



by Christian Klusman



*Captain America II: Death Too Soon* is the name given to the second pilot for the proposed series (it was given a number and subtitle after its initial TV debut, as well as for its video release). Reb Brown returns as Captain America, along with his partner Simon Mills, once again played by Len Birman. There has obviously been a change in the bureau, though; Heather Menzies is out as the token government woman, and Connie Selleca, has taken over for her.

In this exciting new chapter in the career of Captain America, Steve Rogers is continuing to wander across the country. However, this time he has his fancy-pants van with jet-propelled motorcycle in the back to go along with his shiny new red, white and blue wardrobe. After a warm-up confrontation where Cap battles street thugs over an old lady's purse, we get to the real issue at hand. Dastardly European terrorist Miguel (the great Christopher Lee in one of his lower career points) has kidnapped Dr. Ilson, a top scientist for the National Security Labs. Ilson was last working on a cure for the "disease of aging." Sounds like trouble, doesn't it? After some discussion about a chemical that is never named but is apparently very important in Ilson's research, Cap is on the case. God help us all.

Tracing the source of the chemical smuggling to a hick town called Belleville, Steve Rogers goes undercover (as Steve Rogers) to get to the bottom of things. He encounters a multitude of unfriendly citizens who try to get him to leave town, first by ruining his artwork ("You really can't see that you're not wanted here, can you?" one guy says to Steve as the guy doodles a pair of eyeglasses on a painting of a cat that Steve is working on. "There; now he can see. And I can easy fit you with the same prescription."). When that doesn't work, the locals try to beat him up, and eventually force him over the side of an enormous dam (as Captain America on his motorcycle). Cap survives the fall, but finally reaches his breaking point. He forces the information out of one of the townspeople, a tomboy-ish woman who runs a local ranch where Steve has been staying. It seems that Miguel and his cronies have poisoned the entire town of Belleville with the aging compound. The townspeople are being given intermittent inoculations that retard the aging process. However, the antidote is not given in a powerful enough dose to cure them. This explains the cooperation of Ilson; the town of Bellevue is being held hostage as a bargaining chip for his assistance.

Miguel, who has threatened the government with the biochemical saturation of a major American city, isn't satisfied with the government response (the United States does not negotiate with terrorists, as we all know too well). Therefore, Miguel drops an enormous cloud of the compound right on top of the city of Portland, Oregon. The exciting thing here is that if you look closely during this scene, you'll see a future Marvel superhero in the crowd: Alex Hyde-White, Mr. Fantastic from the original 1994 *Fantastic Four* film. Reed Richards stops what he's doing to stare at the sky while getting a good lungful of the aging compound, along with everyone else in the vicinity.



We all know how this is going to end, and I wouldn't be inconsiderate enough to spoil the details. Cap comes through yet again (after a lengthy and boring hang glider chase), Belleville and Portland are both saved, Miguel is destroyed, and Steve Rogers even gets to kiss a girl. Is there anything our Star-Spangled Avenger can't do?



Sadly, yes; he's clearly unable to star in an interesting live action film. While Reb Brown isn't exactly a Golden Globe echelon actor, he's not the problem here. Reb isn't the most exciting actor out there, but he seems to enjoy being Captain America. He actually looks like he's having a good time, and that lends a small amount of charm to the films. The other characters aren't really the problem either. In fact, if there's one thing that saves these movies, it is the actors. Unfortunately, everything else in the entire production is pretty squirrely.

Let's start aesthetically, with the costume. When Simon mentions to Steve that his father was ridiculed, and called "Captain America" mockingly by his enemies (we'll get to this whole issue later), Steve quick whips up a drawing of a costumed avenger dressed in patriotic garb. Though only a pencil drawing, it looks nothing like the Captain America we all know. When Simon finally presents Steve with a costume, it's a manufactured version of Steve's crappy drawing. He finally puts on the suit, and we see it in all of its star-spangled horror. First and foremost, it looks like he's wearing an unbuttoned red and white striped vest over a blue spandex tunic thing. While he does have his red boots and gloves, they are both cuffless and have white stars and a stripe on them. As in the Republic Serial, Cap is missing the star on his back and his white sleeves, though in the long run these are very small problems. The coup de grace of the entire costume is the motorcycle helmet adorned with an "A" and two wing-like things flatly painted on the front and sides.

In what appears to be a tacked-on ending primarily for the video release of Part One, Captain America displays his new outfit, which he says looks just like his father's (we'll get to this, really). Finally, we have some hope for an accurate rendition of the costume. We sort of get it, but it does very little to appease anything. The suit is dead-on comic book accurate, although its spandex shine is a bit much; this is simply one more reason why many comic book characters don't translate well to live-action film. However, Captain America still has his motorcycle helmet, albeit modified slightly. It is supposed to look like Cap's mask (which it kind of does) but the helmet just makes his head look too big. At least now there are actual raised wings on the helmet, but they are only slightly raised and painted to look like wings, giving the appearance of plastic raised and painted wings.



The motorcycle looks like something that Evel Knievel would have thrown in the garbage. The body of the bike looks like it's made of cheap plastic. As you watch Cap riding it at top speed, you can't help but cringe; the bike always looks like it's going to shatter into pieces with each bump it hits. Cap's trademark shield is close to the comic book, but the white parts are clear and the star is blue. Plus, it doesn't look very threatening or very helpful in deflecting anything more dangerous than a small rock. And when he throws it, it's like watching paint dry waiting for it to return to him. It's not very convincing as a deadly weapon, and furthermore it's not very exciting.

Leaving the costume aside, let's get to the issue of the new Cap's father. In these movies, are we supposed to believe that we are watching the son of the original Captain America, that valiant hero who fought off the scourge of the nasty Nazis back in the forties? I'm not entirely sure; it is never really clear.

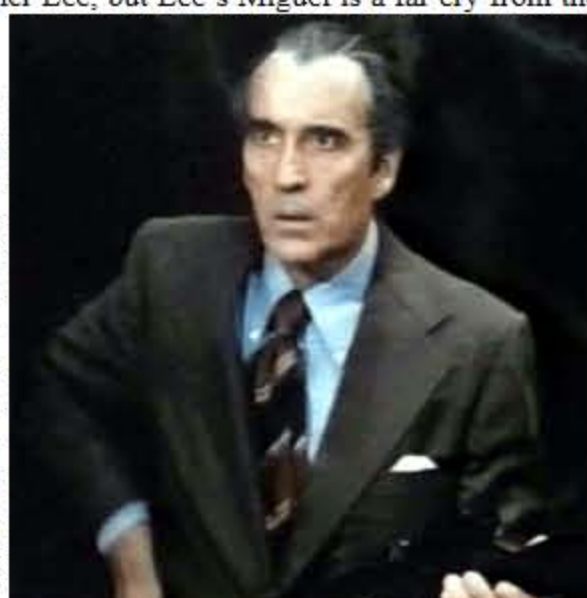


Simon Mills tells Steve that his father was ridiculed by his enemies, and called "Captain America" in a derogatory, mocking way. At this point, the drawing that Steve does is not the original Captain America, but his idea of what he might look like if he existed. If there had been a true, original, costume-wearing Cap, wouldn't Steve have drawn him? There is never any mention of a costume, a secret identity, or an actual persona of Captain America. Steve's father is simply mentioned as a top scientist working for the government. Judging from what we've heard, it probably would have made more sense if the enemies of Steve's father had just called him "Dr. America"; it's just as much of a mockery, and it makes more sense (he is, after all, a doctor).

Okay, so the original "Captain America" wasn't the original comic book character; we've established that, right? No, we haven't. At the end of part one, this first theory doesn't make any sense anymore. When Simon asks Steve if he wants to commit to the Captain America gig permanently, Steve says yes with one exception: he not only wants to do the things his father did, but he wants to look like him in every way. Cut to the tacked-on looking ending; Cap drives up on his motorcycle decked out in his new costume. It looks like the Captain America we know from the comic, stitch for stitch (except for that damn helmet). What is going on? Obviously, there's a problem here somewhere.

Maybe I'm just being too hard on the entire production. It is only fair to mention that one of the major flaws from these TV specials comes from their obvious lack of budget. That leads to an inferior crop of supervillains: ones who aren't so super. The threat in the first film comes from a bunch of thugs and their idiot leader. Yes, they hijack a neutron bomb which is significant villainy, but they have no fun back-story or costumes. In the second film you did have the great Christopher Lee, but Lee's Miguel is a far cry from the Red Skull, Batroc, Baron Zemo, etc.

Another of the issues with *Captain America* can be blamed on the time period as well. The 70s was a time for driving your van around the country (which would have been about as interesting a TV movie as *Captain America I* and *II* are). For the most part, everything in the United States was good. The Vietnam War was over, disco was popular, and sex was promiscuous; it was a far cry from the decade on the horizon when AIDS, terrorism and corporate greed would shed a dark shadow on society. For as silly a time as it was, the late 70s was, if nothing else, mellow. A muscle-bound, blonde guy dressed in red, white and blue tights fits well into that era. It doesn't excuse the fact that Captain America was once again taken out of his comic book time element. But did people in the 70s want to watch a show about World War II on TV? Obviously not; this is why the 70s *Wonder Woman* TV show changed its focus after the first season.



The one high point I will give for this series of movies is the theme song. It was written by Mike Post and Pete Carpenter, the great duo who gave us such memorable 80s tunes as *The A-Team*, *Riptide*, *Simon and Simon*, etc. The theme song to *Captain America* helps to lend a little more credence to the production, but live action Cap still has a long way to go. As you'll see in the next review, he still hasn't gotten there.