



by Christian Klusman



It's sad to say, but Captain America's live action film and television presence has always been rather inauspicious. One would think that, after being in existence for almost seventy years, somebody would have been able to capture the character on film in all his star-spangled glory. Despite several attempts, the results have been pretty dismal. With Marvel's new Paramount film deal, and a new film being seriously discussed for 2009, this is a good time to take a look at the flawed cinematic history of everyone's favorite Sentinel of Liberty.

Captain America first came to life on the big screen in the 1944 Republic Pictures serial *Captain America* (later re-released as *The Return of Captain America*). Anybody that knows

anything about film is familiar with the concept of the movie serial: a film would be shown in parts (usually about fifteen) as a warm-up to the main feature. Each episode would have a cliffhanger ending requiring moviegoers to come back next week to see how things turned out. Usually, the cliffhanger's resolution was just a matter of something being added to the film that moviegoers hadn't seen the week before. Regardless, it was a fun way to start a feature film every week (not to mention a far better option than opening a film with a Fanta commercial).

The Captain America of the Republic Pictures serial (played by Dick Powell, who died before it was released) was a huge leap from the Nazi-hunting Steve Rogers version created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby back in 1941. Here in his first film incarnation, Captain America was Grant Gardner, district attorney for some metropolitan city with many caves, mountains, farms and warehouses nearby in which break-neck fight scenes bust loose at the drop of a hat. To make a really long story simply long, the plot has Cap fighting the evil Dr. Maldor (the great Lionel Atwill), who, as the Scarab, unleashes the "purple death" on several fellow scientists who relegated him to a lowly museum curator after their party returned from a scientific expedition to the Mayan ruins of South America. Throughout the course of these fifteen chapters, we are introduced to such technological advancements as robot-controlled trucks, perpetual life and human reanimation, mummifying gas, blow guns, and everybody's favorite, the "dynamic vibrator" (personal favorite line: "How did you find out about my vibrator?"). With extreme action, elements of science fiction, and sexual double entendres so plentiful, you would think that *Captain America* couldn't go wrong.

Unfortunately, the only real resemblance to the comic Cap comes from the costume worn by our hero, but even that is flawed. The outfit is similar, though Cap doesn't have his star and stripes on the back, and he's missing his white sleeves. The most glaring problem with the costume, however, comes from the lack of wings on Cap's head. This leaves his cowl looking somewhat barren and a bit like a spandex/cotton-mesh ski mask with a big "A" glued to the front. But the most noticeable change to our hero comes in the form of his weaponry. Cap's trusted patriotically-painted shield has been replaced with a much sleeker weapon: a pistol. Yes, Captain America is packing heat now, and he's not afraid to use it.

In this film, Captain America is little more than a ruthless vigilante who shoots people, throws them off cliffs, tosses them down caverns, launches them out of windows, blows them up, and lets them die of both tractor and pitchfork wounds. It is a pretty obvious conclusion to draw that Grant Gardner in his District Attorney costume is a huge proponent of the death penalty. Gardner carries and uses a gun in his civilian guise too, as does his secretary Gail Richards (Lorna Gray), who also shoots several people. Judging by the way in which he dispatches the criminals he confronts, this is an "act first, ask questions later" brand of Captain America



This comes in sharp contrast to the comic book Captain America. In the serial, Captain America's (and his alter-ego Grant Gardner's) willingness to kill anyone and anything that crosses his path is overt. Not all that long ago in the mid-eighties, issue #321 of the comic book *Captain America* actually dealt with the topic of Cap's opposition to the use of lethal force. In this particular issue, given a choice between watching innocents die and turning a gun on terrorists to stop it, Cap chooses to use the gun. It is a choice that he continues to struggle with many issues later, as Cap states that there is no greater "denial of a person's liberty" than killing him.



Yes, this may sound corny, and there was much debate after this issue as to Captain America's World War II war record. How could the Captain have fought on the front lines of a global war and not have killed anybody? The answer creates continuity problems, but some things need to be accepted in the world of serialized fiction. The point is straightforward and simple, however: Captain America does not kill, with war being a possible exception. However, we can't forgive Cap's wanton killing in the Republic Serial because it isn't happening during a time of war.

This brings us to the other problem that the serial raises. Captain America was a hero born out of the ravages of war to

fight the Nazis during a time of great chaos in the world. This was the driving force of the character that Simon and Kirby created. Despite the fact that this serial takes place while World War II was still ongoing (and was no doubt filmed while the war was at its apex), there is absolutely no mention of war, Hitler, Nazis, the Japanese or anything war-related. Warner Brothers had a Looney Toons cartoon in which Bugs Bunny was going head to head with Adolf Hitler, and Batman fought Japanese spies in his movie serial. Why wasn't Republic Pictures on the same page as the rest of the country, especially when they were using a comic book character created for the sole purpose of fighting Nazism and Facism in all forms?

The fact is, there is too much dissimilarity to the comic book character, and while it has its merits as a straightforward action piece, the serial falls short for comic book fans, and Captain America fans in particular. While *Captain America* is entertaining as a serial, it was probably unwise to lend the comic book hero's name to the film.