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#46

October 1985
\$2.95
£1.75 UK
\$3.50 CAN

K49286



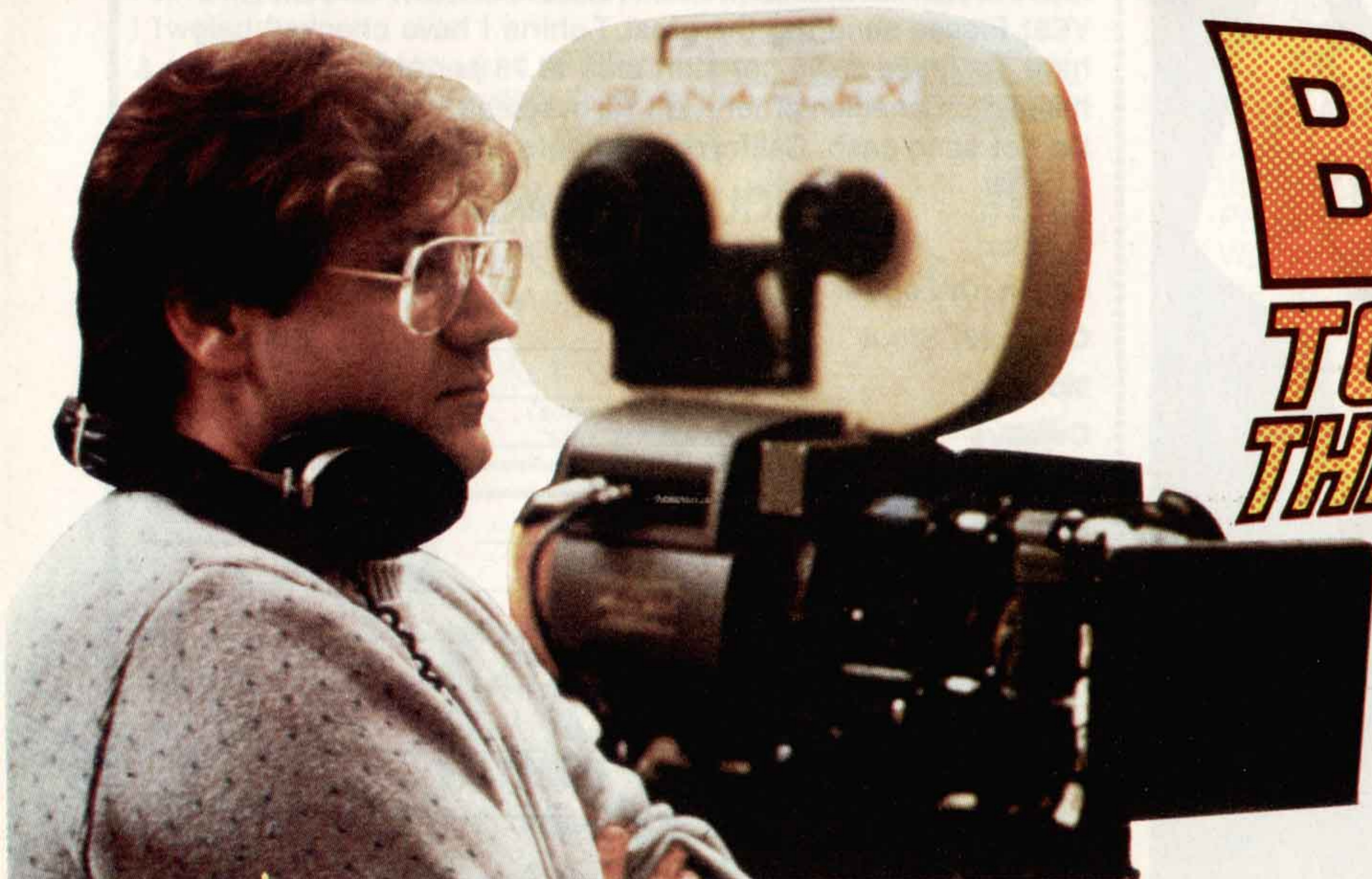
BACK TO THE FUTURE

CHRISTOPHER LLOYD
Stars In Director
ROBERT ZEMECKIS'
Time Travel Fantasy

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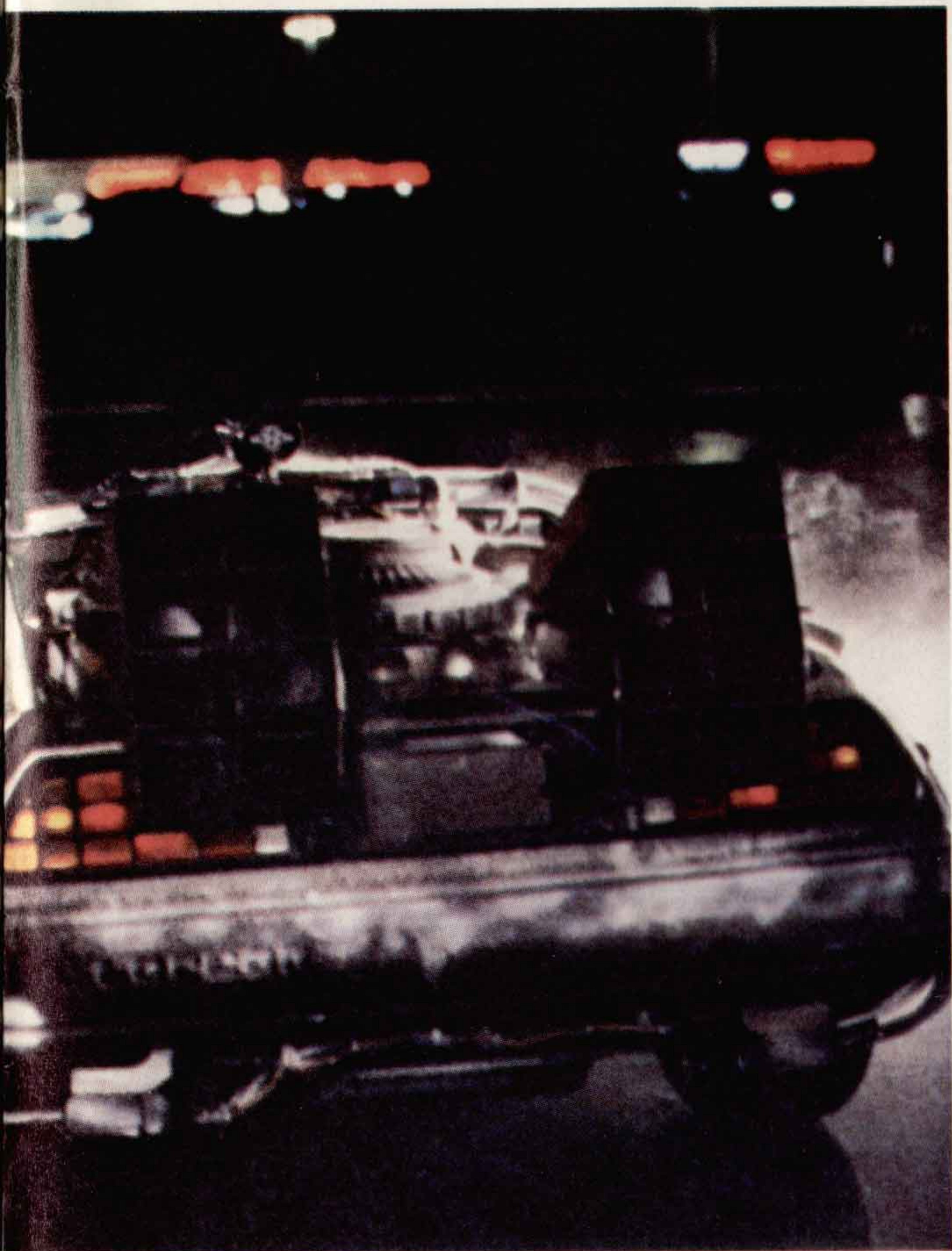




BACK TO THE FUTURE

Director Bob Zemeckis' Tale of Teen Time Travel Finds Humor in the Past

Article by MICHAEL STEIN



Director Bob Zemeckis is fascinated by time travel. "Of all the science fiction sub-genres, it is my favorite. The idea of being able to journey through time, without moving through space, is an incredible concept."

Zemeckis, who most recently directed last year's box office smash *Romancing The Stone*, brings a sense of boyish wonder and enthusiasm to the project he co-wrote with former USC classmate Bob Gale.

"When you were a kid, did your father or mother ever tell you all the tough things they did as kids?" Zemeckis smiled. "Like walking 12 miles to school and doing their homework on a shovel. Wouldn't it be interesting to go back and see if they really *did* walk through those blizzards?"

Bob Gale added, "Sometimes you'll look at your parents' high school yearbooks and think, 'I can't believe my dad ever went to high school and I can't believe my mom ever went out on a date,' but there are the pictures to prove it."

Although Zemeckis' latest film, *Back To The Future*, is the story of one high school senior's visit into the past via time machine, the director is quick to point out that, "Time travel actually plays a very limited role in the movie. It's more of 'a stranger in a strange land' adventure story, a cross between Frank Capra and *The Twilight Zone* . . . a balance between fantasy, emotion and a kid's adventure. The device of the time machine just makes it all that more ridiculously credible."

Kids, plus fantasy, plus adventure . . . put them all together and this summer they spell Spielberg. "Four years ago my co-writer, Bob Gale (*1941*, *Used Cars*) and I took the script for *Back To The Future* to Steven," Zemeckis recalled, "He read it and loved it. We felt it would be a perfect film for Amblin to produce. Then I had to go off and direct *Romancing The Stone*, but when I got back last year, we decided to go ahead with it. If there is a 'Spielberg formula' this film fits it perfectly."

Spielberg himself expanded on Zemeckis' critique: "*Back To The Future* is such an entertaining movie because it's got a little bit of everything. It's like somebody brought a big dumpster full of good ideas and backed it up and poured them all through my

window, with Bob Zemeckis behind the wheel of the truck. It's the greatest '*Leave It To Beaver*' episode ever produced . . . an excursion into the ultimate Zemeckis/Gale imagination."

Filmed at Universal Studios and on locations throughout the Los Angeles area, *Back To The Future* might have operated with a normal shooting schedule, were it not for one wrinkle—the star of the film, Michael J. Fox is also the popular star of the hit television series, "*Family Ties*." Since he was still actively involved in production on the series while the *Back To The Future* cameras began to roll, Fox shuttled between both projects, devoting days to his television show and nights to the film.

Looking back, Fox commented, "I knew it would be a

gruelling schedule, but what was I going to say? . . . 'Sorry Steven, I'm bushed.' "

"Michael has a great sense of humor," added producer Spielberg. "His dry approach to Alex in *'Family Ties'* is what caused me to watch the show week after week. Michael is a young leading man waiting to break through in the movies and hopefully this will give him his chance."

Zemeckis also added, "Michael gives a unique, well-measured performance and his likability and screen presence make his character something very special. His sense of comic timing is obvious and he knows how to deliver a great punch line."

Another actor skilled in comedic knock-outs is Christopher Lloyd who stars as *Back To The Future's* eccentric inventor, Dr. Brown. Best known to TV audiences as *Taxi's* spaced-out "Reverend Jim," for which he received two consecutive Emmy Awards, Lloyd has also built up an impressive list of motion picture credits including *Star Trek*; *The Search for Spock* and *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai*.

As Dr. Brown, Lloyd was careful not to let the well-known punchy-persona of Jim Ignatowski sneak into his character, but the neighborhood scientist is still rather unusual as the key figure in the film's time travel scenario.

"I guess I loosely based Doc Brown in several wild conductors and eccentric professors," notes Lloyd. "He's sort of a cross between Leopold Stokowsky and Albert Schweitzer."

"This was a difficult film for me," Lloyd explained. "There were a lot of mechanical and technical things happening around us and it was very important for Michael and I to really connect with each other."

Fox added about his co-star, "I like to work with people who have energy, and Chris is just brilliant. I can look into those big manic bulbs of his and get right on target."

"Lloyd gives credibility to the 'weird science' of the movie," explained Zemeckis. "In fact the whole time travel format grows out of his character. Dr. Brown needs a stainless steel construction to create a force-field around his time machine. So he uses a DeLorean."

The designs for a nuclear-powered DeLorean were turned over to several talented illustrators and conceptual artists. The instructions were that the car look homemade (after all, it was to be built in the garage of an eccentric inventor) and that it must house a nuclear reactor.

Soon, the drawings began to



take shape, and after much collaboration between artist Ron Cobb, illustrator Andy Probert, the filmmakers and production designer Larry Paull, the car was ready to be adapted. Mike Scheffe, the vehicle construction coordinator began to shop for odd parts which would be used in the construction of the "flux capacitor," as well as the dashboard, vents and side coils. Once his assignment was complete, special effects supervisor Kevin Pike and his team went to work to modify three DeLoreans, which had been purchased for the film. They also added four firejets to the car, which shoot flames from the vehicle as it accelerates and prepares for travel.

When the DeLorean was fi-

nally complete, it was far more technical-looking than the rickety machine made of nickel, ivory and rock crystal that H.G. Wells had constructed for his adventurous time traveller. It was also a lot more amusing.

Zemeckis added, "You don't want to see the machine looking like something from Mission Control or some ordinary computer because Lloyd, as a person, would look out of place in some big, sterile computerized room like in *Tron*. This guy has built a time machine in his basement—which is another example of *Back To The Future's* wonderful sense of the ridiculous."

Zemeckis admitted that the story underwent many revisions and variations before the writing team created the appropriate

time machine. "We actually had thought of putting a time machine in a refrigerator at one point," laughed Zemeckis. "But you had to get in and close it before it would start, and then we worried that kids would start locking themselves in refrigerators."

At first glance the film's storyline may appear to be quite simple—a boy goes back in time and then has to find a way to return to the present—but Zemeckis warns that "this isn't really a story you can capsule, even after you've seen the film."

"The story is anchored in sort of a benevolent Merlin/Arthur kind of relationship between Dr. Brown and Marty. Brown is a bit out of control. And Marty is simply a normal kid with normal



The time juxtaposition from 1955 to 1985 provided almost everyone associated with the film some unique challenges. Production designer Larry Paull and his team were asked to create a small northern California town that would appear quaint and lively in 1955, and then display the wear of time and suburban sprawl in 1985. Also, the performers, who looked fresh and happy as high school students in 1955 had to further draw upon their acting skills to convince the audience how parenthood and the ensuing years had taken their toll in 1985.

For Hill Valley circa 1955, Larry Paull and crew converted a major section of Universal Studios' backlot into an old-fashioned town square. Although Paull received an Academy Award nomination for the futuristic visions in *Bladerunner*, this was his first foray into the 1950s.

"I began to delve into a lot of *Life* and *Look* magazines and used a lot of photographic research of the time," recalled Paull. "I did a lot of digging, even into old high school yearbooks in order to come up with a feeling and a visual concept."

On the backlot, Paull and crew constructed a grassy town square surrounded by small picturesque shops including a record store, travel agency, florist and a malt shop painted in an unmistakable 1950s turquoise blue.

After many weeks of shooting in the 1950s town square, the film company moved onto several Los Angeles locations, while Paull and crew got to work converting the exact location over to 1985. When the film crew re-

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problems and a normal incredulity. But the two have a history of getting into trouble all for the sake of science.

"When Marty goes back in time and gets stuck in 1955, the only way he can get back is to find the young Dr. Brown. And when he does, of course, the young man doesn't know who he is. Marty has to make friends all over again and explain to Brown that he must build a time machine. Marty had been warned not to disrupt the fabric of time, but matters become rather complicated. He comes across his parents as kids and his mother gets a mild crush on him. This puts future events and even his own existence in jeopardy, so Marty must make sure his parents meet and fall in love so that

he can even be born."

By setting their story in the present day, but sending the lead character, Marty McFly, back to 1955, Zemeckis and Gale had the opportunity to interfere with the course of history and then scramble to rescue their characters from serious consequences.

"The '50s were a time of relative calm," suggested Zemeckis, "where everything was moving rather smoothly. We began to see the effects of technology and money; pop culture was starting to blossom with rock and roll. But I guess the thing that happened in the '50s that makes it so nostalgic throughout the decades that followed was that it was the first time that the teenager started to rule, and he's ruled ever since."

McFly (Crispin Glover) is perched upon a tree limb during some extracurricular "bird watching." Doc Brown rides to the rescue, after hanging on to the tower clock for dear life. Bottom right, Christopher Lloyd as Dr. Emmett Brown demonstrates his plan for sending Marty back in time.

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turned two and a half weeks later, their Norman Rockwell town had become an aging 1985 neighborhood.

"The changes we made in the town square are the same that have been happening in a lot of small towns in the last 30 years," Paull explained. "What has happened in most small towns is that the thriving shopkeepers have moved to outlying shopping malls in suburbia, which has left the center of these little towns to deteriorate and downslide. The grassy courthouse has become a parking lot for the Department of Social Services. There is still a florist and a travel agency, but there is now a pornographic bookstore and a pawn shop. The Studebaker dealership belongs to Toyota and the malt shop has become a gym for aerobics.

Another study in contrasts which Paull concocted was the garage/laboratory of Dr. Brown. When Marty McFly first visits the Doc in 1985, his home is a rustic shack squeezed in between a Burger King and an office building on a heavily trafficked street. But when Marty stumbles back into 1955 and tries to find Dr. Brown, who is 30 years younger, he finds him at the same address, where his home is a sprawling mansion surrounded by grassy slopes and shady trees. The 1980s garage was temporarily constructed on Victory Boulevard in Burbank, California, and then torn down upon completion of the scene. The sites used for the exterior and interior of Dr. Brown's impressive complex are two well-known Green & Green designs in Pasadena, California, known as the Gamble House and the Blacker-Hill House.

Although a high school in Whittier, California, served as the setting for Hill Valley High, the First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood houses a gymnasium that became the setting for a 1955 high school dance called "Enchantment Under the Sea." Draped in fishnets and gaudy colors, the gym was filled with 150 extras who were fashionably dressed in full-skirted taffeta dresses and baggy suits selected by costume designer Deborah Scott.

Perhaps no one on the entire *Back To The Future* crew faced as many daily challenges as make-up artist Ken Chase, who was responsible for aging three young performers from age 17 to 47. Lea Thompson, who plays the flirtatious and pretty Lorraine Baines at age 17, ages 30 years and gains 30 pounds when she becomes Lorraine Baines McFly,

Marty's boozy, uptight mother. Crispin Glover and Thomas F. Wilson make a similar physical transformation—the addition of 30 years.

"It is much more difficult to make someone appear to be in their 40s, simply because of the mechanics," explained Chase, who also designed the old age make-up for Alex Haley's popular miniseries, *Roots II*. "If I were asked to make Lea look 100, I would cover her whole face with latex foam prosthetics and there would be no skin visible. It would all have the same texture and would be easy to do. But since we couldn't change her appearance dramatically, we had to use foam rubber against skin and

film. Yet we didn't want the character just getting hit on the head and going back in time. So Industrial Light and Magic designed the visual time travel concepts, the opticals, to look slightly organic. I can't describe them fully but they will be what you least expect—big vacuums created in the atmosphere and tremendous winds. What I can tell you is that they are loud, violent and pyrotechnic."

"When I first started on the movie, we filmed several special effects sequences, and I remember being a bit intimidated by it all," admitted Fox. "On the very first day of work, I climbed out of a DeLorean wearing a yellow space suit, into a barn full of



Doc Brown (Chris Lloyd) explains the workings of his DeLorean time machine to Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox). Photo © copyright 1985 Universal City Studios.

there is a difference in textures. It's important for the audience to recognize these actors through a 30-year span, and if we put too many appliances and wigs on, that's easily lost."

The three and a half hours that each actor spends in the chair while their old age make-up is applied can be frustrating after a few days, but Lea Thompson explains that it actually helped her to prepare her character each day.

"I find that most of acting is preparation," she revealed. "Getting into the make-up, getting into the costume, you slowly start psyching yourself into the role. Since this is a gradual process, watching it go on piece by piece, you become more and more part of the character and the psychological change into Lorraine at 47 just happens."

While *Back To The Future* is a film which deals in time travel, filmgoers should be warned not to expect a picture loaded with special effects.

"We focus on the characters," Zemeckis stated. "We have a time machine and accidentally Marty goes back in time but the real story begins when he gets there. You won't see a lot of special effects. In fact, there are only about 30 to 35 in the entire

smoke and hypnotized chickens. After a while I learned to relax and enjoy all the commotion around me."

Bob Zemeckis' films often deal out an unexpected amount of dark humor, and the open-mouthed wide-eyed reaction which he evokes just before the audience laughs, is the exact reaction he is aiming for.

"But it can also be a real problem as far as the commerciality of the film," the director lamented. "Take *Used Cars*, for example. Because of the kind of reaction that I go for in my films, no one thought *Used Cars* was very funny. Maybe it was because John Belushi or Goldie Hawn weren't in it.

"I never want to sacrifice my humor though. I'm very proud of the humor in *Used Cars*. But, unfortunately, the American public is very snobbish when it comes to comedy. It's always a mystery to me. Whenever I make a film I'm always surprised because people laugh in places where I least expect it and don't laugh where I do! That's why we have to play both sides of the street. You want to make a movie that's enjoyable, but you also want to make a movie people will see. Americans love comedy in the movies but they need an excuse

to go see a film. So you put in an actor like Bill Murray or Eddie Murphy who is already established as a 'funny guy.'

"But then again," Zemeckis said with obvious pleasure, "who would have thought that Michael Douglas could be funny? He had some great moments in *Romancing The Stone*."

Considered to be one of the most talented younger mainstream directors today, Zemeckis feels that a healthy respect for some of the more traditional methods of comedic filmmaking is partially responsible for his success.

"You always have to go back to the older films to see how characters were done. There are certain elements of characterization and story development which are truly timeless. Once you get those elements down, then you can be as flashy as you want.

"Editing is also a critical factor, but here is a point where the films of today differ from the comedy classics. When you look at the Marx Brothers or Three Stooges films, you'll see that there is hardly any editing. Those guys just set the camera down and did their thing. Their timing was completely natural—but they also had a different film language then.

"Everybody plays it straight in my movies. No one tells jokes, acts funny, or does schtick. My movies are film stories first. To the characters, each film's unbelievable reality is real. This draws the audience into the film's world where they find the humor out of the basic outrageousness of the whole."

Now that filming has been completed on Universal's July release, *Back To The Future*, Zemeckis is looking forward to at least a short vacation.

"I've been on the floor directing for two years straight," Zemeckis said with a sigh, "So I'm going to take a few months off, kick back, and get reacquainted with my wife. Bob Gale and I won't begin scripting our next project, *The Shadow*, until around Labor Day and I'll be directing that one also."

Although a bit tired from his recent encounter with Dr. Brown's newfangled "way-back" machine, Zemeckis is happier than an Eloi at a Sunday Picnic about the finished product.

"*Back To The Future* is a comedy-adventure-science-speculation-coming-of-age-rock-and-roll-time travel-period film," laughed Zemeckis. "It has a great ending," he added with pride. "It's happy, it's weird and it's wild. You're not going to be disappointed by *Back To The Future*."