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BACK TO THE FUTURE

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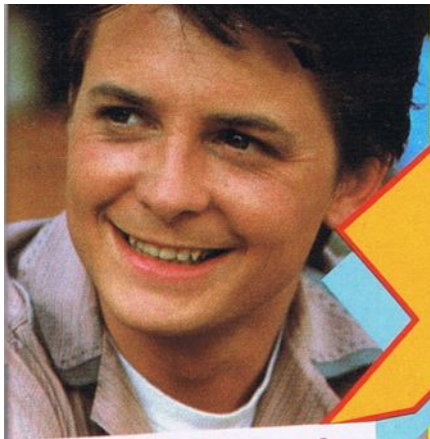
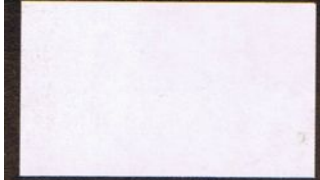
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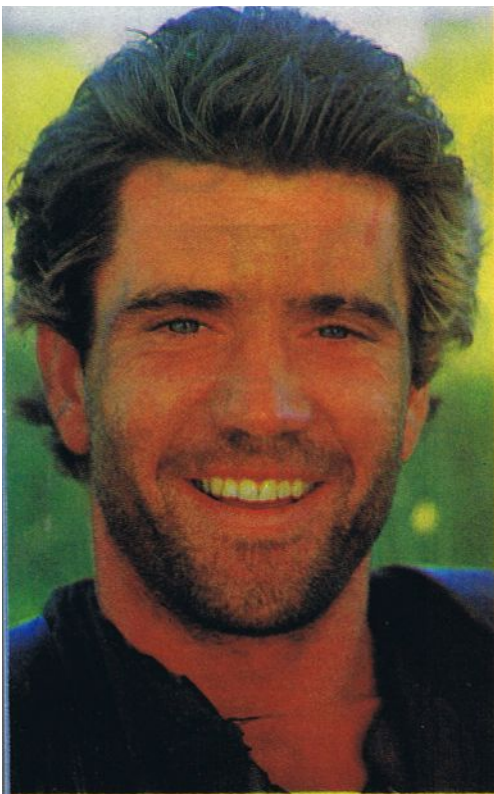
REMO Super-assassin
defends the USA

MAD MAX
Road Warrior or
modern messiah?

JAMES BOND
Producer "Cubby"
Broccoli: "007
will go on forever!"

ALL NEW!
more pages





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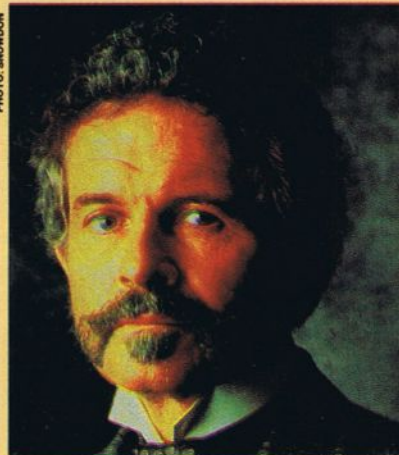
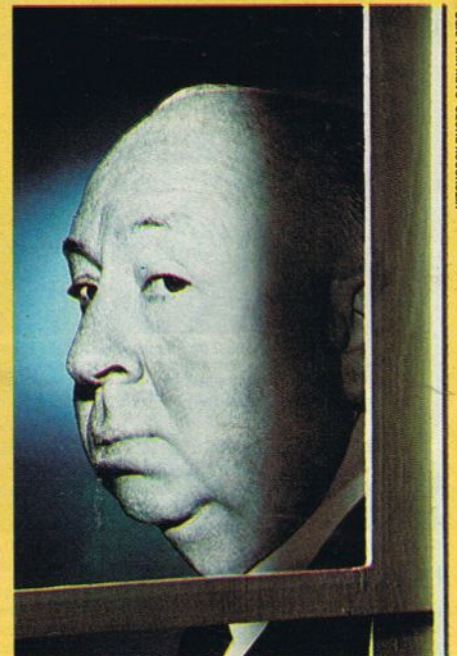


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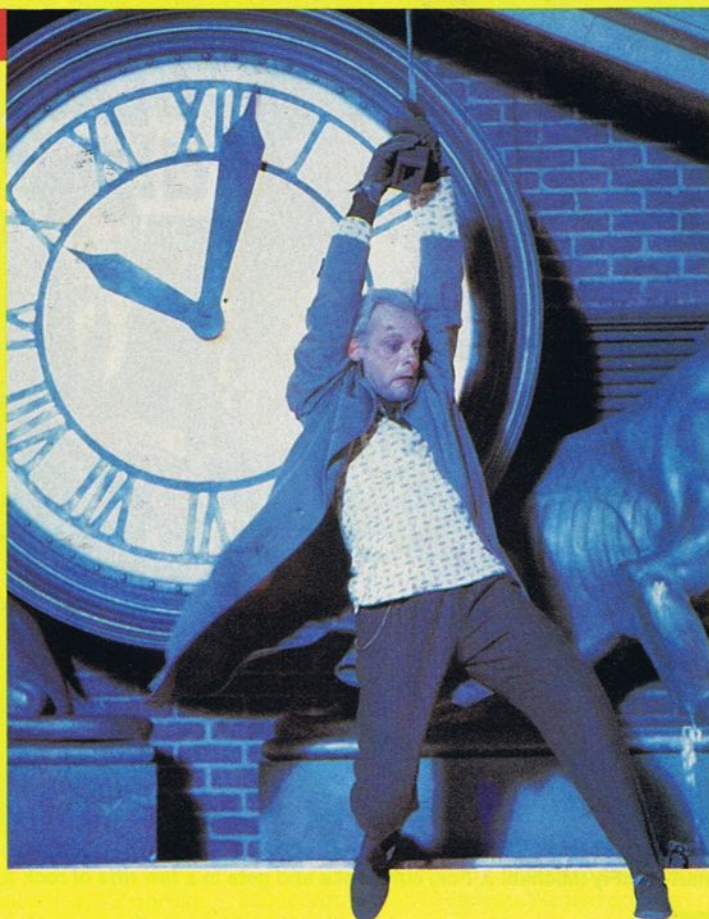
STARLOG PROFILE

Bob Zemeckis

It's a Wonderful Time!

By LEE GOLDBERG

The adventurous writer/director turns his attention to movies today and yesterday as he races through the present, out of the past and "Back to the Future."



ALL BACK TO THE FUTURE PHOTOS. COPYRIGHT 1985 UNIVERSAL CITY STUDIOS

Dr. Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd) swings perilously as he completes the lightning/electrical connection needed to help send his friend Marty (Michael J. Fox) and the DeLorean time machine *Back to the Future*.





Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) cuts loose and gets in a few riffs of rock & roll when he plays at his parents' high school dance.

Back to the Future looked like a guaranteed loser. It was a science-fiction tale co-written by a director with a typo for a last name and two box-office duds to his credit. It was also about time travel. And time travel *doesn't* sell.

Nobody would touch it.

But five years later, director Robert Zemeckis made *Romancing the Stone*—a movie that raked in big bucks. He also had an influential buddy named Steven Spielberg who thought a time travel movie sounded like a good idea.

Suddenly, *Back to the Future* looked like a guaranteed winner.

Universal Studios believes the movie could rival *E.T.* at the box-office and industry insiders predict it will make Zemeckis a "seven-figure" talent to be reckoned with. The wave of hype crashed through the gates of Universal Plaza, raged down Lankershim Boulevard, and swept over the offices of *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *The Los Angeles Times*. It tore through LA's swank clubs and eateries and didn't ebb until washing down Wall Street in New York where the tide brought Universal's stock up to a 1985 high.

The publicity had Zemeckis excited—and very worried. Interviewed on the eve of a nationwide press tour and just a few days before *Back to the Future's* release, the 34-year-old Chicago native was understandably jittery. It's important to Zemeckis that *Back to the Future* succeeds—there's a symbolic importance to it, a career imperative.

"It's the movie I always wanted to make," he says. "It's the dream of what I expected moviemaking to be. I got into movies to tell

this kind of story and I always knew this was a movie that would work."

While the hype was nice, it could have also been suicidal. Could *Back to the Future* possibly live up to its glorious fanfare? Or would the fanfare be its funeral dirge?

"I really don't want people comparing us to *E.T.*," Zemeckis says. "What [Universal President Sid Sheinberg] said was that *Back to the Future* has the same commercial potential as *E.T.* Suddenly, it was a headline. It's an awful big claim and I would never have done that. In *The Hollywood Reporter*, he compared it to *The Wizard of Oz.*"

Zemeckis laughs self-consciously. "I respect his enthusiasm, and I love the fact he is a big fan of the movie, but, well, that gives us high expectations to live up to."

But too much hype sure beats being a project nobody wanted—and it beats being a film that, six weeks into shooting, had to be tossed in the garbage.

Time & Time Again

Zemeckis' tale of teenager Marty McFly, then played by Eric Stoltz, who drives a time machine into 1955 and almost prevents his parents from meeting "just wasn't working," the director concedes. "Eric wasn't creating the right character to tell the story."

Back to the Future might have died right there, stillborn after a four-and-a-half year gestation and six weeks of shooting. But the most important man in moviemaking, Zemeckis' college chum Steven Spielberg, never lost faith. Stoltz departed. And the filmmakers started over.

"It was a drastic, drastic thing that had to be done and it was my feeling that the movie

hung in the balance," Zemeckis says. "It wasn't hard to admit it wasn't working, but it was hard to realize what lay ahead."

They cast Michael J. Fox, a 23-year-old actor with a sharp sense of comic timing polished during three years on the NBC sitcom, *Family Ties* (STARLOG #98). It was that very TV series that worked both for and against him in assuming Stoltz' part.

Fox had to work two jobs which meant Zemeckis had to work around him—and *still* meet a July release date. But the hardest part of the re-shoot was the lingering feeling that the filmmakers had already failed.

"It was psychologically debilitating. The pressure came when we filmed something we were happy with the first time again and did it exactly the same," he says. "That depressed us because we didn't improve anything. Even though there was nothing wrong with it, we put on all this pressure to improve—even when there was nothing that needed improving. Even if we did just as well as we had before, we walked away feeling we *could* have done better."

But Zemeckis is certain "we didn't slip," and proudly proclaims the movie *is* better.

"We worked very hard to maintain everything that was good originally and to improve everywhere else," he says. Christopher (*Star Trek III*) Lloyd (STARLOG #82) carried the biggest acting burden. As Fox's co-star, he had to act out scenes he had already performed to everyone's satisfaction again—this time with a different Marty and sometimes, due to Fox's hectic schedule, with *no* Marty at all.

"Chris understood completely. As a matter of fact, much of the footage we shot on the 40-foot-tall clock tower was salvageable from

the Stoltz shoot. The stuff we did on the stage only six feet off the ground was shot the second time around while we were waiting for Michael. Chris never got a chance to see the actor he was playing with throughout that entire sequence."

The bottom line, though, is "it's always rough to go back and do something over again." But Zemeckis has no regrets. Hiring Fox saved the film.

"Michael is the absolute anchor of the movie. What is to his credit and to the film's credit is that it's subtle," Zemeckis observes. "The audiences will enjoy the other performances and all the wild stuff going on, but they will not be pummeled by it because they're totally identifying and relating to Michael J. Fox. His performance is perfectly measured and the most difficult anyone could do."

The difficulty is that Marty McFly, an '80s kid caught in the '50s, is "a reactor, his mission is to react to the past. Michael does a wonderful job and that's absolutely crucial to the movie. He has made the unbelievable part of the movie believable. He pulled it off.

"You completely believe that Chris Lloyd's character built this time machine. There was a chemistry between him and Mike on and off the set that really works for the movie," Zemeckis says. "Eric had a different chemistry in a way that would have worked for a different movie, but it wasn't right for our movie. Eric's movie was more mature, with a main character who had less of a sense of wonder and vulnerability. It wasn't the film Bob Gale [Zemeckis' co-writer and the film's co-producer] and I had in mind."

Partners in Time

The film Zemeckis and Gale did want to make had been in their minds for a long time. They wrote *1941* for Spielberg, and, with some of the filmmaker's spare change, made *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* (1978) and *Used Cars* (1980). They then began the screenplay that would become *Back to the Future*.

The pair shopped the script around but "absolutely nobody wanted to do it," Zemeckis says. "The biggest concern was that time travel movies never make money."

While they were tinkering around with a "gangster movie" for ABC Circle Films, Zemeckis was offered *Romancing the Stone*. Though in some ways suspiciously similar to Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Romancing the Stone* was crafted by the director into an exciting and humorous high-adventure (which he discussed in STARLOG #85). Zemeckis was set to segue right into *Cocoon* when, just prior to the release of *Romancing the Stone*, Zemeckis explains, "I showed 20th Century Fox the finished movie and they fired me from *Cocoon*. And I don't understand why.

"I truly don't know why. It's the great mystery of my career. It made me feel awful, terrible—like they were reacting to shoddy work on *Romancing the Stone*."

Although Zemeckis had yet to see *Cocoon*, he had heard the common critique that "the first two-thirds are great and the last third

sags" because of a *Close Encounters*-like ending. "That was the problem I was working on when I was fired," he says. "There were also no real villains in the movie, no antagonists." The director's only regret about not helming *Cocoon* is "that I worked on it so long and molded so much of the story, but I didn't get to see the project through."

He and Gale were writing a movie version of *The Shadow* when Universal expressed interest in *Back to the Future*. Spielberg became interested, too, and when that happens, a dormant project can suddenly become Hollywood's hottest ticket.

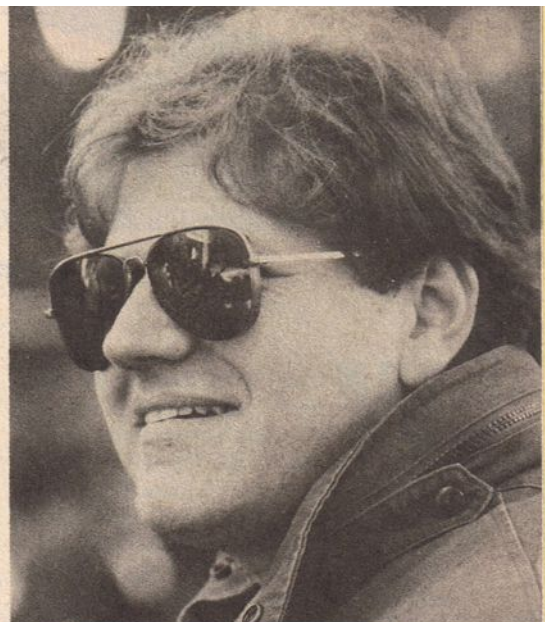
"Steven was a big fan of the movie and a perfect executive producer," Zemeckis says. "He was there for ideas and casting. The most important thing he does is create an atmosphere for you to comfortably create a movie. He says, 'It's your movie—but if you need me, I'm here.' He respects the filmmaker's vision. He lets you do the movie the way you see it.

"It's the perfect movie for Amblin [Spielberg's production company]. It's full of all the stuff people associate with Steven's name—the science fiction, fantasy and adventure and the very uplifting story."

Still, *Back to the Future* is a time travel movie and time travel stories have been done to death. Haven't audiences seen all the wrinkles in time? Will they want to see them again?

"I must say, I was concerned," Zemeckis explains. "It was most pointed and scary when STARLOG expressed concern. STARLOG is representative of the subculture of SF aficionados. And what I thought you were saying was 'All of us guys who are into science fiction will, once we see the first five minutes of your movie, know everything.'

"I knew we weren't going to have any spectacular special effects. In fact, it's a very unscience-fiction science-fiction movie. The original design was never to make it a serious science-fiction speculation movie. Instead, it was inspired by *A Christmas Carol* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, which are fantasy movies—in fact, they are time travel movies, but they're not considered science-fiction. That's what we rooted our movie in, and, though it's tough to know now, I hope peo-



Filmmaker Bob Zemeckis charts the trip *Back to the Future*.

ple will want to see it and won't feel that they have seen it before."

Now, with the movie finally complete, Zemeckis is satisfied.

"I'm extremely happy that *Back to the Future* got off the ground the way it did," he says. "It's very much the movie I wanted to make for so many years."

And already, he has a sequel in mind.

"We're kicking around many ideas. The sequel could really be great. We laid down a really good framework—it could be a wonderful, wonderful adventure," Zemeckis says excitedly. "I talked with Chris Lloyd and if there's a sequel, he wants to play two parts, the villain and the hero. He would have to travel to the future and stop his future self, who has become some kind of diabolical villain."

And perhaps Bob Zemeckis will open the sequel with some dialogue he wasn't able to fit into *Back to the Future*—the scene in which Dr. Brown returns from the future in his time DeLorean and implores Marty to join him.

Marty looks at Dr. Brown incredulously. "I can't go driving off into the future!"

"Don't worry," replies Brown. "You'll be back in a minute." ★

This is one type of chemical bonding he doesn't know anything about. Mad scientist Emmett Brown (Lloyd) watches as Lorraine (Lea Thompson) makes a move on Marty (Fox) who she does not know is her son-to-be.

