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Show Business/Jeffrey Kaye

ABEL NEGLEX TREX EFFEX

New West
March 26, 1979

"... On the lot of Paramount where the adventures of the reunited crew of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* are taking shape, all systems are not 'go' ..."

THE TELEPHONE IN a nondescript, one-story brick building in Hollywood is answered cryptically with one word—"Seward," the name of the street outside. A sign above the locked doors advertises a former tenant, a sweater manufacturer. One long block away, the only identifying sign on another brick building—its street number—is illuminated. A burglar alarm on the wall signals a not-too-subtle warning to unwelcome guests.

Across town in an industrial section of Marina del Rey, another brick building offers no clue to the activity inside. The phone there is also answered with a street name—this one "Glencoe." Unmarked trucks transport cargoes shrouded in black velvet from building to building; guards protect the secret shipments as they're loaded and unloaded. The people running this top-security operation refuse requests for interviews. Metal bars crisscross the windows. Armed guards are stationed at the doors. With all the hush-hush super-secrecy, you'd think the people inside those buildings were planning a foreign invasion—not just making a movie.

But this is no ordinary film. This is *Star Trek—The Motion Picture*, a multimillion-dollar sci-fi extravaganza, with special effects up the kazoo, mysterious alien beings, exotic sets and costumes, and perilous scenarios.

Eagerly awaiting the outcome of this ambitious production are thousands of fans knows as "Trekkies"—a built-in worldwide cult of dedicated, obsessive devotees who consume *Star Trek*–related publications, patronize *Star Trek* fan clubs and conventions, and watch reruns of the 1960s television series, now playing in more than 100 U.S. cities and 51 foreign countries. They mob speaking engagements of the show's creator and have been known to camp in the driveways of the actors' homes.

But on the Hollywood lot of Paramount Pictures Corporation and in the ancillary buildings around town where the adventures of the reunited crew of the United Space Ship *Enterprise* are slowly taking shape for a big-screen debut, all systems are not quite "go." The production of the film's special optical effects—the core of the motion picture—has been plagued by delays, power struggles, ultimatums, union jurisdictional disputes, mismanagement and cost overruns that rival those of some Pentagon contractors.

By last Christmas, almost a year after Robert Abel & Associates contracted to produce the special effects for the film, the production was way behind schedule. Although Paramount had ploughed some $4 million into ASTRA [A Star Trek–Robert Abel] Image Corporation—the Abel company that was set up to work

Robert Abel, late of *Star Trek* crew.

exclusively on *Star Trek*—a crucial camera-tracking device which Abel promised to have developed by September was nowhere near completion.

With movie theaters around the country prebooked for delivery of Paramount's most costly motion picture on December 7 of this year, the studio's management began to fear that the lack of progress on the special effects might so jeopardize *Star Trek*'s production schedule that the December date would live in infamy as Paramount's Pearl Harbor Day, 1979. Studio executives brought in their own special effects wizard, sharply cut back Abel's responsibilities, then fired him and began to ask pointed questions about where the money went.

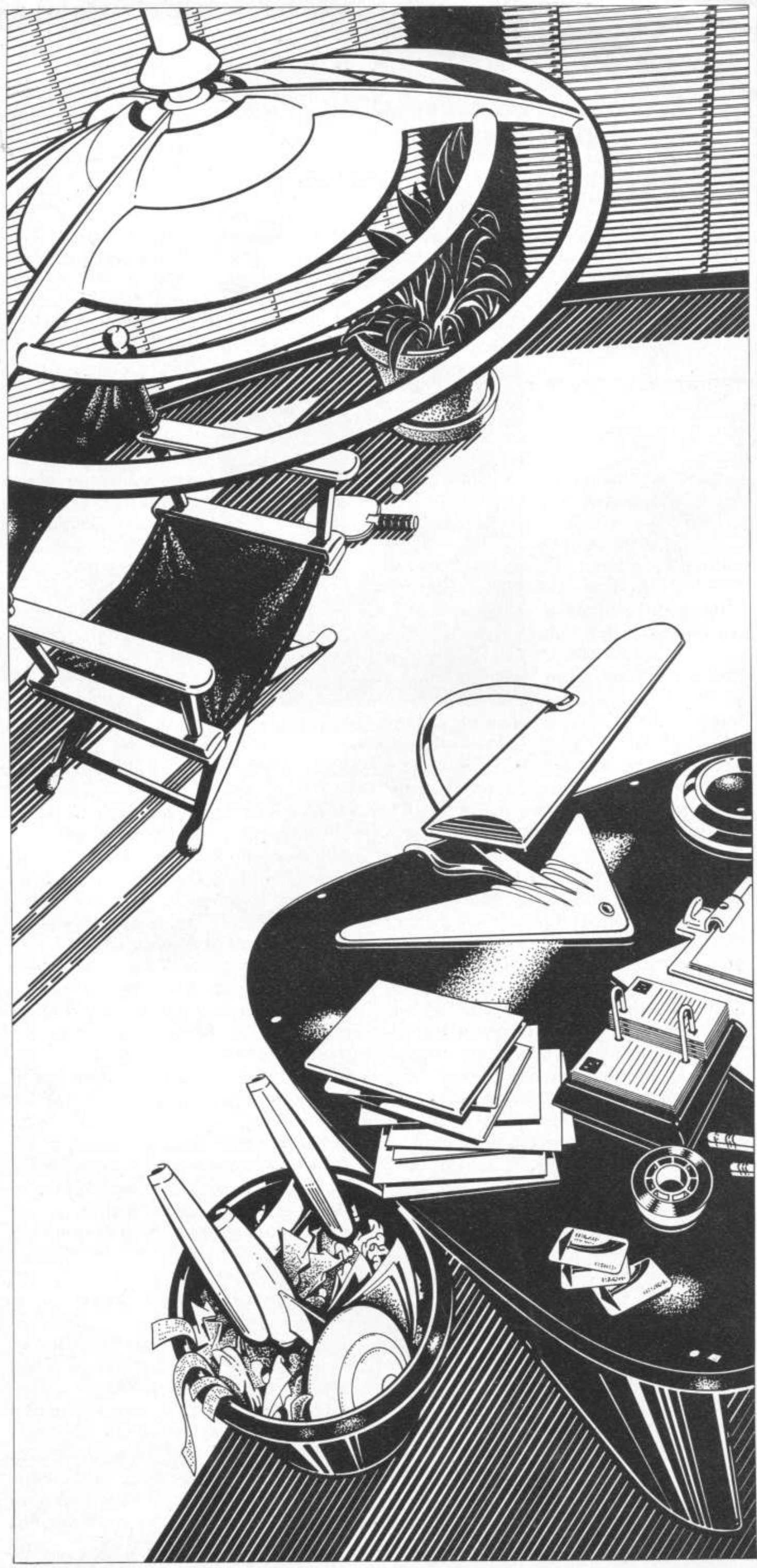
STAR TREK, the television series, ran for three seasons on NBC-TV before the network brought it down to earth, canceling it in 1969. The "Wagon Train to the Stars," as the program's creator, Gene Roddenberry, once described it, never fared well in the ratings game, but with its somewhat campy style, its penchant for parables with a liberal bent and its attention to technical detail, the science-fiction series garnered a large following after it was launched into syndication by Paramount in 1970. In 1976, as an indication of its popularity, fantasy inched toward reality when the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) unveiled its space shuttle *Enterprise*, named after *Star Trek*'s "starship."

The show spawned a minor industry as its principals toured the lecture circuit and attended *Star Trek* conventions across the country. By 1976, Paramount, noting the success of *Star Wars* and realizing it had a hot property on its hands, was at work turning *Star Trek* into a motion picture. The film was never made because Paramount, also in the process of building up its television programming, decided instead to return *Star Trek* to the tube. The show was to be the flagship of a "fourth network"—the lead-off hour in a three-hour package to be offered once a week—initially, only to independent stations.

But the effort to take over prime-time viewing also never got off the ground because of a poor response from advertisers, and in 1977, Paramount decided to switch back to a feature film with a budget reported to be "in the area of $5-million to $6 million."

Last March, Paramount brass called a news conference to announce that the studio had been so inundated with fan mail demanding a motion picture version of the series that *Star Trek—The Motion Picture* was being produced with the cast of television regulars in their original roles, and with Oscar winner Robert E. Wise directing. The film's budget, Wise told reporters, would be around $15 million. A major role, already cast, said Paramount president Michael D. Eisner, speaking in the Café Continental on the studio's Hollywood lot, would be played by Persis Khambatta, a former model and Miss India turned movie actress.

Addressing a packed audience that included Charles G. Bluhdorn, chairman of the board of Gulf & Western Industries, Inc., Paramount's parent conglomerate, Eisner promised that *Star Trek* would introduce "some of the most spectacular effects on film during the past decade." Eisner declared that the special visuals



Trashing the *Enterprise:* Abel has returned to Abel & Associates, on the planet Earth.

Illustrated by Dan Quarnstrom

"will be of extreme importance," and announced that Robert Abel & Associates had been placed in charge of special optical effects. *Variety* reported: "Bob Abel said two thirds of *Star Trek* will involve special effects, opticals and animation, of which he's in charge."

Abel's star was rising when Paramount chose him for the honor. He had built a reputation as one of the most creative producers of television commercials in the industry by using special effects that were originally developed for the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Also, unlike other optics wizards, he was not attached to any major studio. So when Paramount approached him with the offer, Abel was ready and willing.

Abel was known as an innovator in the field who used live action and/or animation in combination with special effects that were created with computer-controlled camera systems. His commercials and logos—such as the Whirlpool logo he designed, his first using streak animation—entranced and captivated clients and consumers alike. Images exploded, streaked, glimmered, sparkled and bedazzled—psychedelia gone straight. (Art directors smoked marijuana before attending screenings of his sample reels.)

The ads were expensive, costing anywhere from $1,500 to $2,000 for every completed commercial second—two to four times the industry average. But Abel's roster of customers eventually read like a *Who's Who* of the business world: 7-Up, Chevrolet, ABC-TV, CBS-TV, Max Factor, Zenith, Marantz, Greyhound, Borax, Perrier, RCA, Kawasaki, Yellow Pages, Pacific Telephone, TWA and others, including Levi Strauss, for whom Abel made a mesmerizingly attractive and now famous commercial in which Levi's trademark is walked like a dog down a city street past a kneeling gold prospector.

But Abel's uniqueness, as well as the mystique, began to wear thin as other production houses caught up with his technological innovations and as customers became irritated with his business practices. Former associates recall that Abel's commercials repeatedly ran late on delivery and over budget. Clients were often asked to pay the higher bills, but when they balked, Abel & Associates would absorb the cost overruns. As a consequence, "We were holding our breath from payroll to payroll," says Sherry McKenna, Abel's executive producer for three years, until she quit in December, 1977, around the time arrangements for Abel's participation in *Star Trek* were being finalized.

Although the Levi's commercial was artistically successful, it was not without its production problems. Originally bid out at $190,000, according to one source, the ad finally cost Levi

Strauss $250,000. Even with the extra money, Abel sank an additional $80,000 into the commercial. "Levi's killed us," remembers McKenna. "It was one of the most disastrous six months I have ever spent. Bob [Abel] was interested in art. The fact that his company went from black to red did not interest him. What interested him was that his [Levi's] commercial rated higher than any other."

McKenna says that when the *Star Trek* deal came around, she could see the writing on the wall. Abel had acquired a bad reputation among advertising agencies, many of whom were going elsewhere with their business, but "Paramount didn't check us out. . . . When I heard about *Star Trek*, I thought, this is going to be Levi's-times-four."

PRESENTED WITH an early draft of the *Star Trek* script, Abel and his associates initially worked out an internal budget of about $5.5 million to $6 million for the special optical effects, according to informed sources. But, say the sources, Abel, concerned that Paramount might think the figure too high, presented the studio with a budget of about $4 million for the work.

But as things slowly progressed in the making of the film, it became clear that even Abel's original internal estimate was not going to be sufficient. For one thing, the script was constantly being rewritten. In addition, as Abel personnel decided that many of Paramount's concepts were "ludicrous," "made no sense" and were "embarrassing," they expanded their duties to include designing costumes and sets. When officials from the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) found out that Abel was using nonunion personnel to construct sets, additional friction was created between the studio and Abel's company.

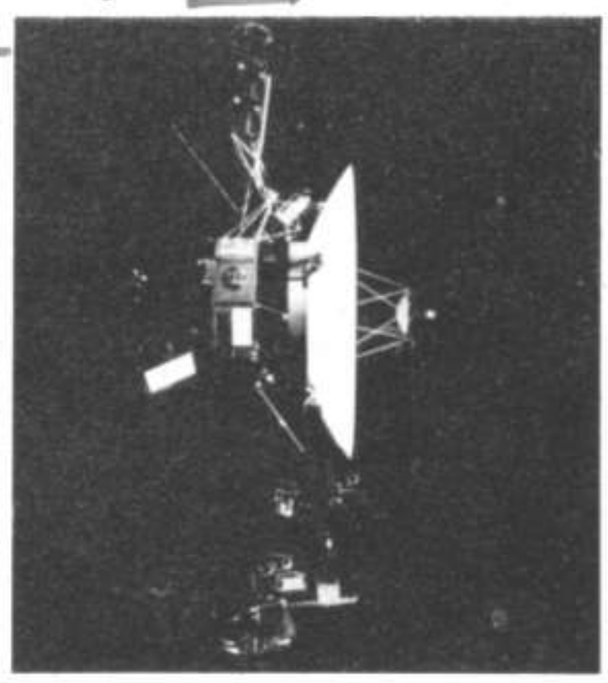
In the meantime, Abel's commercial division was churning out TV advertising, and was looking for more business. "Because the news is out that we are doing *Star Trek*," wrote Abel's executive producer, Jeffrey Altshuler, in an April, 1978, staff memo, "many people think we are out of the commercial business completely. It is imperative that we clarify our position and demonstrate that we are still a very viable company and intend to remain so." On April 28, *Back Stage*, an industry publication, ran six large ads touting Abel's commercials, as well as his "50 TALENTED, CREATIVE . . . DIRECTORS, DESIGNERS, ARTISTS, CAMERAMEN, TECHNICIANS AND PRODUCTION PEOPLE."

As Abel accumulated additional responsibilities for *Star Trek*, he worked his way up from an initial 140 scenes to over 350 scenes. More than 100 people were on the payroll. He was building up an impressive inventory of sophisticated

TREKKIE ALERT

SINCE *STAR TREK* went off the air in 1969, the process of turning it into something other than a TV series has proceeded at a somewhat slower than "warp" pace, as any "Trekkie" could tell you. The making of *Star Trek—The Motion Picture* has already taken two years, and has gone through a number of incarnations as different scripts have been written and discarded.

Actors were initially told not to memorize the last third of the script because of anticipated changes. But that, as it turns out, was an overly optimistic instruction. At this date, fewer than twenty pages of the original 150–page screenplay will be used.



NASA's real-life *Voyager*.

Because of the intense interest in the movie generated by devotees of the TV program, security on the set has been tight. Last February, when the head of the Star Trek Association of Orange County alerted Paramount that he had been approached by a man offering to sell plans of the set, the studio called in the FBI. The man was ultimately convicted of a felony—stealing a trade secret. He was fined $750 and was given two years' probation.

Visitors to the set have been restricted, but on one occasion, fans were called in to act as extras. They had to have their sideburns trimmed to points and their hair cut short, but Trekkies, noted one cynic who worked on the film, "would have cut their throats if they'd been asked to."

Viewers of the movie will discover a newly outfitted U.S.S. *Enterprise* on its way to deal with a mysterious and menacing alien being. Former captain, now Admiral James T. Kirk (William Shatner), pressed into service by Starfleet Command, joins the rest of the cast, which includes Dr. Leonard "Bones" McCoy (De Forest Kelley), engineering officer Montgomery "Scotty" Scott (James Doohan), helmsman Sulu (George Takei), communications officer Uhura (Nichelle Nichols), security chief Chekov (Walter Koenig), former nurse, now Dr. Christine Chapel (Majel Barrett), and transporter chief Janice Rand (Grace Lee Whitney).

Mr. Spock (Leonard Nimoy) of the planet Vulcan is unexpectedly transported to the starship in midflight. New characters on board are commander Willard Decker (Stephen Collins) and navigator Ilia (Persis Khambatta). Khambatta supplies the sexual titillation for the movie. She's a bald beauty from the planet Delta, where, as you may not know, sexuality is a characteristic of the race, and sex is a method of communication. She's a nymphomaniac who's taken a vow of celibacy—though that doesn't prevent her from showing up in minimal clothing now and again when things get a little slow.

Kirk seems a little rusty as the *Enterprise* speeds toward the alien being, and almost gets the starship trapped in a black hole. The alien turns out to be the wreckage of NASA's *Voyager VI*, which has been transmogrified into a massive, conscious, intelligent life form. Called "V'GER" (because some of its letters were erased), the being is on its way to Earth, the "Creator Planet," to capture "Na-sah" (NASA), which it considers God.

In the meantime, V'GER takes over Ilia's body, and Kirk and Spock go through a dramatic spacewalk to V'GER. The interior of the being is supposed to supply some of the most dramatic special effects footage of the film, while Spock, on a death-defying search for the perfect logical being, provides the allegorical touches that true Trekkies crave.

Not to give too much away, we're left with notions about the dichotomy between logic and emotion, and the importance of human qualities. As Gene Roddenberry, *Star Trek*'s creator and the movie's producer, wrote, "It is the dirt under our toenails that enables us to dance."

In the works is a spectacular special effects sequence involving V'GER before the movie ends. As for the film's ending, suffice it to say that the actors have contractual commitments to consult Paramount before getting involved in any other long-term projects. Paramount president Michael D. Eisner is said to be interested in producing a sequel based on *Star Trek*. Other options being considered are a TV series or a series of made-for-television movies. —**J.K.**

hardware and gadgetry, and was constantly working on new technology to produce the special effects—but with few tangible results, according to numerous sources. Abel had re-outfitted the Abel & Associates building on Highland Avenue in Hollywood, since one of his intentions, say reliable sources, was to build himself a studio capable of handling other projects after *Star Trek*.

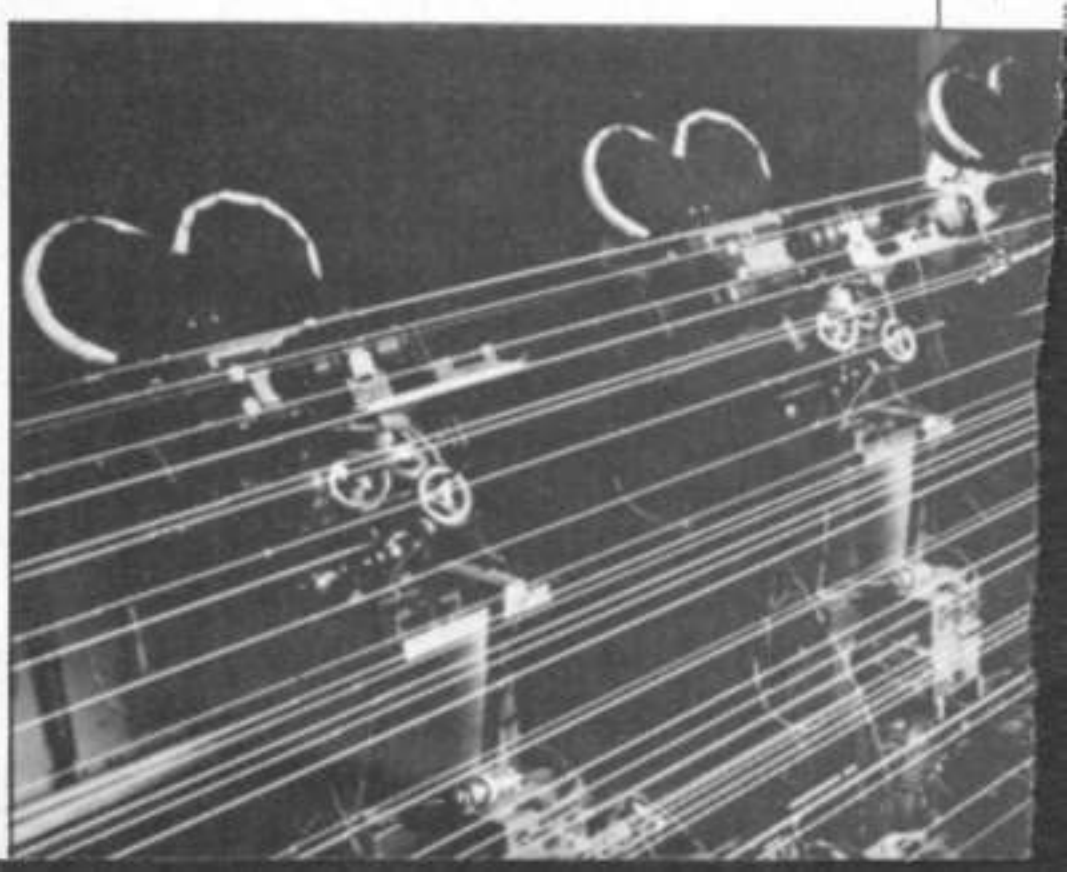
The relationship between Paramount and Abel soon deteriorated to a "them versus us" situation. Paramount became known around Abel's firm as "Paranoid." Some Abel employees wore lapel badges reading: PARAMOUNT IS A KLINGON CONSPIRACY. (Klingons are the black-hat guys on *Star Trek*.)

Paramount continued to approve incremental increases for Abel, but by Christmas, 1978, the studio demanded a definitive figure. Abel came back with a new budget, asking for an extra $12 million (making a total of $16 million), and that was "the straw that broke the camel's back," reported one reliable source.

Paramount executives sent in Lindsey Parsons Jr., the studio's vice-president and executive production manager, to put together a strike force with the intention of reorganizing the special optical effects effort in the hopes of salvaging a precarious production schedule. Douglas Trumbull, founder of Future General Corporation, a Paramount subsidiary, was brought in to supervise the effects. The magician behind the effects in *2001*, *Silent Running* and, more recently, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Trumbull told *Newsweek* magazine last year that he had no interest in simply producing special effects again. But Paramount reportedly made him such a lucrative offer—a handsome six-figure salary and the opportunity to direct a film—that Trumbull was persuaded to devote his energies to *Star Trek*.

With Trumbull in charge, Abel's role was greatly reduced. Whereas at one time Abel had overall responsibility for supervising the effects, those duties were now divided. Richard Urisitch was put in charge of the matte paintings and opticals, Bill Millar was assigned responsibility for miniature photography, and Abel was left with the graphics and flat art.

The wizard of psychedelic commercials.



Urisitch and Millar are also both veterans of *2001* and *Close Encounters.*

The shifting of responsibilities took much of the wind out of Abel's sails. "He's been bluffing," said an Abel artist at the time, "telling Paramount what he can provide."

"He has not completed a single final effect to date," commented another source in January. "He worked to set himself up with the most fantastic special effects facility in town. There was a lot of theorizing, deadlines, flow charts and memos, but no action."

By mid-January, Abel's commercial division was effectively out of business. Paramount, angered at the lack of progress of the special effects, insisted that Abel devote his full attention to *Star Trek.* The studio's anger was multiplied when it discovered that Abel had used Paramount-supplied equipment and ASTRA Image Corporation personnel (bankrolled by Paramount) to produce television commercials. In addition, the commercial wing was going further and further into the red. A commercial for Home Box Office, originally bid at $150,000, wound up costing more than $300,000. The Perrier commercial went $20,000 over budget, and a spot for Hitachi also cost an extra $20,000.

On January 22, Abel called his staff together to inform them of Paramount's decision to curtail his company's participation in *Star Trek.* That day, with the Jonestown tragedy still dominating the news, Abel employees discovered that a macabre trickster had placed packages of Kool-Aid in their mail slots. Abel was ordered out of the building where the miniatures were being constructed, the locks on the doors were changed, and the phone was no longer answered with a cheerful, "ASTRA."

Paramount renegotiated Abel's contract with him, then issued a final ultimatum—either produce an optical effects sequence to the studio's liking by mid-February, or leave the picture.

At 4 P.M., Tuesday, February 20, a few days later than originally scheduled, representatives from Paramount and Abel's company sat down to screen several of Abel's partially completed special effects sequences. The small audience at Abel's Hollywood facility included Douglas Trumbull and Robert Wise, a director

with a reputation as a calm, patient man. But Wise, during the screening, reportedly became visibly angry at one point.

The following day, studio honchos huddled together to make their decision: Only one of Abel's sequences would be used in the film—but both the film and the effect would be completed without Abel's participation.

On February 22 ("Black Thursday" as it came to be known by Abel's staff) at 10:15 in the morning, Abel called his crew together to announce, "We've been fired." He attributed the dismissal to personality clashes. He quoted from the *I Ching*, saying, "Darkness has pushed out the light." The 100-plus ASTRA employees would be laid off with one week's severance pay, although some of them would be rehired by Paramount.

Abel added that his company would return to commercial production. He ended the meeting with a screening of the effects produced for *Star Trek* and a nostalgic showing of his sample reel of commercials. The laid-off employees then left the Highland Avenue building and went to drink their lunches.

ALTHOUGH PARAMOUNT'S chief concern regarding *Star Trek* is to get the movie completed in time for December delivery, studio officials are also taking a careful look at some of the estimated $5 million that Paramount has already put into Abel's ASTRA Image Corporation. According to knowledgeable sources, Paramount accountants are studying the possibility that equipment purchased by the studio may have been sold by Abel's firm. Sources say that Paramount's auditors have not been able to account for certain studio-bought equipment. Paramount is said to be comparing serial numbers with invoices in an effort to locate items that are supposed to be in the possession of the Abel company, but that appear to be missing. The inquiries are obviously delicate, since any legal action (which Paramount hopes to avoid) might tie up release of the film.

Star Trek will reportedly cost about $30 million. Problems with the effects have meant various scenes have to be reshot, driving expenses higher. But the increased costs are not expected to set Paramount back irretrievably. The studio set an industry record last year by netting $290 million in domestic film rentals—due in large part to the successes of *Grease*, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Heaven Can Wait*.

As for Robert Abel, "He's blown it," says a former associate. "He could have been off and running like another Disney, but he blew the golden opportunity."

Both Robert Abel and Paramount officials declined *New West*'s repeated requests for interviews.