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Exclusive: The ALIEN Returns

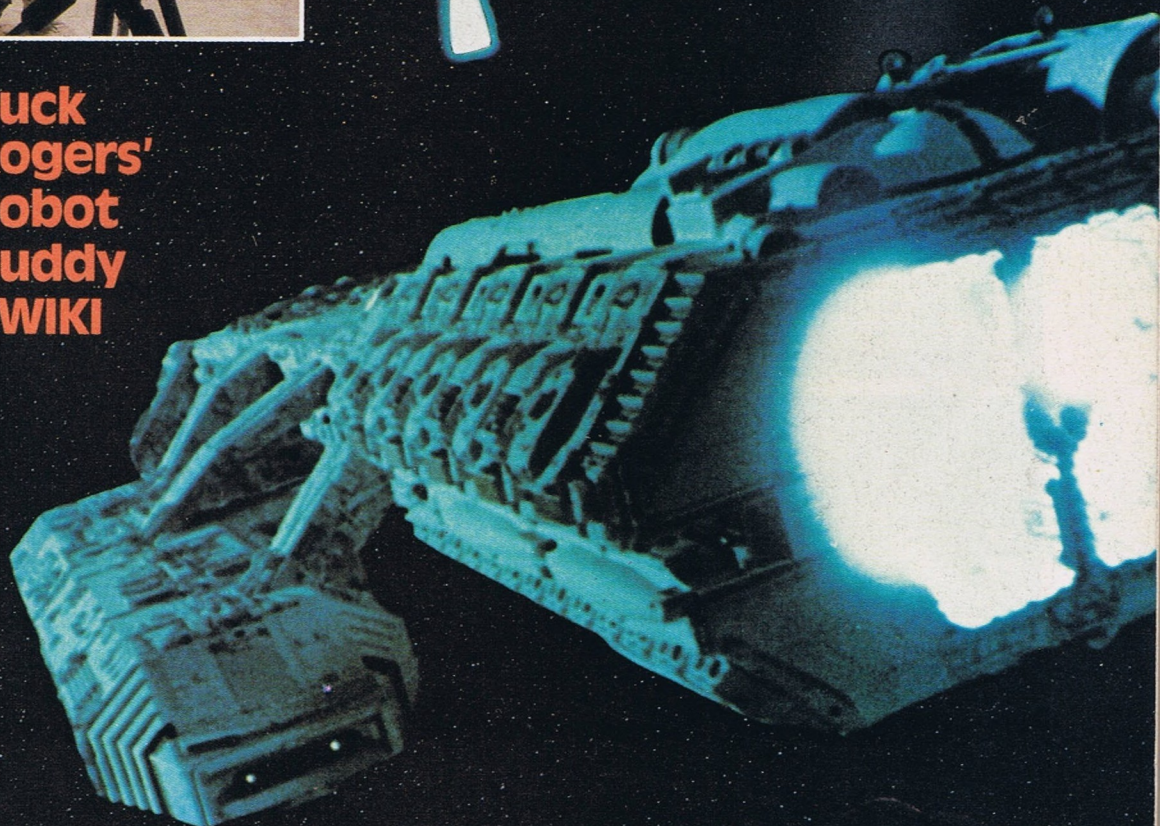
STARLOG

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GALACTICA **1980!**

**Earth is Found
But Can It Be Saved?**



**'THE
EMPIRE
STRIKES
BACK!'
Interview
with
Director**



**Buck
Rogers'
Robot
Buddy
TWIKI**



**'DOCTOR WHO'
Interview with
Tom Baker**

**'MARTIAN
CHRONICLES'
Landmark Mini-series
Reviewed**

**The Newest
Galactican
JAMIE**



STARLOG INTERVIEW

Felix Silla: Buck Rogers' Biddi-Biddi Buddy



PHOTOS © 1980 NBC

By SAMUEL J. MARONIE

The time is the 25th century. The place is a conference room somewhere in the post-cataclysm city of New Chicago. A small mechanical man faces a clocklike device propped on the table and speaks: "Biddi-biddi-biddi... Do you have any idea if Buck is with the others...?" Then the comical head of the diminutive drone nods quizzically and waddles out through the automatic door.

This, however, is not a real scene from the far-flung future; it's Universal Studios today

—on the set of TV's *Buck Rogers*—and the director's shouted command to "Cut!" still echoes in the air as a buzzer sounds to signal the end of shooting.

Meanwhile, the robot, Twiki, in reality actor Felix Silla, peeks out from behind a plastic geometric wall unit to check on his performance. Receiving approval for the completed sequence, the 3' 11" player is finally able to leave the set and its brutally hot electric lights. An assistant comes forward quickly and helps Silla unscrew his head... literally. With the

stifling mask removed, he mops a considerable amount of sweat from his brow, hikes over to a shaded portion of the sound stage and is now ready to field a few questions.

A Robots' Job Can Be Fun

"This whole *Buck Rogers* thing has really been an off-again, on-again affair," Silla says concerning his involvement with the SF-adventure series. "First I had been interviewed by another producer before Glen Larson took over, but didn't hear anything afterwards for a while. After that I went right into *Galactica*, where I doubled [stunts] for the little boy ['Boxey']/Noah Hathaway and also was his stand-in. I also did quite a few stunts for other episodes, as well.

"It was during this time that I was called in again for another interview—this time by Glen Larson—and found out that I was competing with a couple of other 'people' for the role of Twiki... which included," he grins wryly "a monkey."

Fortunately, more rational minds prevailed and the powers-that-be decided against these rivals—both human and animal—and tapped Felix Silla for the job. As *Buck Rogers*' robotic friend/comrade/jester, the Italian-born thespian saw a lot of potential for himself in the project.

"I was glad they chose me because I really wanted to play Twiki. After reading the script it was clear to me that it was a fun part and the character had a lot of good lines."

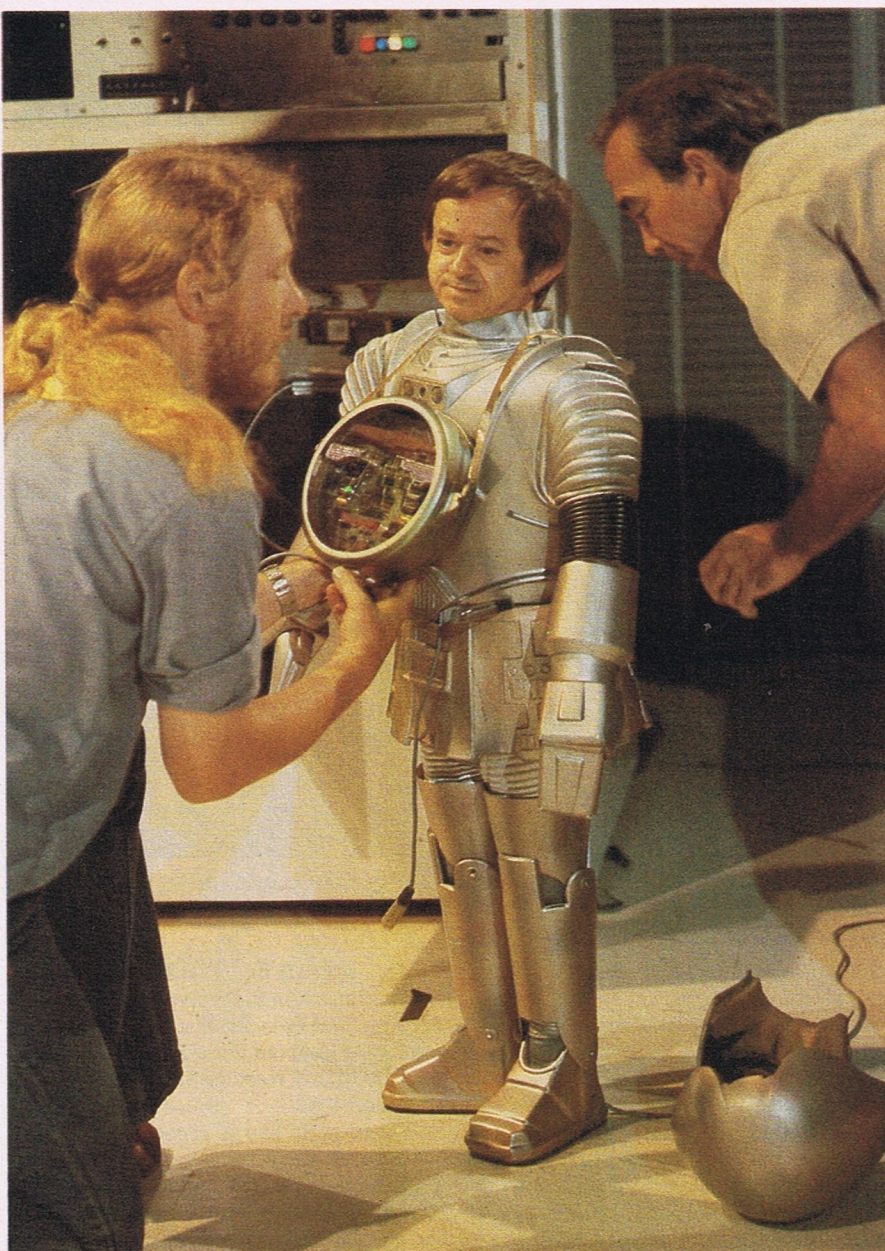
Ironically, Silla has yet to get a chance to speak any of those "good lines" he refers to. The dialogue comes from the writers and is spoken during actual shooting by a script girl, who does a creditable imitation of Twiki's mechanical voice (and also duplicates the tones of Dr. Theopolis, the clocklike device). Ultimately, the TV dialogue is recorded by vocal wizard Mel Blanc, of Warner Brothers cartoon fame.

While some actors might resent being encased in an all-concealing costume and having their lines spoken by someone else, Silla's ego remains proportionately small. The performer speaks of *Buck Rogers* as a team effort and stresses that the cast and crew must work together to really make the show a success. Silla's high level of enthusiasm, however, seems enough to keep the entire company afloat single-handedly. It is the good of the show that matters to Silla, not merely his personal glory.

Costume Problems

"Originally, Universal planned *Buck Rogers* as three two-hour TV films for NBC, but then they turned around and released the first one as a feature film. I was really happy with how the film came across and enjoyed it very much. Right now, with the series, I'm having a lot of fun and I think the same good feeling is showing up among the entire cast in the finished product. The people I'm working with are just great and that makes this experience all the more enjoyable."

As Silla talks, he props himself up comfortably—or at least as much as possible while outfitted in a robot suit—against a piece of the futuristic scenery. Although he does



Felix Silla stands patiently, stoically, as stage hands snap together Twiki's robot suit around him. Although lightweight, the suit tends to get as "hot as a sauna."

not find the costume unbearable to work with, such minor comforts as sitting and reclining are practically impossible while he is suited up. Yet at least he appears to have mastered the use of his mechanical "claws," as he dexterously smokes a cigarette that a stagehand has just lit for him.

He had a forewarning that there would be some hardships to endure even before shooting began. Once he won the part, Silla had to be encased from head to toe in a plaster mold for the costumers to use as a guide in constructing his outfit. The suit was thereby designed to fit his body features perfectly and insure a more custom fit. "It's kind of like the armor the gladiators used to wear," he remarks as a crew member begins peeling off the costume.

"The outside 'metal' parts come in seven fiberglass pieces which weigh seven or eight pounds total; actually, it's very light. It only takes five to ten minutes to snap the sections

together and then I'm ready to go." After the last piece had been detached, he jokes, "It's amazing what they can do with a little Velcro nowadays."

"But I can't go so far as to say that it is really uncomfortable. The only real drawback is that air doesn't circulate in it too well. After spending a few hours in front of all those hot lights it really turns into a sauna; in fact, I've lost a bit of weight just from sweating since we started this series. It's impossible to sit down between takes and relax."

Silla then points to his pair of silver overalls that are worn underneath and, in a sense, seal the lower part of his body. "I also have to be careful about drinking too much coffee."

From the Big Top to Hollywood

The role of Twiki is only the latest in a long line of accomplishments in Felix Silla's amazing career. Born in a small town just outside



PHOTO © 1975 COLUMBIA

In 1975 Silla got a chance to be part of a grand spoof of the movie classic *The Maltese Falcon*, when he starred as a diminutive Nazi in search of *The Black Bird*.

Rome, Italy, Silla trained for many years as a circus performer. In 1955 he came to the eastern United States and toured the country with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. As he puts it, "I rode bareback, clowning, swung on the trapeze and did practically everything there is to do in a circus."

After several years touring the country under the big top, he headed for Southern California. In Hollywood he has found almost constant employment as both a character actor and stuntman. Some of his most interesting film work is represented in such features as *The Towering Inferno*, *Earthquake*, *The Hindenberg* and SF producer Irwin Allen's upcoming opus, *The Day the World Ended*.

Silla explains that he is called upon most often as a stunt double for child cast members, as well as serving as their stand-in during the monotony of focusing lights and lining up camera angles. Not only does Silla's size make him a natural for such work, but, unlike child actors, his age assures a full day's performance. (Child labor laws strictly prohibit a minor from working more than four hours on the set.)

With his active stunting career and circus training, it seems little wonder that Silla can so easily meet the physically exacting role of Twiki. When a performer is called upon to wear concealing costumes and makeup, he often must also master the art of pantomime and exaggeration to convey even the simplest emotions. Silla admits that he enjoys the challenges of working under such conditions, but there can also be some drawbacks.

● Apes & "Things"

"I was an ape in *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*—as well as in the first *Apes* film—and that had to be about the toughest thing I ever did." He winces, recalling the gruelling make-up sessions.

"One day we had to report for a 3 a.m. makeup call; it took me three and a half hours to get into all the ape appliances. Then the crew drove us all the way to the Fox Ranch and—wouldn't you know it—as soon as we arrived the rain started to pour down. That meant we had to drive back, take off all the makeup—which took a couple of hours in itself—and do the whole thing over again the next day."

Another anonymous role in which Silla was neither seen nor heard, but for which viewers readily remember his contributions, is the *Addams Family* teleseries; Silla portrayed the cantankerous "Cousin Itt." As the humorous, hairy relative of the weird Addams clan, Silla gave the creation a "body language" that was quite unique.

"That was a clever costume," he recalls. "There were a lot of moveable pieces and the suit had a real freedom of movement, so I was able to give Itt a bit of personality. But," he hastens to emphasize, "I think Twiki is much more interesting; he's someone with memorable traits that people won't forget."

Silla has also gotten a chance to do some genuine emoting in his career. In a feature film called *The Little Cigars* he played a member of a gang of tiny thieves. He remarks that most people recognize him from this movie and, not surprisingly, it remains his

favorite part. He was also prominently featured as a miniature Hitler in the George Segal comedy *The Black Bird*.

Sidelights & Highlights

While the actor has been involved in the making of several science-fiction movies, he confesses that he holds only a minimal interest in the field.

"Basically, I enjoy these kinds of movies—especially those that have lots of special effects. *Star Wars* I can't really say I cared a lot about; I didn't quite know how to take the film. *Star Trek* [the TV series] is much more to my liking and I still enjoy watching them."

And how about *Buck Rogers*...?

"I saw a couple of chapters of the old one—the serial with Buster Crabbe—and thought they were pretty interesting for what they were doing at the time. But our version is the one that I enjoy the most. Now, I'm not saying that just because I'm in it," he laughs, "but because it's a well-done show. I think that our show is the kind of entertainment we need nowadays. *Buck* is a real family show; it's not strictly for kids and not strictly for adults. *Buck Rogers* is for the entire family to enjoy together."

Speaking of his own family, Silla, his wife of 14 years, Susan, and two children (Bonnie, 12 and Michael, 5) reside in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley. Susan is also a little person ("She's just a couple of inches taller than I am...") and teaches in a Burbank school. Felix proudly boasts that son Michael "goes crazy" when he sees his dad flying through outer space as Twiki.

Even with the hectic pace of shooting a weekly television series, the actor finds time for his many outside interests. He enjoys dabbling in photography and leathercrafting during idle hours, but regards music as one of his chief loves. In fact, Silla has formed his own musical group—The Original Harmonica Band—which is featured at night clubs in Reno and Las Vegas.

Any performer enjoys recognition for a job well done. How does Silla cope with being Twiki's anonymous alter-ego?

"A little while ago I was getting out of my car when I was stopped by a woman who looked at me and asked, 'Aren't you in some kind of science-fiction show?' When I said that I was, she got very excited and said that she was thrilled to meet me."

While the fan could not place Felix Silla's seldom-viewed face, she could read the actor's custom auto license plates, which these days read simply: TWIKI.

But now our conversation comes to an end. The 25th century calls again—as the director summons Silla back to the set for more filming. He begins to assemble his other identity. Soon, he is in front of the blazing lamps as another scene is repeated for the camera.

During each take the tiny actor expertly catches every cue and executes each movement perfectly; he shows no sign of wearying under either the brutal lights or the rapid pace of TV production... Which only goes to prove that Felix Silla is a real pro at his craft—no matter what his size or shape. ★