

Flash Gordon

By Roy Kinnard

The movie serial — dramatic stories told in weekly installments of a dozen or so 20-minute chapters — is a forgotten exhibition format today, the last serial (“Blazing the Overland Trail”) having been re-released in 1956. The serial genre gained popularity in the silent era with productions like “The Perils of Pauline” (Pathe, 1914), starring Pearl White. Often called “cliffhangers” because the hero or heroine was placed in mortal danger to bring the audience back for next week’s installment, the serials increased in appeal through the 1920s, finally waning by the end of the decade as audiences grew tired of the films’ melodramatic contrivances.

A product of independent producers and smaller studios like Universal (major studios like MGM and Paramount never made serials), the chapterplays continued on into the sound era, but by that point were marginalized entertainment, playing only at Saturday matinees for children. The serials might well have died off by the mid-1930s, had it not been for the efforts of one man, Henry MacRae, at Universal Pictures. MacRae (1876-1944) was a veteran producer at Universal, and was in charge of the studio’s short subject dept. MacRae felt that the serials could be upgraded to generate broader audience appeal, and when Universal purchased the rights to adapt a group of newspaper comic strips owned by Hearst’s King Features Syndicate, he saw great potential in one of the King Features properties, “Flash Gordon.”

A space-adventure fantasy originally created by artist-writer Alex Raymond as competition for the rival “Buck Rogers” strip, the newspaper feature was awash in fantasy, adventure, romance and occasional horror-in short all of the elements that make a movie successful-and Universal Pictures, the home of “Dracula” (1931) and “Frankenstein” (1931) was certainly no stranger to the fantastic.

“Flash Gordon” was produced by Universal in 13 weekly episodes, and was filmed at the studio in late



Flash Gordon (Buster Crabbe) is flanked on his left by Princess Aura (Priscilla Lawson) and Dale Arden (Jean Rogers) and on his right by King Vultan (Jack “Tiny” Lipson) and Ming the Merciless (Charles Middleton). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

1935 and early 1936 on a budget of approximately \$360,000.000. This was at a time when the average top-of-the-line feature production was budgeted at \$250,000.00 and the average serial cost \$100,000 to produce. The budget was the biggest ever for a serial, necessitated by the flamboyant subject matter and science-fiction gadgetry, but Universal still had to economize, and re-used sets and props from “Bride of Frankenstein” (1935) and “The Mummy” (1932), as well as music from “The Invisible Man” (1933) and “Werewolf of London” (1935). The special effects, though crude and obvious by latter-day standards, certainly worked at the time (and still do) within the comic-strip framework of the material, and 1936 audiences were enchanted by the imagery of rocket ships, ray guns, and cities floating in the clouds.

Athlete-turned-actor (and Olympic gold medal winner) Larry “Buster” Crabbe (1908-1983) was cast as Flash. A better actor than he was ever given credit for, Crabbe (with his dark hair bleached blonde to match his pulp-paper counterpart) was perfect in the role. Universal contract starlets Jean Rogers (1916-1991) and Priscilla Lawson (1914-1958), both former beauty pageant winners, were cast as Flash’s virginal girlfriend Dale Arden and the less-than-virginal Princess Aura, respectively, with Aura’s villainous father, Emperor Ming, played by character actor

Charles Middleton (1874-1949), whose flamboyant, theatrical acting style was a definite asset to this sort of material. The rest of the cast was rounded out by familiar character actors such as Frank Shannon (Dr. Zarkov), Richard Alexander (Prince Barin), and John "Tiny" Lipson (King Vultan). "Flash Gordon" was directed by Frederic Stephani (1903-1962) who was also the primary screenplay writer.

"Flash Gordon" was released in early April, 1936, just as Universal Pictures was undergoing a change of management. The serial was a huge box-office success, earning favorable reviews, and, unlike most other serials, played evening performances at first-run theatres. A re-edited feature-length version was also released by Universal. In late 1937, Universal began production on a 15-chapter sequel, "Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars," which was released in the spring of 1938. "Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars" was made on about half the first serial's budget, but gained considerably from faster pacing and a more colorful plot, with Ming the Merciless (having survived his apparent demise at the end of the first serial) forming an alliance with Queen Azura of Mars (Beatrice Roberts) in a nefarious plan to destroy the Earth. Most of the cast from the first serial were back for "Mars," and some of the original release prints were even made on color film stock, producing a vibrant green tone to enhance the proceedings.

A third Flash Gordon serial, "Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe," was released by Universal in 1940, in

12 chapters. Buster Crabbe, Charles Middleton and Frank Shannon were back in their roles, but Carol Hughes replaced Jean Rogers as Dale, and Roland Drew played Prince Barin. Although filmed at about the same cost as "Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars," "Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe" looked a bit more sophisticated visually, with bright, glossy cinematography and improved miniature work.

In the 1950s, the Flash Gordon serials were shown on television (where they continued to run in syndication well into the 1980s), introducing the films to a new generation. More feature versions were also edited from the original serials for television distribution. The serials gained new popularity on TV, providing a nostalgic look back at a simpler period in American cinema, and serving as an inspiration for "Star Wars" (1977) and a 1980 remake, "Flash Gordon," produced by Dino De Laurentiis.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Roy Kinnard was born, raised and currently lives in Chicago, Illinois. He became interested in classic films and their history after seeing movies on television in his childhood. Kinnard is the author of several books on film history, including "The Flash Gordon Serials" (with co-authors Tony Crnkovich and R. J. Vitone), and has met and interviewed many of the personalities he has written about, including Buster Crabbe, Jean Rogers, Fay Wray, and Jayne Mansfield.