

FILM VIEW

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When Budgets Soar Over The Rainbow

Money — there's too much of it being spent and not enough to go around. Because in times like these publicity claims, like everything else, tend to become inflated, filled with hot air, we shouldn't necessarily believe that the forthcoming "Superman," based on the comic strip, actually cost \$78,000,000, but even if it cost half that much, one must wonder whether or not something is wrong. Forget the art part; it seems bad business to make a film that has to become one of the biggest money-makers of all time simply to show a small profit. Movies can't cure cancer or the common cold and, much of the time, they can't even cure boredom. What is going on?

I know that this is a touchy subject with a lot of filmmakers. The cost of something, they say, is beside the point. Critics should only concern themselves with what's on the screen. That would be true, of course, if movies were not primarily a business and only secondarily an art. A certain number of movies have to show a profit if more movies are to be made, and if enough movies do not make profits, one can say of the movie industry, as the angry wife said in Ernie Pintoff's cartoon classic, "The Critic," about the money spent on a lousy movie ticket, "Out the window, Murray!"

We live in an era of hype and hustle, and no wonder when a nice, charming but hardly seminal science-fiction film like "Star Wars" can earn rentals, at last count, of approximately \$164,760,000, and "Jaws" \$121,000,000. Figures of that sort are malignant sugar plums dancing through the heads of movie makers who dream of the Big Jackpot.

I doubt that Francis Coppola was dreaming of the Big Jackpot when the budget for his still-unreleased "Apocalypse Now" grew from \$10 million or \$12 million to something in the neighborhood of \$30 million. Bad luck with location shooting was reportedly responsible for the way that budget went up. "Apocalypse Now" will be, one assumes, a "serious" picture, which makes the risk of the tremendous budget even greater. One can applaud Mr. Coppola's personal courage in risking that much money (a lot of it his own), yet isn't he possibly doing himself and movies in general a disservice by taking such an extraordinary financial gamble? If he fails a number of other movies will be left unmade.

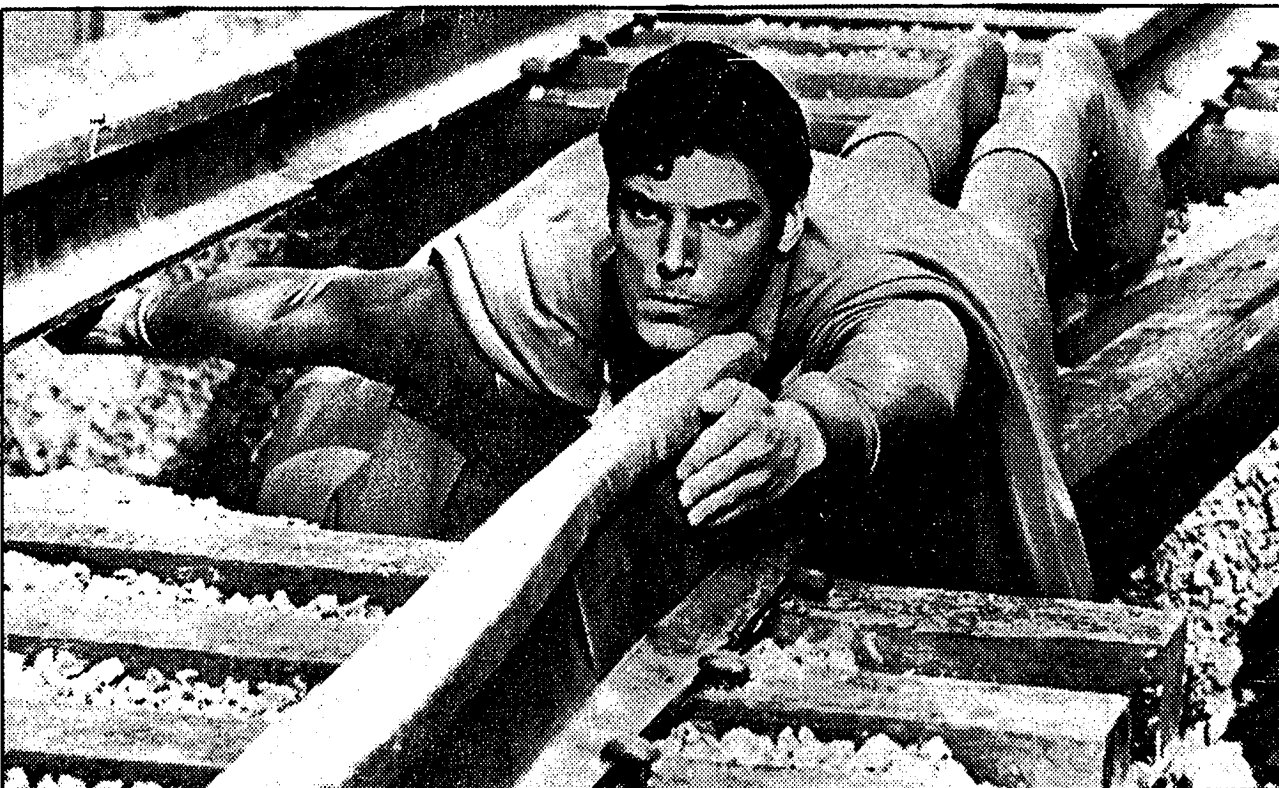
As the cost of perfectly conventional movie production escalates, ways must be found to offset the financial risks, most of which have less to do with acts of God than with ignorance, arrogance, lack of imagination and maybe even a tiny bit of cupidity. A classic example of a production that was fated to fail from the start was the original attempt in the 1950's to film the exteriors of "Cleopatra" in London in the winter; the cameramen found they couldn't see from one side of the giant set to the other because of the fog. Someone had not done his homework.

The problem is that a lot of the money being spent on the production of motion pictures these days is not showing up on the screen, not, at least, in ways that might be expected to generate some sort of favorable emotional responses in the audience.

A spectacular case in point is the Motown production of Sidney Lumet's film version of "The Wiz," which reportedly cost anywhere from \$23 million to \$27 million. This is the film that was supposed to return big-budget, studio produc-



If the studios responsible are to be believed, more than \$100 million has gone into making "The Wiz" (above) and "Superman" (which opens Dec. 11). Each must become "one of the biggest money-makers of all time simply to show a small profit."



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tion to New York City, though the movie is such a colossal bore it might well send all film producers out of town forever. Who wants to spend that kind of money and come up with a "Wiz"?

At this point in movie history the cost of "The Wiz" would not seem all that extraordinary had anyone connected with the film had a dominating vision of the kind of fantasy it was supposed to be, once the Frank L. Baum original was more or less junked. Surprisingly (at least to me) the casting of 30-ish Diana Ross in the role of Dorothy is not where "The Wiz" goes wrong. Miss Ross is such a rare mixture of talents as a singer, actress, performer and personality, both modest and so self-assured I expect she could perform during an earthquake without missing a beat, that she manages to make the most improbable circumstances worth attending to. Yet "The Wiz" is a mess due to the misguided efforts to turn the energetic, likeably dopey stage musical into what might pass for a ghetto fairy tale:

Sweet little Dorothy, now 30 or thereabouts, teaches grade school in Harlem and is, in the terms of the screenplay, "afraid of life," meaning, one must suppose, men, though that's never made clear. One night she runs out into the snowy street to retrieve her beloved Toto (still a small dog) and, swept away by a white tornado of what could be soap chips, finds herself in Oz, which looks like an abandoned suburban shopping mall. Because this is a big set, the movie must stay in it for a while, so there's a lot of singing and dancing about nothing much until someone tells Dorothy that if she wants to go home, she'd better get herself on down to the Emerald City to consult the Wiz.

The movie then jumps around New York City locales (real, simulated and parodied) until it arrives at the World Trade Center, which, because it's another gigantic set and thus must be utilized, demands that we have another big production number that for sheer joylessness and confusion must set a new standard for movie musicals.

"The Wiz" does look expensive, like a rhinestone-studded subway car, but it's not much fun, partly because Dorothy's unawakened sexual impulses (which is what I take the film to be about) have nothing at all to do with what happens in the movie to Dorothy and her pals, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion.

In the entire film there are only two songs worth listening to ("Move on Down The Road" and "Don't Bring Me No Bad News") and no choreography of any interest whatsoever, though there is much moving around to music. As I sat watching the film in the Orpheum the other afternoon, I wondered what the young children, who are being herded by platoons into theaters to see this movie at group rates, could possibly make of it. Do self-help lyrics like "If you believe, within your heart you'll know" say something to these children? I can't think that they do. Is Diana Ross's understated chic something they identify with? Can such a film make a profit even if every school kid in America is forced to see it?

Possibly, but since the movie was so unimaginatively conceived and executed, this yellow brick road to profits will be uphill all the way.

It's not as if something went wrong with "The Wiz" during production. The original vision wasn't good enough to justify the expenditure of so much money. Should "The Wiz" fail, it will mean the failure of more than one film because, in all probability, a number of other, possibly better musicals won't be made. These days no movie is an isolated investment.