

**S**OME INSIDIOUS STRAIN OF CABIN FEVER HAS INFECTED THE CAST AND CREW of *Superman Returns*. It's day 81 of a planned 118-day shoot, and they've been spending long hours cooped up inside a windowless warehouse on the Fox Studios lot in Sydney, Australia, aboard the *Gertrude*, a 300-foot, four-story yacht that Lex Luthor has swindled from an aging shipping heiress.

More precisely, they're on the *Gertrude's* belowdecks library set, which is surrounded by a sea of inky black darkness and suspended by tons of scaffolding. It's the kind of plush salon where Charles Foster Kane would have enjoyed a highball while crossing the Atlantic. Beams of blond wood arch magnificently across its high ceiling, and the glass-paneled floor invites watery reflections to waltz delicately on the curved wall near the grand piano.

Off to the side, director Bryan Singer, 40, dressed in a torn black T-shirt and sagging jeans that reveal several inches of Calvin Klein underwear, sits Saturday-morning-cartoon-close to a stack of monitors. He is shoveling cheese and crackers into his mouth, trying to maintain his flagging energy.

The work this day has largely been dedicated to capturing that chunk of film crucial to any comic-book adaptation: the sequence where the villain, often in some sort of crowing exposition, begins to reveal his nefarious plans for world domination, which almost always include offing some hero in tights. In *Superman Returns*, this comes as an exchange between Luthor (Kevin Spacey) and his brassy girlfriend Kitty Kowalski (Parker Posey). In the scene, which the crew has been shooting at different angles for hours, Kitty brings Lex a martini, which she promptly smashes in the fireplace after he cuts her down with a few deliciously dry insults.

"So now that we are in the middle of nowhere, away from prying eyes, does the oldest criminal in the world think I'm worthy of hearing his plans?" Posey says.

Singer interrupts the scene by speaking into his "god mike," which, oddly, has a grinning devil's face drawn on its red foam head in Sharpie pen. "The 'oldest criminal mind,'" he says. "Not the 'oldest criminal.'"

"I'm crashing," Posey says, breaking character. "I was so ready to do this four hours ago."

They give the scene yet another go. This time, Posey and Spacey step on each other's lines and end up standing in silence. "You've got to play that, babies," Singer says.

"I've worked with actors before," Posey replies sarcastically. Singer leaves the video village and walks on set. "Go back to your chair," she says, laughing, attempting to diffuse the mounting tension with a joke.

As Singer huddles with the actors, his hushed voice conceals his words, but his hands act out the instructions, fluttering with staccato flourishes. They run the scene again. And again. So many times that the prop master is worrying that there might not be enough martini glasses to finish what they've started.

The scene ends with a sort of historical precis from Luthor: "Romans built the roads. Persians built the ships. Americans built the atom bombs." He makes an allusion to Prometheus and cryptically promises to bring "fire to the people." He closes by saying that "the gods are selfish beings who fly around in little red capes and don't share their power with mankind."

Now it's time for Spacey, who won an Oscar working with Singer on 1995's *The Usual Suspects*, to become frustrated. Shaved head shimmering with perspiration, he's clearly reveling in his evil genius speechifying, but he can't quite find his rhythm with the lines.

"It's okay," Singer says reassuringly into the mike. "We'll get through this." However, by the time Spacey gets so irritated that he nearly puts a jackboot through the bookcase, even the unflappable director has to wonder if they're going to survive their time on this ship.

**U**NDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, RETURNING SUPERMAN, THE MOST beloved comic-book character of all time, to the silver screen after a 19-year absence would be enough to make any director—even a veteran of the genre like Singer (*X-Men* and *X2*)—sweat bullets. Add in a \$250 million budget, the fact that the red cape is being worn by an untested actor (newcomer Brandon Routh, with *Blue Crush's* Kate Bosworth as Lois Lane), and the franchise's massive cinematic baggage, and you get an idea of the tremendous weight Singer is carrying on his slight shoulders.

This production, which is using every soundstage on the lot, dwarfs what the director did on the *X-Men* movies. "Twice the amount of visual effects, five times the amount of sets," he says, his over-active brain humming almost audibly. Those sets include a vision for Metropolis that isn't simply Manhattan (scenes in the Christopher Reeve-era movies that had Superman flying over the Statue of Liberty confused Singer when he was young). Guy Hendrix Dyas, Singer's production designer, studied the 1930s comics, traced over a map of Manhattan, and "started to chop and change it," he says. The result, created both physically and

**SUPER-SIZE HIM:** BRANDON ROUTH STRUTS HIS STUFF. AS FOR CARPING THAT THE SUIT'S "S" IS TOO SMALL, BRYAN SINGER SAYS, "IF IT WERE ANY BIGGER, IT WOULD START LOOKING LIKE A BILLBOARD."



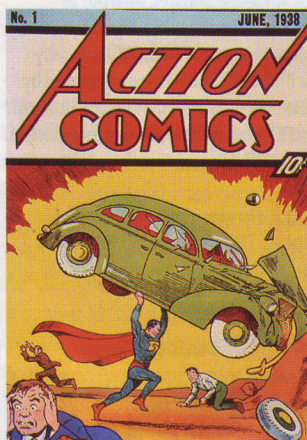




## TALES FROM THE KRYPTON

IN **SUPERMAN RETURNS**, ROMANTICALLY OUT-OF-SYNC CLARK KENT AND LOIS LANE HAVE A LOT OF HISTORY TO SORT THROUGH. BUT IF YOU WANT TO GET INTO SOME REALLY INVOLVED HISTORY, TAKE A LOOK AT WHAT WRITERS, ARTISTS, PRODUCERS, AND DIRECTORS HAVE DONE WITH—AND TO—THE MAN OF STEEL IN HIS NEARLY 70 YEARS OF EXISTENCE.

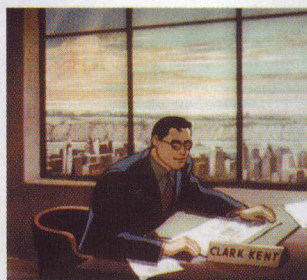
—TOM RUSSO



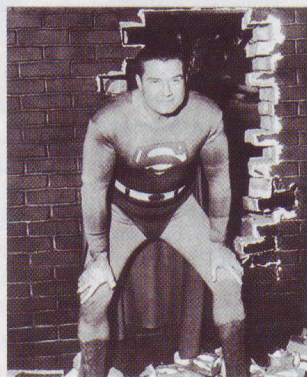
**1938** Superman is launched in *Action Comics* #1, the culmination of years of pitching by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster. They are paid \$130 for the story and the rights to the character. Today, a mint copy of the issue is worth upwards of \$450,000.

**1940** *The Adventures of Superman* radio show begins its 11-year run.

**1941** Animation producer Max Fleischer, whose studio brought Betty Boop and Popeye to the screen, releases the first Superman cartoon to theaters. The short earns an Oscar nod, and the series produces 16 more cartoons.



**1947** Siegel and Shuster sue DC Comics for the copyright to Superman plus \$5 million in damages. The courts reject the bid a year later; the pair subsequently sign an agreement to surrender all claims to Superman and Superboy for \$100,000.



**1948** *Man of Reel*: Superman goes live-action, in the first of two movie serials starring dancer Kirk Alyn.

**1952** TV's *The Adventures of Superman*, starring George Reeves, begins its 104-episode run.



**1959** A year and a half after his show ends production, Reeves, 45, is found dead of a gunshot wound. Although his death is ruled a suicide, rumors of foul play (addressed in an upcoming film starring Adrien Brody and Ben Affleck) abound.

**1966** The musical comedy *It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman* opens on Broadway. The show closes after 128 performances.

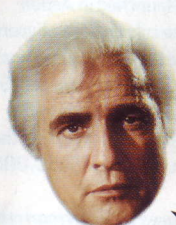
**1974-1976** Producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind begin development on *Superman: The Movie*. Marlon Brando is cast as Superman's father, Jor-El; Gene Hackman signs on as Lex Luthor. James Bond veteran Guy Hamilton is hired to direct. When the Salkinds decide to shoot in England instead of Italy, British tax exile Hamilton drops out and is replaced by Richard Donner. The Salkinds are thinking about Robert Redford as their lead; Donner casts Christopher Reeve.







**1975** Further litigation by Siegel (left) and Shuster is dropped in a settlement with Warner Communications, now DC's parent company. Siegel, in poor health, works as a civil service clerk in Los Angeles; Shuster, also out of comics, is legally blind. Warner agrees to pay them each \$20,000 annually for life, and to give them a "created by" credit on all Superman comics, movies, and TV shows. The property's reported value: \$1 billion.

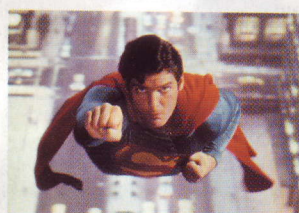


**March 1977** Production on the movie begins. The shoot lasts 19 months, and includes work on portions of *Superman II*.



**March 28, 1977** Brando punches in for work.

**April 18, 1977** Brando punches out, high-tails it to the bank to cash his \$3.7 million check.



**1978** DC publishes the tabloid-size event comic *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali*—in which Ali actually beats the Man of Steel (who, fans will note, was weakened by a dose of red sunlight).

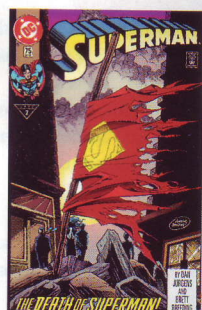
**December 1978** The \$55 million film opens, earning \$134 million. On all-time box office charts, only seven pre-1980 releases have grossed more.



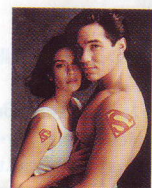
**1981** *Superman II* opens. Richard Lester is credited as sole director despite the contributions of Donner, fired by the Salkinds after the first film's release.

**1983** *Superman III* released, costarring Richard Pryor as bumbling computer work Gus Gorman.

**1987** *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* released by Warner, although it was produced by B-movie house Cannon Films. Gross: \$15.6 million.



**1988** Superman is featured in a *Time* cover story marking his 50th anniversary. Ironically, the piece follows an effort by DC to boost sluggish sales by dumping that half-century of continuity and rebooting the character.



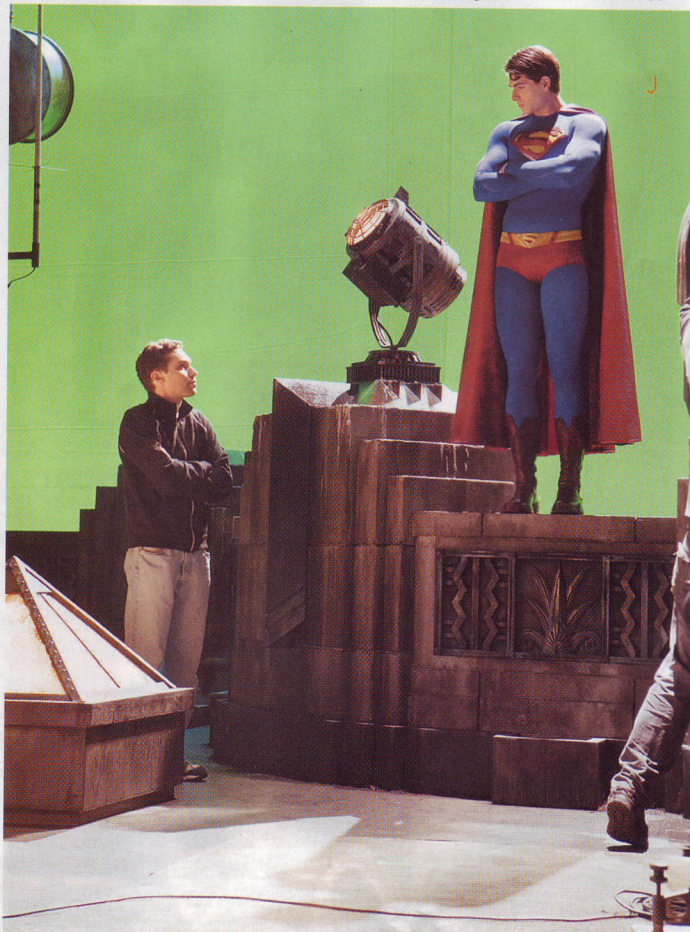
**1992** Superman is "killed" in the widely publicized January 1993 issue, which sells six million copies. He's resurrected eight months later.



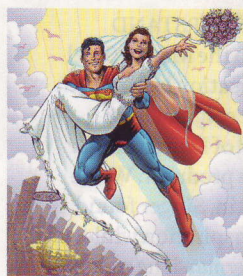
**1993** *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* debuts on ABC, ranking 62nd in the Nielsens for the season.



**KEEPIN' IT STEEL:** ABOVE, LOIS LANE (KATE BOSWORTH) AND HER FELLOW REPORTER CLARK KENT. BELOW, SINGER AND ROUTH PREPARE FOR A GREEN-SCREEN SCENE. BOTTOM, LEX LUTHOR (KEVIN SPACEY) AND HIS GIRLFRIEND (PARKER POSEY) COME TO BLOWS.

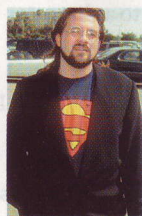






**1996** Clark Kent and Lois Lane get married, both on ABC's show and, consequently, in the comics.

**1996** Kevin Smith is hired by Warner Bros. and producer Jon Peters to write the fifth movie installment, *Superman Reborn* (later *Superman Lives*), targeted for a summer '98 release.



**1997** Nicolas Cage signs on for the movie, as does director Tim Burton; Smith's script is tossed.

**1997** DC gives Superman a radical makeover complete with blue skin and new, electrically based powers. The following year, the superhero's 60th anniversary, he reverts to Superman Classic.



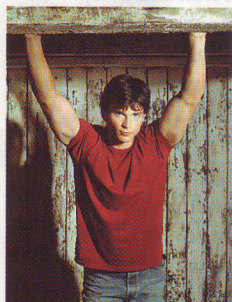
**1998** With the budget for *Superman Lives* reportedly climbing as high as \$190 million and the script still not jelling, Warner shelves the project.

**2001** Wolfgang Petersen signs on for a proposed *Batman vs. Superman* crossover, while McG (pictured) of *Charlie's Angels* fame is hired to direct a relaunch scripted by J.J. Abrams (*Alias*). The studio ultimately decides to go with the McG project.



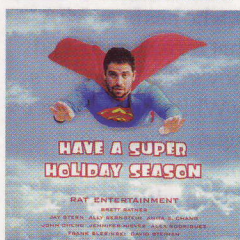
**2001** *Smallville* premieres on the WB, finishing as the network's second-highest-rated show for the season.

**2002** McG runs into a super scheduling conflict with *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*; director Brett Ratner (*Red Dragon*) steps in, sends out a holiday card with his face superimposed on an image of Superman.



**2003** Ratner quits when Warner balks at the budget—reportedly hovering around \$240 million—as well as his casting choice, unknown soap actor Matthew Bomer. McG returns.

**2004** McG again quits, unwilling to fly to Australia to shoot the film. Bryan Singer is lured away from the *X-Men* franchise to direct, from a script by his X2 writers. Singer casts Brandon Routh—an unknown soap actor—as his lead.



**2004** Reeve dies of heart failure at 52.

**October 2005** Proving that he's no fair-weather Super-fan, Cage names his newborn son Kal-El, Superman's Kryptonian moniker.



tle too righteous, relevant to an audience that has developed a taste for reluctant, angst-ridden heroes.

"He's that symbol of hope, and I don't think that makes him outdated," Dougherty says. "In terms of tone, Bryan likes to say that it comes in between *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*. It takes itself very seriously, but it's not afraid to be a little lighter."

"Superman's always been an idealistic hero, and with idealism there are always pitfalls," Singer says, adding that the character still stands for "truth and justice" (although "the American way" is up for discussion). "He's the ultimate immigrant, and he wears his special heritage with pride. When he returns, the world isn't the way he left it. People have moved on. Lois has moved on. He now has to reclaim his place. That's the conflict that makes this movie interesting."

**E**RIE. THAT'S HOW 26-YEAR-OLD BRANDON Routh (rhymes with "mouth"), known to his friends as B.J., describes his resemblance to the young Christopher Reeve—the angular jaw, the pronounced brow, the meaty good looks—and also the strange connection he's felt to the Man of Steel throughout his life. It all started the first time he saw the 1978 movie on TV. "I was five or six years old and dressed up in my Superman pajamas," says Routh, who grew up in the small town of Norwalk, Iowa (pop. 6,000). "I was so excited to see it, I gave myself a migraine. I was puking through half of the movie. I don't think I even remember watching it."

Jump ahead two decades: Routh has moved to Los Angeles to give acting a shot, after a year at the University of Iowa and a modeling stint in New York. He gets lucky, landing a role on the soap *One Life to Live* and a string of other bit parts, but no big breaks. To pay the rent, he pours drinks at Hollywood's Lucky Strike bowling alley.

He meets a woman who exclaims, "Man, you look like Christopher Reeve!"; turns out she's the assistant to J.J. Abrams, who is writing a *Superman* script. Later, at a Halloween work party where he dresses up as Clark Kent/Superman—with black-framed glasses (which he wears in real life) and a black suit with a blue shirt and the "S" logo peeking out—he wins first prize.

But the real omen was the migraine he got the morning he was to meet Singer. The director, who was leaving for Sydney that day to scout locations, had discovered Routh in some old audition tapes of McG's. Routh showed for their meeting at the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf on Sunset Boulevard, and "the instant we met," the actor says, "I just had this huge feeling that this was going to be amazing."

"I've never been distracted by [an actor's] heat at any given moment, or their stardom," says Singer. "I've always been driven to their character—their genuine character, who they are. That's why the meeting is so important." Routh, he says, "was my first and only choice. Superman has to appear as though he just stepped out of the comic, out of our collective memory. Otherwise, you're just making a studio vehicle."

**R**OUTH PACKED ON AROUND 20 POUNDS OF muscle to bulk up his six-two-and-a-half frame for the role, and he's been on a strict diet and exercise regime for almost a year. His skintight supersuit, which a computer mapped to his body, cost hundreds of thousands to develop, and he can't gain or lose an ounce until the film wraps.

In a subterranean room lined with racks of clothes, not far from a set