

THE MYSTERY MEN!

Universal's effects-laden superhero parody is based on an obscure comic.

by Joe Fordham

Scan the magazine racks of your local newsstand and you'll be hard pressed to find Bob Burden's "Mystery Men" anywhere therein. Dig deeper at your resident comic collector's store and you might be more lucky, if they stock back issues of Burden's bizarre *Flaming Carrot Comics*, first published under Burden's indie Kilian Barracks label in 1981, now part of the eclectic cadre at Dark Horse Comics. Seek out *Flaming Carrot* #16/17 and you'll have hit the motherlode, the first appearance of the Mystery Men, the shambolic troupe of superheroes with no superpowers.

August 6, 1999, sees the release of Universal Pictures' big-budget, live-action adaptation of Burden's unique take on the superhero mythos. Fifteen stars including Ben Stiller, Hank Azaria, William H. Macy, Paul Reubens, Janeane Garofalo, Claire Forlani, Tom Waits, Greg Kinnear, Geoffrey Rush and Lena Olin will be duking it out amongst the ragtag comic book combatants. Kinka Usher, veteran of Nissan's surreal "Enjoy the Ride" commercials and the National Milk Board's wacky "Got Milk" spots, takes up his first big-time feature directorial reins.

Usher, one of the advertising world's most highly regarded directing talents, explained the material's appeal, noting that the comics are "very, very different from the Mystery Men we portray on the screen. The thing I really enjoyed about making this movie was that I had freedom to create the heroes that I chose. I wasn't locked into any predisposed idea of who the characters had to be because they were in a hugely popular comic book. It was one reason that drew me to the project. It gave me total freedom to create my own world. I never re-



Wannabe heroes with dubious powers, The Blue Raja (Hank Azaria), The Shoveler (William H. Macy) and Mr. Furious (Ben Stiller).

ally read comic books at all, so I didn't really know much about them. I was more drawn to the idea of a story that was original and an idea that was fresh. This story was the antithesis of a Superman or a Batman. The Mystery Men were superheroes on the other side of the tracks and I thought that had really brilliant potential."

The director's unconventional approach proved to be in keeping with the maverick spirit of the source material at its Dark Horse home. "Bob Burden, who created *Mystery Men*, is much loved around here, the eccentric that he is," stated producer Scott Faye, spokesman for Dark Horse Entertainment, the film production wing of Michael Richardson's indie comic outfit. "He's somewhat of a creative genius." Grown from humble origins in the eighties, Dark Horse now has the third largest comic

circulation in the world, second only to Marvel and D.C. After *THE MASK*, *DOCTOR GIGGLES* and *VIRUS*, *MYSTERY MEN* marks their fifth feature, co-produced with Lawrence Gordon and Lloyd Levin.

Burden entered the Dark Horse fold in 1989 when his self-published *Flaming Carrot Comics* was enjoying the peak of its success, just a couple of issues after "Mystery Men" first appeared. "Back then I was operating as an independent comic producer, packaging everything and giving it to them," Burden recalled. "I had a free range, kind of like Colonel Kurtz going off with 400 Indian tribesmen." The heart of Burden's darkness lay in *Flaming Carrot*, a character deliberately created as the most ridiculous, surreal superhero to emerge from the early eighties' direct-to-market comic boom.

"I wanted to see if I could make the story itself be the star of my series. I didn't want my stories predicated by the super power factor or the theme of

the character's origin or costume," Burden explained. "It was an evolution from the standard comic formula, like Cortez burning the ships he came to South America on so his men wouldn't be thinking about going home. They had to fight or die, and so did the *Flaming Carrot*. I took the dumbest character idea I had come up with at the time and just ran with it. Beyond dumb and downright preposterous, *Flaming Carrot* had a surreal quality. He was a superhero so far removed from the Marvel and D.C. mold, no one ever even asked what his powers were."

While this paid off in forcing Burden to write better stories, pushed the collectors' market price for an original *Flaming Carrot* #1 to \$75 and spawned a Carrot website at flamingcarrot.com, the down side was that for many years the Carrot was too far out there to translate into other media. This led,



Macy, Stiller, and Azaria with their fellow Mystery Men: The Bowler (Janeane Garofalo), The Spleen (Paul Reubens) and The Invisible Boy (Kel Mitchell), fighting the villains threatening to take over Champion City.

in 1988, to the creation of the Mystery Men, a no-less surreal but more marketable proposition. "I had interest from Hollywood in the Carrot but it never seemed to get off the ground," related Burden. "The Mystery Men hit the home run that won the game."

Faye acknowledged the spirit of Flaming Carrot remained entrenched in "Mystery Men," and was eager to praise the movie adaptation for capturing its source material's loopy, edgy intent. "Neil Cuthbert, who wrote the screenplay with Brent Forrester, just did a phenomenal job of expanding this world," said Faye. "The movie is weird and wacky, yet it's extremely entertaining, and obviously with our cast extremely well acted. There are visual effects, but they are definitely secondary to the plot and the characters. It's really not a film which overtly relies on visual effects to tell the story. It really is a character-driven piece."

As might be expected of the feature film debut of such a visually distinctive commercials director, the final MYSTERY MEN film will contain over 300 visual effects shots, cutting edge digital trickery being generated by effects studios including Pacific Ocean Post and Rhythm and Hues. The majority of these post-production tasks centered around depicting the Mystery Men's home town of Champion City, as well as a few otherwise impossible-to-achieve-superhero feats—but the distinction is superhero, not superhuman. The only flying objects here are sharp and metal and pointy, as thrown by The Blue Raja, Master of Silverware, a crime-fighter who lives in fear of his mother finding out the secret of her constantly disappearing kitchen cutlery.

"What distinguishes this from other superhero films is the fact that these are superheroes with families, with issues, with

problems," Usher explained. "These are superheroes that have relationships with each other. These are superheroes that are incredibly sincere about their pursuits. They take it very seriously, so there's no joke here. It's the situation that's funny."

Paralleling Burden's original aim for comic book characters with depth, Usher's thoughtful approach helped the movie MYSTERY MEN evolve to attract their stellar cast. "When I got involved with the picture it was medium- to low-budget with no cast, just me and the producers," Usher recalled. "I just sat down with each cast member and explained my vision. I rallied them around the idea that I was going to make a film that was going to be very unique, that wasn't slapsticky or stupid, but was very sincere, with a tremendous amount of humanity and heart, with really diverse and interesting characters. There were 13 different characters so there was a great opportunity to create a wonderful film. I also didn't want to make my first film with a single star. I wanted to make an ensemble movie, as opposed to just another Schwarzenegger action-hero movie. I wanted the movie to reflect me. The movie itself is the star."

Stiller as "Mr. Furious," the brooding leader of the pack, was always the Mystery Man closest to Burden's heart, perhaps because he most obviously carried the Carrot's loner torch, albeit not implanted in a giant, orange noggin. "I was lobbying for Ben from day one," said Burden. "He was even going to direct the movie at one point before SOMETHING ABOUT MARY came along." Macy, as the hapless "Shoveller," brought his character to life beyond all Burden's expectations. "It was a brilliant role," Burden exclaimed. "I loved him in FARGO,

"I wanted to make an ensemble movie, as opposed to just another Schwarzenegger action-hero movie."

—Kinka Usher, director—

but this may rival that." Paul Reuben also made "The Spleen" his own. "They took the name and some of the powers that he had and kind of ran with it, which is exactly what they should have done," Burden commented. "I felt sorry for Paul because he had zits all over his face and a really bad haircut, but he really captured the role." New characters include Kal Mitchell as "Invisible Boy"—"He's invisible when nobody's looking at him," Burden explained—who entered the team as a post-script addition, based on an off-hand Burden quip. Hank Azaria's "Blue Raja" and Geoffrey Rush's "Casanova Frankenstein" were both drawn from the original comic bible.

"I'd say, on this particular project, lightning was caught in a bottle," Faye observed. Burden was equally enthused, "I did this quirky comic, this blue collar superhero that became a cult hit, and now it's transformed and grown into this big Hollywood movie—and I'm happy with it! That's the most unusual thing. That's a story unto itself."

Bob Burden's comic inspiration. Universal opens their big-budget adaptation nationwide August 6, directed by commercials auteur Kinka Usher.



THE MYSTERY MEN!

Trying to walk the fine line between comic book spoof and character drama.

By Joe Fordham

It all started with a Flaming Carrot. From out of the blue in 1987, Bob Burden's six feet tall, vegetable-headed, self-ignited, crime-fighting superhero with no superpowers rose to become a beacon of the eighties' direct-market sales, comic book store boom. It was a comic book revolution that had not been seen since the days of Zap and Fritz the Cat selling out of head shops 20 years before. Michael Richardson's Dark Horse Comics, established in this boom, saw the Carrot coming, gave him a home in his shelter for emerging artists and simultaneously acquired the motley coterie of Burden's Carrot universe, The Mysterymen. Dark Horse Comics spawned Dark Horse Entertainment, their film production company, in 1995, to usher in *THE MASK* and *TIMECOP*. *TIMECOP* forged a link with Lawrence Gordon and Lloyd Levin, the powerhouse producer double team, with ten years and 15 movie titles behind them. With combined credentials including *DIE HARD*s one and two, both *PREDATORS*, *EVENT HORIZON*, *FIELD OF DREAMS*, *BOOGIE NIGHTS* and *THE ROCKETEER*, Gordon and Levin's eclectic tastes lead them to establish a first-look development deal with Dark Horse. Richardson offered up Burden's Mysterymen.

Noted Levin, speaking from his Universal Studios office, "What really attracted us to the



The Bowler (Janeane Garofalo), the Shovel (William H. Macy) and the Spleen (Paul Reubens), blue collar crimefighters hit the streets of Champlion City.

Mystery Men were the characters, who were all very blue-collar, set in the margins of society, about the guy who has a shitty job whose boss beats the crap out of him, or the guy who's having problems with his wife and doesn't know how to relate to his kids, or the guy who has girlfriend problems. It was a real departure from any sort of situation Bruce Wayne would find himself in."

The Mystery Men's screen predecessors, however, still played a role in the producers' early story meetings. "Our superheroes are very self-aware of superhero mythology," noted Levin. "When you see *BATMAN*, *SUPERMAN*, or even *SPAWN* or *BLADE*, there's no awareness of the genre and its mythology. It was almost as if the characters in these movies

have grown up without seeing any of the movies or the comic books we've all seen. That was very much a part of our concept from the beginning. We went in with the assumption our audience had seen all the movies and read all the comic books, and were maybe bored with the same old thing."

As well as establishing the rules of the Mystery Men's world and their characters' motivation, the concept suggested genre-bending possibilities and started to define the project's sense of humor. "We were hoping maybe we could do what *SCREAM* did to horror movies," said Levin, "to approach our story with a certain amount of self-awareness while still being sincere. We were not making a spoof."

The first specific concern

was how to choose characters from the original comic. This was not a tidy *Fantastic Four*, or even an amorphous *Justice League of America*; Burden's Mysterymen were a fluctuating wild bunch that occasionally included characters even more bizarre than their Carrot leader. The film could not possibly contain them all. "We made a decision very early on to keep it less broad than the comic book suggested," said Levin. "There was a certain level of fantasy in Bob's comic which we wanted to avoid." It was eventually decided aliens and the Carrot would have to wait for sequels in favor of Burden's more terrestrial, unnatural juxtapositions with their trademark offbeat wit.

Gordon, Levin and Richardson brought their pitch to Universal, and the studio decided they wanted to develop a script based on the material. Levin recalled an offbeat genre script that had caught his eye. *PLUTO NASH*, a comedy about a nightclub owner fighting for his rights on a lunar colony in 2087, currently in development for Eddie Murphy with Castle Rock at Warner Bros., was written by Neil Cuthbert, whose only previous genre credits included *HOCUS POCUS* and *RETURN OF SWAMP THING*. Levin saw the potential. "Neil wrote from the point of view of genuine heart. We were all sure that he was capable of writing *MYSTERY MEN* as a comedy about wannabes and losers, without being condescending



Greg Kinnear stars as Captain Amazing, Champion City's beloved superhero in a big-budget adaptation of the Dark Horse comic book created by Bob Burden.

towards them. He was able to avoid parody, but yet still make a comedy, and that was a fine line."

The MYSTERY MEN screenplay evolved into a tale of a group of errant crime-fighters with homespun costumes and dubious powers who inhabited a superhero metropolis, Champion City, patrolled by the heroic Captain Amazing. When evil mastermind Casanova Frankenstein effects his own release from the Erie Asylum for the Criminally Insane, Amazing disappears and the Mystery Men are left to save the day. Further drafts would follow, with revisions also supplied by a second screenwriter, Brent Forrester, veteran of THE BEN STILLER SHOW and THE STUPIDS. "When we cast Ben Stiller, we made a decision to slightly change the Mr. Furious character," Levin recalled. "Brent was brought in to do it, and that had a kind of ripple effect on the rest of the script."

Stiller would eventually become a leading player in the MYSTERY MEN, but the popular comedian first considered a very different role. "Ben at one point was going to direct the script," said Levin. "When he decided he

didn't have enough time to devote to the project as a director, we approached him about another character and then we just kept re-approaching him about Mr. Furious."

The director's role was filled by Kinka Usher, a filmmaker new to the feature film arena, whose exotic moniker is a childhood nickname bestowed by his siblings—that stuck. Usher honed his story-telling skills at his Santa Monica-based production company, House of Usher, producing and directing advertising spots for Pepsi, "Got Milk" and Nissan, most notably perhaps in a spot where a Wil Vinton stop-motion animated G.I. Joe shanghai's Bar-

"We created a world where the whole superhero mythology was embraced. The costumes had to be believable so they didn't make our heroes look like buffoons."

bie from her floozy Ken to go "Enjoy the Ride" as only G.I. Joe knows how.

With a director aboard, the cast was not long to follow. "The response to the script from the acting community was very positive," said Levin. "Geoffrey Rush was the first character cast, filling the role of our villain Casanova Frankenstein. Geoffrey basically pursued us, he was very eager to be in our project, so that was a really great way to begin. I think ultimately we attracted a very independent film-type cast." Rush was followed by William H. Macy, Claire Forlani, Janeane Garafalo, Hank Azaria, Tom Waits, Paul Reubens, Kel Mitchell, Greg Kinnear, and finally Ben Stiller.

Cuthbert's screenplay took shape under Usher's influence. "Early on I felt the story didn't have the sophistication that I was looking for," commented Usher. "It was too broad. I tend to go for a much more British-style of comedy, which is dryer and more based on situation and character than delivering the next joke." Usher had American referents for style. "I used CITIZEN KANE, visually, and then probably RAISING ARIZONA, comedically." As pre-production began, Usher turned to visual effects designers at Pacific

Ocean Post, long-time collaborators from his commercial work, to begin development of Champion City, while production designer Kirk Petrucelli (BLADE) was recruited to assimilate the visual plan.

Wardrobe designer Marilyn Vance (STREETS OF FIRE) adopted an approach that grounded the characters in their own reality. "We really had to play with the idea that these were people who dreamed about being superheroes, but they didn't really have the resources to pull it off," noted Levin. "We had to make their costumes credible from the point of view of their characters and their situations, but we also had to avoid making them look silly. We were creating a world where the whole superhero mythology was embraced, and the costumes had to be believable so they didn't make our heroes look like buffoons."

The fusion of past and present became a visual motif in the design of the Mystery Men's world. "The idea was to create a universe that spoke to the future but used elements from the past and from other places," said Levin. "Champion City became this intense mélange, of which took on its own sensibility, with a very Euro-Asian feel. There was also real neo-baroque influence, based on the 19th-century Spanish architect, Gaudi, especially for our villains."

SUPERMAN had Metropolis, based on New York City; BATMAN had Gotham City, based on Chicago; DICK TRACEY had Chester Gould's Detroit—Usher planned to break the trend. "A lot of superhero films have used American back-grounds. What I wanted was to create much more of a global feeling for MYSTERY MEN. I wanted to make sure there was a sense

Facing Frankenstein (l to r): Garafalo, Invisible Boy Kel Mitchell, Wes Studi as the Sphynx, Macy, Hank Azaria as the Blue Raja, Ben Stiller as Mr. Furious and Reubens.



of other parts of the world, although everyone speaks English. The film is probably an amalgam of San Francisco and Hong Kong, very gritty, with a tremendous Asian influence in the music and graphics and signage in the streets, with a lot of European cars driving around."

Usher and Petrucelli also strove to use their production design to dislocate the city's sense of time. "We combined a range of periods from the twenties to the seventies. Some scenes look very forties, others look very twenties, all suggested by different types of cars and wardrobe and makeup and hair. As you watch the film it's visually very interesting. It's really a blend of all these influences."

An 80-day shoot was planned starting October 23, 1998, with Brian DePalma's current favorite director of photography, Stephen Burum (SNAKE EYES), lensing Usher's feature debut. One of the boldest visual decisions for MYSTERY MEN, atypical of the recent glut of superhero movies, was to shoot exteriors on practical locations in and around metropolitan Los Angeles, enhancing and dropping in the digitally created Champion City skyline for an estimated 60% of the picture. "The sets for Casanova's home were built on huge stages and on the backlot," said Levin. "All the action with our heroes, where they live, where they work, were all filmed on location, which was Kinka and Kirk's idea, which Stephen Burum supported. I think it grounds the film and draws our audience a lot closer to the characters." It has been over 20 years since Richard Donner first took Christopher Reeve out onto the streets of New York in his red cape and boots for SUPERMAN THE MOVIE. It was a vibrancy that Levin hoped to catch on screen in MYSTERY MEN.

Despite the visual sophistication, with Rhythm and Hues joining Pacific Ocean Post to add to the expanding roster of digital effects supervised by Lori Nelson, MYSTERY MEN remained a character piece for Usher. "I've made tremendous amounts of commercials be-

"The Mystery Men throw forks, and beat up people up with shovels. They don't fly and can't make themselves skinny. They're much more practical superheroes."



Commercials director Kinka Usher (r) rehearses the Mystery Men at home (l to r) Stiller, Macy, Azaria, Garofalo, Mitchell and Reubens, keeping the humor real.

fore with large effects budgets," the director stated. "The problem with effects is that they tend to divest the story of its humanity, and the humanity of this story was the most important aspect of the project for me. The effects purely supported the idea. The Mystery Men's tasks were very dubious. They throw forks and beat people up with shovels, they don't fly, they can't make themselves really skinny—they're much more practical superheroes."

The real thrill for Usher came from his collaboration with his performers. "The thing about good actors is that they shepherd themselves. They make the film better because they ask really tough questions about why they're doing something, and every time they asked these questions, they made the film better."

Some of the biggest laughs on set came from Greg Kinnear. "I first thought Greg was kind of a dolt," Usher stated. "I cast him because I thought that was perfect for Captain Amazing. When I started working with him as an actor he was wonderful! A superb performer! Great

instincts. A lot of the actors interpreted their characters in interesting ways because they were also writers. We had a lot of scenes with free movement where we would improvise lines, which was very, very helpful in bringing the characters to life."

Enthusiastic studio response allowed last minute additions, inserting city backgrounds where none were originally planned, but the overall effect has taken everyone by surprise. "From the earliest days when Kinka was involved with the project, he brought this film to a level which was beyond anything that I had imagined."

The film has been an interesting experiment for Usher. "I think we've created a different kind of movie, an entertaining movie based on characters and their experiences, not based on the classic Hollywood hooks, sex and violence. I'm very pleased that I was allowed the opportunity to make a movie like that, without any studio interference, with really almost total freedom to design the characters and the visual aspects of the film as I chose. The

film is on a massive scale, but there are definitely edgy, subversive tones to it. It's like I've made an independent picture within the studio system with a studio-sized budget, but the film has a little independent heart to it."

Levin gave pause to consider the implications of his maverick underdog's potential amongst the summer's boxoffice high-rollers. "Comic books are much more interesting and complex than the standard knee-jerk movie industry will give them credit for," he stated. "I think a lot of filmmakers are really starting to recognize that—I don't necessarily think a lot of movie executives are—but I think that some of the more interesting literature in the last couple of decades has been based on graphic novels. There's a synergy. There's this tremendous dialogue going on between comic books and movies."

Levin quoted THE MATRIX as a recent example of the cross-over. The Wachowski Brother's recent boxoffice smash tapped the comic gestalt by employing extensive pre-visualizations by comic artist Paul Darrow. This was the tip of the iceberg as far as Levin was concerned. "There are so many movies I've seen that are influenced by Frank Miller's work. Not even comic book movies, but some of Oliver Stone's work, for instance," he observed. If further evidence were needed, Gordon and Levin's next Dark Horse project, HELLBOY, currently being written and directed by Guillermo Del Toro, from a magnificent graphic novel by Mike Mignolla, should turn a few heads in the summer of 2000. But then again, it all comes down to story.

"One of my favorite things about MYSTERY MEN, even though it's a real trip visually and it's a lot of fun, is the theme," said Levin. "Dare to dream the dream that you want to dream, and have the courage to pursue those dreams, no matter what anyone has to say." For Levin, Usher, Burum and the cast and crew behind MYSTERY MEN, it has certainly been a sentiment they have been proud to follow. □