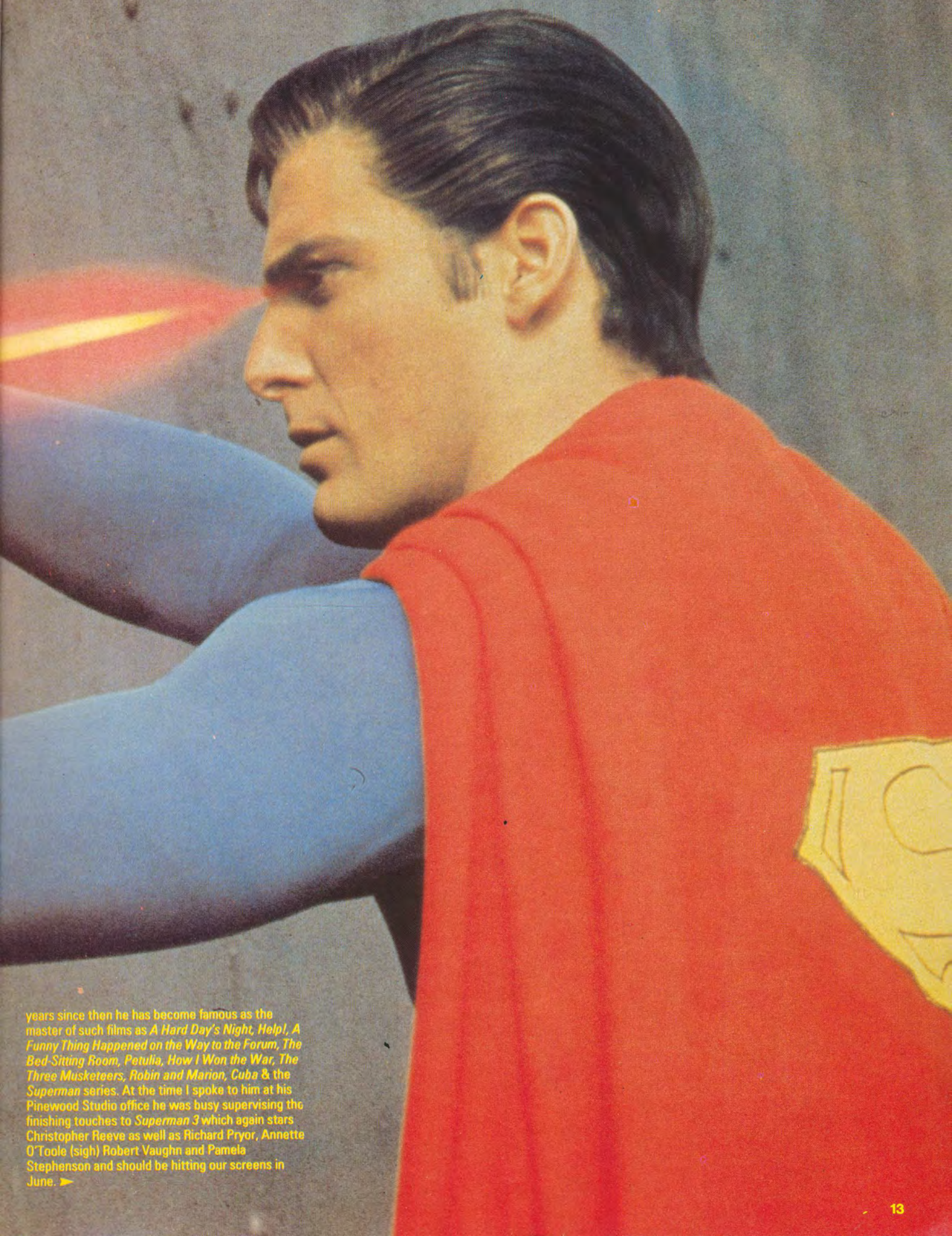
"I was offered a job as a tv producer but it was about £5 less a week than it was costing me to live. And there was no real future in Australian tv for me at the time. TV was in its infancy there, you might say, in 1957. I appeared twice on tv while I was in Australia—once in Sydney and once in Melbourne—and both times the floor in the studio was not yet dry. They were sort of *mud-packed* floors. In Melbourne I was

guest on a programme called *I've Got a Secret* and every single thing went wrong. For example it was a half-hour show but it ran over length by 27 minutes. And when the woman with the secret was announcing what it was someone pushed the wrong button and as a result we, on the panel heard it but the audience didn't. So the moderator turned to the woman and asked her, "Have you got *another* secret?"

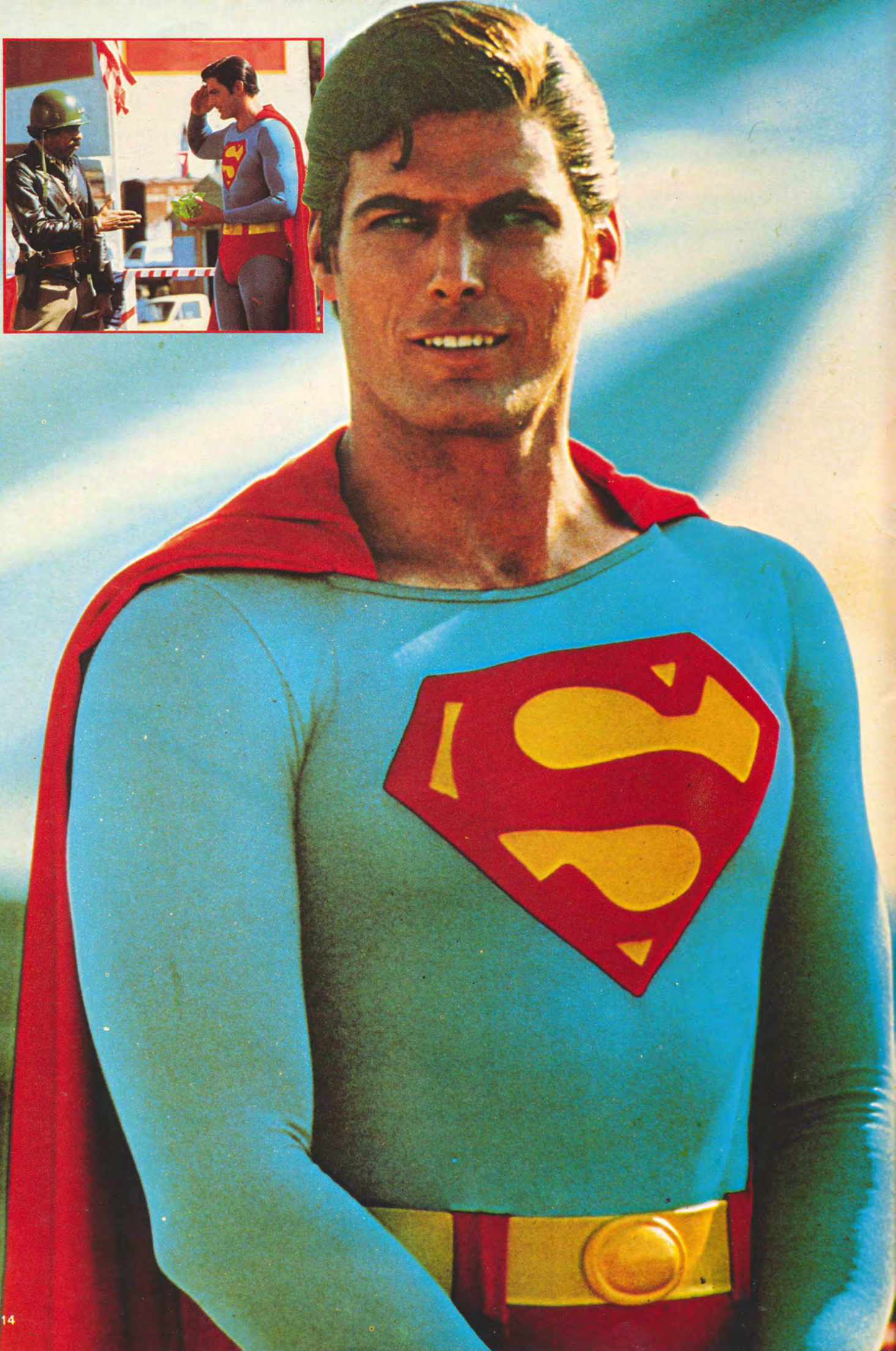
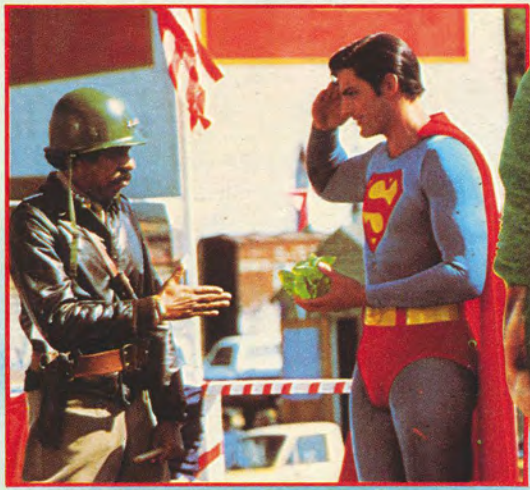
Experiences like that helped convince Lester and his wife to use their return tickets while they still had them and they arrived back in England in 1958. In the

ER on SUPERMAN III

Interview by John Brosnan



years since then he has become famous as the master of such films as *A Hard Day's Night*, *Help!*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *The Bed-Sitting Room*, *Petulia*, *How I Won the War*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Robin and Marion*, *Cuba* & the *Superman* series. At the time I spoke to him at his Pinewood Studio office he was busy supervising the finishing touches to *Superman 3* which again stars Christopher Reeve as well as Richard Pryor, Annette O'Toole (sigh) Robert Vaughn and Pamela Stephenson and should be hitting our screens in June. ►



Though he's lived most of his life in Britain Richard Lester is actually an American. He was born in Philadelphia in 1932 and soon became something of a child prodigy, starting school at the age of 3 and university at 15. "It's been downhill ever since," said Lester.

While at university he formed a singing group which was hired by a local tv station. The group was soon fired but Lester stayed on as a stage hand and worked there for about 2 years. By that time he was a producer even though he was still only 20. "It all happened very quickly," he said, "Because it was a period of very rapid expansion in American tv and Philadelphia was at the centre of it. Eventually all the companies moved out to Hollywood but from 1948 to 1952 Philadelphia had a very good innings.

"At one point I was working on 12 different networked programmes a week. It was slave labour really. We all worked round the clock. On Sundays I worked as a puppet handler on something called *In the Park*. There was a man on a park bench with some animals that were arm puppets. I would crouch behind the wall and change the puppets around, and if the crow had to smoke I was the one blowing smoke up its bum with a tube.

"All these shows were live, of course, and the sound was always a problem especially with the westerns. We had to hide the microphones all over the place – under bushes, behind cactuses etc. Once a horse bit a microphone in two during a love scene and people rang up the station to find out what the hell had happened."

When he turned 21 Lester gave up live tv and set off around the world, earning money – but not much of it – by playing pianos in bars or guitars in streets. He arrived, broke, in England at the beginning of 1955. "I only came here because everyone spoke English. I knew that I couldn't earn a proper living in a non-English speaking country. I never really intended to stay but then I met a few people who were involved in fairly interesting work – they were just beginning in tv, or the theatre, playwrighting or acting – and living a Bohemian kind of life and suddenly I felt *at home* with this group of people whose thinking seemed to click with mine."

So he stayed. And very quickly things started happening for him. First, thanks to his tv experience, he was hired by one of the then new commercial tv companies, ARTV, to train British tv directors and this led to an opportunity of doing his own tv show. He was still only 23.

"It was one in a series of live half-hour programmes and I performed it ad-lib with a then out-of-work actor called Alun Owen. It was called modestly enough, *The Dick Lester Show* and it went out just before Christmas – between *Dragnet* and commercial tv's first pantomime – so we got the third highest rating in the country because people didn't bother to switch off. The show itself was totally incomprehensible and the critical reaction was absolutely terrible but Peter Sellers saw it and decided it was either a piece of sheer surrealistic genius or sheer rubbish. He suggested we should meet and it turned out we got along very well together. And so we devised the first of the TV Goon Shows.

"We did three series: *Idiot's Weekly*, *A Show Called Fred* and *Son of Fred*. I just directed the series, I didn't write any of them. They were written by Spike Milligan and Eric Sykes, along with a group that included Terry Nation, Johnny Speight, John Antrobus, John Junkin and Dave Freeman. Most of them had never written before. We did some marvellous things in the show and it had amazing critical acclaim but unfortunately, because it was live, none of them were ever recorded."

It was after doing *Son of Fred* that Lester's Australian interlude occurred. When he returned to England he met up with Michael Bentine and started writing for him, as well as directing his tv shows and acting in his radio programmes. He also resumed his friendship with Peter Sellers and together they came up with the idea for *The Running, Jumping and Standing Still Film*. "One Sunday we just went out into a field with Peter's camera, some stolen props and shot the film. We were all in it – our friends, Peter's chauffeur – and we made it for £70. We put it



together in Sellers' room on his drum kit with a small editing machine."

The 11 minute Goon comedy soon acquired a cult reputation, helped by many good reviews, and ended up being nominated for an Oscar. All this served to convince Lester that directing films was where his future lay rather than with television. And then shortly afterwards he was given his first chance to direct a feature – by none other than *Starburst's* old friend Milton Subotsky.

"They gave me a 22 page script for *It's Trad, Dad!* which I thought was the outline but turned out to be the *whole* shooting script. And so off I went. I got the offer only 2 or 3 weeks before shooting was due to start and we had to shoot it all within 3 weeks so we moved fast. We shot about 35 or 36 different musical numbers – a lot of Trad bands, Dixieland bands, like Acker Bilk, Chris Barber, Humphrey Littleton, George Melly – and we had Helen Shapiro and Craig Douglas, the Singing Milkman . . .

"During the shooting the Twist suddenly became the current dance craze in the States so I said to the producer, wouldn't it be a terrific idea for our final sequence if we could show everyone doing the Twist instead of jitterbugging. We'd be the first movie to have it. And I said we could go over and shoot some of these new artists in America. And the producers said – Great, if you'll pay your own way over. So I had to pay my own fare over to New York. We shot 2½ days with Chubby Checker, the king of the Twist, then went racing back to England and stuck him in the film. More or less just opened the tin and threw the footage in . . ."

It's Trad, Dad! received some good reviews and in spite of costing only £60,000 ended up as Columbia's third most successful film of 1962. It was this achievement that was mainly responsible for Lester getting the assignment to direct *A Hard Day's Night*. "It came about for rather sordid reasons. United Artists wanted to do a quick exploitation film of the Beatles and knew I had done a quick musical exploitation film so they asked me."

A Hard Day's Night was, of course, a tremendous success making not only a fortune at the box office but also attracting critical acclaim. Suddenly Richard Lester was famous . . .

The next few years were extremely good for him, both professionally and personally but towards the end of the 1960s things went sour. First a planned project with controversial playwright Joe Orton, which would have starred Mick Jagger, had to be abandoned when Orton was murdered by his lover. As an alternative Lester quickly made *The Bed-Sitting Room*, a black comedy set in England after World War 3. This turned out to be the least successful of all his movies. "It never even played in the States. United Artists sent out a publicity sheet saying something like: 'This movie is so funny few people will understand it.' A *great* piece of copy. They didn't even give it a press show in the States because they thought the reviews would be bad. It did play in one cinema in New York and *Time* magazine gave it a rave review but by the time the review came out the picture was already off."

Lester then endured a depressing period when one project after another collapsed beneath him. First of these was *Send Him Victorious* about a right-wing take over of Britain and the kidnapping of Prince Charles. "We were about 4 or 5 weeks from shooting when United Artists withdrew the money. I then tried to set it up myself which bankrupted me and that was the end of it." Lester then wasted a year preparing for a film based on the first *Flashman* novel which was to have starred John Alderton (years later Lester made *Royal Flash* with Malcom McDowell). Again United Artists pulled their money out almost at the last moment. Other projects followed but, " . . . I just couldn't get them going. I couldn't get finance. For all practical purposes, for the pictures I wanted to do, I was unemployable. And the pictures I was offered by both major studios and independents were so horrendous I couldn't touch them . . ."

But finally he was offered an assignment he felt he could accept. It came from Alexander and Ilya Salkind and concerned their proposed film version of *The Three Musketeers*.

The subsequent enormous success of the film, and its sequel, and the fact that Lester enjoyed a good working relationship with the Salkinds (who were impressed by the way he could shoot a big picture fast and economically) led to his being brought in as an associate producer on *Superman* when the film ran into production difficulties in 1977. Then, with the sequel, he took over as director from Richard Donner. Having heard Donner's version of these events (see **Starburst 35**) I asked Lester his side of the story:

"Well, speaking from the producer's point of view rather than for myself, they had, rightly or wrongly, budgeted *Superman* at a certain price and it went four times over that cost. And they were having to find the money themselves, they weren't being backed by Warner Brothers. Originally Warners were just taking the film on a pick-up basis but as the Salkinds ran out of money Warners would say, 'Okay, we'll put this bit in and bail you out but in exchange we want this territory and that one; we want television rights, etc.'" And they got *everything* of Part 1. The Salkinds made *no* money from this huge money-making film . . .

"Now they had budgeted the film in the beginning on the basis that it would be shot in Rome by Guy Hamilton. When Dick Donner took over he wasn't particularly experienced in special effects films and it was a question of: Do we fly Superman with wires? Travelling mattes or front projection? Each of those things requires a different system and a different budgeting. In the end the film shot for almost 2 years and cost an enormous amount. Then Donner gave a statement to *Variety* saying that he was not going to work with these "bums" again; that if he was going to continue on *Superman 2* he would have complete control and the producers were going to have to listen to him. And since the Salkinds were putting their own money up again and had already spent this enormous amount without any return they said, Well, no . . .

"And they came to me and asked me to direct it and I said no, they went to Guy Hamilton again and he said no and then they came back to me and I finally agreed to do it."

Wasn't the original idea to shoot both Parts 1 and 2 at the same time? "Yes, but when I became involved as a producer one of the first things I suggested was that there was no point in shooting the sequel simultaneously if they didn't have the money to finish the first film. Or that first film wasn't going to be *good* enough to warrant a sequel because the money was being spent on Part 2. So I said forget Part 2 and just try to make Part 1 sensational. Husband all your effects for the first film - even take the ending and use it for 1 because it's a better ending. Do everything you can to make Part 1 *good* . . .

"But what you're leading up to is the question of how much of Part 2 was shot during Part 1. Roughly speaking I think 17% of Part 2 had already been shot, of which Donner shot about 9 or 10% because remember there was something like six directors working on Part 1 with various different units. John Glen shot a lot of 1, so did John Barry, the production designer, Peter Duffell, Andre de Toth . . .

"And there was a lot of footage for 2 shot during 1 that we didn't use. We took a lot of sequences out and rewrote them, putting in new characters even. It was all very complex. Some footage was revoiced, some was reshot using doubles. It's very difficult to say precisely what was what in 2. That's the good thing about it, I think. The last thing one wanted was a film where they said, 'Ah, that sequence comes from *Superman 1* and that sequence is one of Lester's . . .' Because then I would have really failed."

But overall I thought *Superman 2* had a different style to 1. How had Lester achieved this? "I think a lot of that is to do with the editing - the tempo of the editing and the removal of excess was as much the reason for the difference in style as the rewriting. I was only able to rewrite half the script of 2 and there were things we just couldn't change. They were forced upon us by the other film. The costumes, for instance, and the cast. I'm not saying I was disappointed by the latter. Nobody forces someone like Gene Hackman on you. It was a wonderful opportunity to work with him . . ."



Superman 3 is the first of the *Superman* movies that Lester will have had full control over. Does that mean it will be more of a "Richard Lester Film?" "There's no point in making a unique and personalised film as part of the *Superman* series. You have to remain faithful to the legend, to its generic roots... you are faced with the fact, for instance that he is invulnerable except for the following caveats - Kryptonite, etc - and that he had to behave in a certain manner given a certain set of circumstances. There are only so many powers with which he is endowed; you can't invent a new one without the written permission of D.C. Comics. So in that way you are very limited.

"But 3 will be different in some ways because I think a change was needed. In the first one it was - Can you make a man fly convincingly; the second one was - Okay, we've seen him fly now let's see him do something; and with the third it's - Okay, we've seen all that, now come up with something different. And I hope we've done just that. For example, this one starts in an unemployment office which is out of the style of the other two. I mean nobody cared about how Lois Lane, a working reporter, paid for her penthouse apartment in Part 1 whereas 3 starts in this mid-town American unemployment office situated in an obviously depressed State. I wanted to start small and go back to Middle America - to Smallville itself, Superman's hometown. So I think 3 has a bigger element of reality than the others."

Had there been any pressure on Lester to top the special effects featured in Part 2? "I knew that if we tried to do that we would lose because I don't think it was possible to top them. I mean we practically destroyed New York in Part 2 - how do you top that? And you only have a certain number of tricks you can do with Superman anyway - there's always a problem of scale with him. You can't have him pick up an oil tanker or an ocean liner, it just looks silly. He can just about get away with a bus. So you have to know what you can do with him and that limits you a great deal. Also I didn't want to do anything in 3 that had a space or extraterrestrial quality to it. I felt strongly we should be earthbound in 3. That's why we decided to start the smallest way we could in the movie - we very nearly started with a shot of a matchbox. In fact we finish the first scene on a matchbox and then slowly build up to a big sequence in the Grand Canyon."

In the past Lester's films have tended to be relatively small ones in terms of budgets and shooting schedules. Was it difficult for him to adjust to working on a big movie with lots of elaborate special effects? "It was when I became a producer on 1, after they'd been shooting on it for a while, that I realized I was so blissfully ignorant about what is possible with special effects today. I'm on record as saying I deliberately took on 2 as a director as a means of on-site training - a youth opportunities scheme for an old director - and I learned without a doubt more out of making 2 than during all the other 18 films I'd made.

I genuinely feel I'm a much better film maker now because of the *Superman* movies.

"Also I'd always made my films in a kind of smash and grab manner working totally on my nerves, trying to get a burst of exuberance or panic or hysteria going amongst crew, actors and myself and literally dragging everybody along out of nervousness. Well, that's fine when you've got a 4 or 6 week shoot and you're 30 years old but I'm 51 and *Superman 3* was a 15 week shoot. You can't roar around for 15 weeks. So I've had to learn to work in a more straight forward



craftsman-like way, which has been good for me."

On the subject of special effects I asked if they had presented any problems during the making of 3:

"There are always problems with the flying scenes, and there are always problems with model work... Were any new techniques tried out for the flying this time? "No, it's the same mixture as before - wires, pole-arm, travelling mattes, models..."

Is there much model work in 3? "Yes, there has to be in a *Superman* film. You can't create the kind of mayhem that a *Superman* requires with just real life action - you always have to use extensive model work. There was an amazing amount of model work in

2 that no one noticed. The middle western town that the villains from Krypton attack was mainly models - the street was a series of reduced-in-scale miniatures getting smaller into the distance. I told you I'm learning quickly about special effects! Much of New York was done with models, even the Eiffel Tower was a model."

And all done by Derek Meddings, but he was absent from 3? "Yes. We desperately wanted to have him on the film but when we started work he guaranteed us he would be finished on *Krull* in May but he was still there at Christmas. They are 9 months over on models. We kept waiting for him and everytime he thought he was getting out from under they'd throw more things at him for him to do. He's a responsible chap so he won't leave the film until he feels it's finished.

"One of the things I achieved as producer on 1, apart from smiling at everyone, was to bring Derek Meddings and Paul Wilson together and form a new model unit. Paul had worked with me as a camera operator and lighting cameraman for years - he was with me on *A Hard Day's Night* - and I'm a great fan of his and he suddenly found with Derek a wonderful partnership.

"Colin Chilvers, who supervised the mechanical effects on 1 & 2, is doing the model effects on 3, in fact he's doing everything - he's supervising all the effects and doing a marvellous job."

And how expensive was 3 compared to the other two? "It cost less. But it's difficult to judge really. The first one cost an enormous amount and in a sense subsidised part of the budget of 2 so it's hard to say exactly what I spent shooting 2. Part 3's budget is high but I think it would come out less than either of the first two..."

We moved to the subject of the cast. Was Christopher Reeve still enjoying the role? "I think we found a few things in it that allowed him to spread himself a little. I think he found things to play in the character in 3 which he didn't play before. But this will be his last one. He says it is and I hope it is. I've told him I think he should stop for his own sake, I certainly will stop with 3, and so are the writers. So if the series continues there's going to have to be a major rethink about it. I don't know - if someone came into this office right now and said to me, 'If you do another *Superman* we'll let you do 5 films of your own choice...' which is the most appealing thing you can say to a director, I'm not sure what my answer would be. But I don't think I could convincingly come up with a storyline and enough original ideas for what the Man in Blue could do next, so I think it should stop..."

Probably the most unusual piece of casting in 3 is black comedian Richard Pryor as the villain. How did Pryor who has a reputation for having a hair-trigger temper, react to working on this type of movie? "I really don't know. He's been very nice about us whenever he's talked about the film. But I think he'd made a lot of films in a row and it was hard for him. He is physically very weak. He's still suffering from the after-effects of his fire accident. Very much so, in fact. He can give you the illusion of fitness because he has wonderful energy but I think he's reached the point where he really just wants to sit down and hide for a while.

"He's a marvellously interesting man and performer and I liked him very much but I can see the despair and the danger and I certainly wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of him. But he's one of the most fascinating people I've ever met."

Finally, what presented the biggest problem during the making of *Superman 3*? "I think the big problem was again balance. The balance between the different elements. You don't want people to come out saying the film was a Richard Pryor number - a showcase for him. Nor do you want them to say, Oh yes, just more bits of flying and blowing things up. I'm banking on the fact that the story reads more interestingly. I hope it's a better story. I may have failed totally in directing it but I think the story as we wrote it was more interesting and has a greater reality than the other two. And in fact it was based on a true story... That's what it has that the others didn't. A stronger sense of reality." ●

