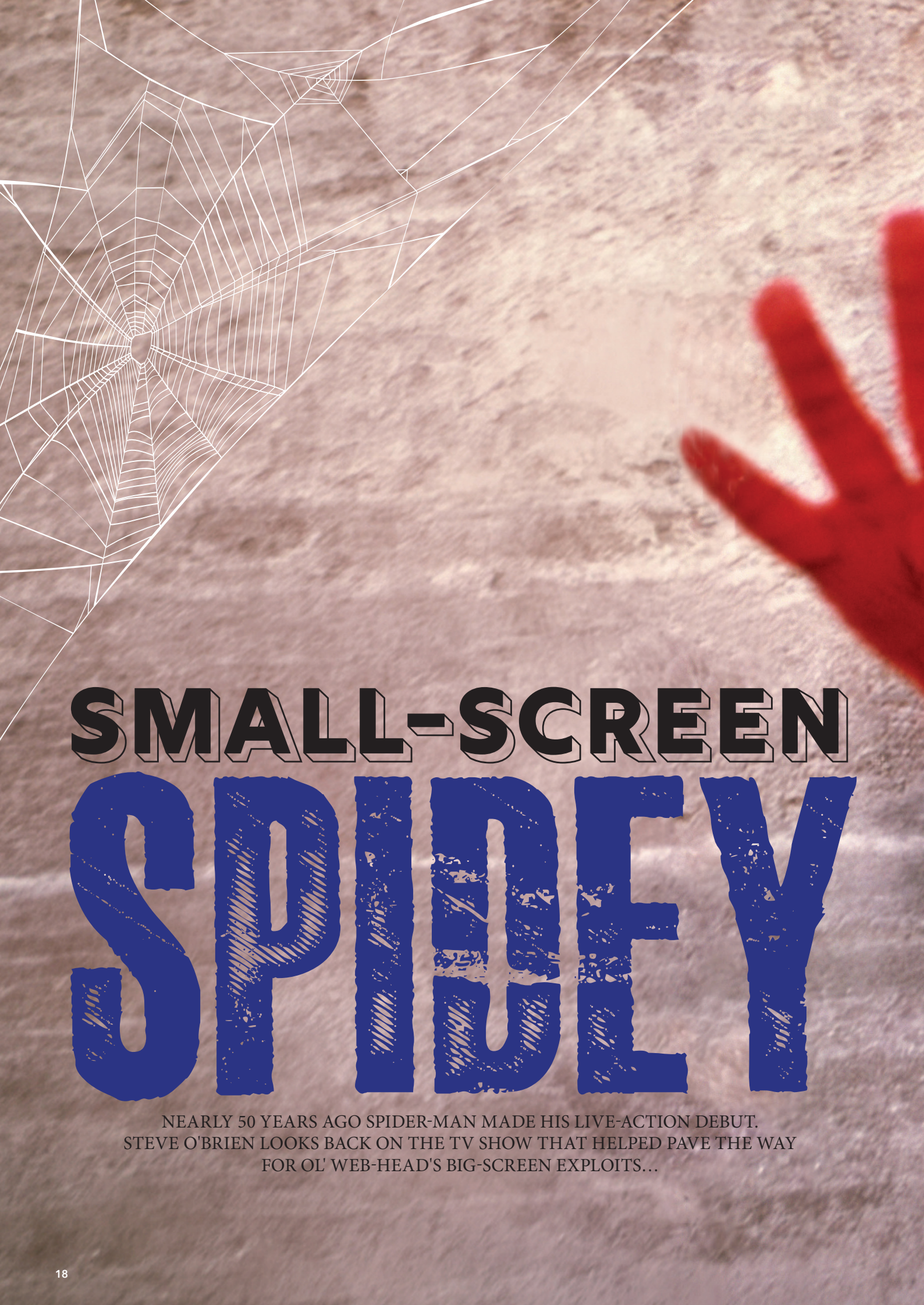


A white spider web is visible in the upper left corner, and a red handprint is in the upper right corner, both on a textured, brownish background.

SMALL-SCREEN SPIDEY

NEARLY 50 YEARS AGO SPIDER-MAN MADE HIS LIVE-ACTION DEBUT.
STEVE O'BRIEN LOOKS BACK ON THE TV SHOW THAT HELPED PAVE THE WAY
FOR OL' WEB-HEAD'S BIG-SCREEN EXPLOITS...



FAST FACT!

ONE OF NICHOLAS HAMMOND'S MOST RECENT ROLES WAS AS REAL-LIFE DIRECTOR SAM WANAMAKER IN QUENTIN TARANTINO'S 2019 FILM *ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD*.



Nicholas Hammond posing with his camera (left) and above, as Spider-Man on top of the Empire State Building



These days, comic book fans are used to feeling seen. The Spider-Man movies, from Sam Raimi's trilogy to the Tom Holland run, are so doggedly faithful to their source material they don't give any grumbling room for even the prickliest of comics fan. But it was all so different in the 1970s when Marvel's frontline heroes started to appear on TV screens. Back then, beggars couldn't be choosers and so we had to swallow Bruce Banner now being called David Banner and the Hulk being a human-sized mute. And so it was with *The Amazing Spider-Man*, who took his live-action bow on 14 September 1977, 15 years after his comic book debut.

Today, CBS' Spider-Man series is so sidelined that it's a humble footnote in the story of the live-action web-slinger. Hell, it wasn't even speculated that its star, Nicholas Hammond, might make a cameo alongside those other screen Spideys in 2021's *No Way Home*, so forgotten is he as the screen's first Peter Parker. But then, given all the liberties the series took with Marvel's most famous superhero, maybe it's not a surprise. Anyone looking for the Green Goblin, Doc Ock, Lizard or Electro in this series would find disappointingly human adversaries instead. "The Spider-Man TV series I was very unhappy with," Stan Lee told *Heat Vision* years later, "because very often, people will take a novel, let's say, and bring it to the screen... and they will leave out the one element, the one quality that made the novel a bestseller. With Spider-Man, I felt the people who did the live-action series left out the very elements that made the comic book popular."

The Amazing Spider-Man premiered just two months before another of CBS' superhero dramas, *The Incredible Hulk*. But whereas Kenneth Johnson's show would end up running for five ratings-busting seasons (and spawning three reunion TV movies), the live-action Spidey would be canned after just 13 episodes, an early example of what's now known as 'superhero fatigue' (the network also screened *Wonder Woman* and had made, in 1978, a pilot for *Dr Strange*).

But though there was much that CBS jettisoned from the character's comic book origins, there was a fair bit they retained. The 90-minute pilot keeps Spidey's origin story, in that he's bitten by a radioactive spider, except that, by this time, Peter's already a photographer for the *Daily Bugle*. There's no Aunt May or MJ in this



Japanese actor Shinji Tōdō as a rather different take on the character – Takuya Yamashiro

SPIDER SENSEI

Don't ever be caught out on the pub quiz question of "Who was the second live-action Spider-Man?" The answer isn't, as you might think, Tobey Maguire, but Shinji Tōdō, an Asian actor who played the web-slinger in a 41-episode Japanese TV series between 1978 and 1979.

That said, although it looks like our Spider-Man, he's not quite the same. In this version, his human alter ego isn't Peter Parker, but Takuya Yamashiro, a 22-year-old motocross racer. When a spaceship from the planet Spider (yes really) crashes on Earth, Takuya encounters Garia, the last survivor of that world. Mortally wounded, Garia transfers his blood to Takuya, granting him spider-like abilities: superhuman strength, agility, wall-crawling and web-shooting.

Garia also entrusts him with the Marveller, a transforming spaceship that becomes the giant robot Leopardon.

Takuya dons the familiar red-and-blue costume to battle the Iron Cross Army (Tetsu Jūji Dan), an alien invasion force led by the villainous Professor Monster and his henchwoman Amazoness.

The show is like a fever dream of '70s tokusatsu aesthetics, featuring exaggerated poses, explosive pyrotechnics, and a catchy but insane theme song that we're amazed hasn't popped up in a Tarantino movie. While the plot is light years away from Stan Lee's original vision, Phil Lord and Chris Miller did suggest at one that Takuya Yamashiro would be featured in *Across The Spider-Verse*, though so far he's failed to make it into either of the two films.

"THE PEOPLE WHO DID THE LIVE-ACTION SERIES LEFT OUT THE VERY ELEMENTS THAT MADE THE COMIC POPULAR"



Peter Hooten as Dr Strange and Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman in two of CBS' other '70s superhero shows

series, but there is J Jonah Jameson, though this version is slightly less hot-tempered than the one comic-book readers had been used to. As Peter Parker, though, CBS hit a doozy. At 27, Nicholas Hammond may not have been the fresh-faced college geek of the comics, but he proves a likeable lead, less awkward than in print, certainly, but far from the square-jawed, socially confident Peter the network could easily have gone with.

"At first, I was reluctant because the only show that had ever been on TV like that was *Batman*," the actor told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2021. "And I was not interested in being in something like that. It had its own value, but that was not really for me. And [the producers] said, 'We want this guy to be a real guy. We want viewers to get involved in his life, his story.' And I thought, 'What a challenge. Take a sort of fanciful character and convince the viewers he is real, make them forget that essentially what they are watching is a comic book character.' That was something I wanted to do, and they offered me the job."



WISHING ON A NOIR

Apart from the excitement of a new Spider-Man movie, this year fans have also been treated to the first live-action Spider-Man TV series in nearly 50 years – *Spider-Noir*.

Based on the comic *Spider-Man Noir*, which explored the concept of an alternate universe version of the web-slinger that emerges during the Great Depression, it's about as far from the world of the Nicholas Hammond version – or indeed the Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield and Tom Holland iterations – as it's possible to get. It's a decidedly downbeat take on our favourite superhero, with a goal to – in showrunner Oren Uziel's words – “make a version of Spider-Man that no-one had ever seen before.”

Movie fans will have seen Spider-Noir already, as voiced by Nicolas Cage in the first *Spider-Verse* film. Well, now he's essaying the character in the live-action TV series, though it's not *technically* the same superhero, with this one's alter ego a private investigator named Ben Reilly rather than being another version of Peter Parker.

“Same character, different universe,” Uziel told *Empire*. “It's a different flavour of that character, even though it's still [Nicolas Cage's] voice. It's not a continuation of *Into The Spider-Verse*. Once [Phil Lord] and [Christopher Miller, *Into The Spider-Verse*'s producers and the execs on this series] introduced the idea of the multiverse, I think you're allowed to take things and make them your own.”

That's not all. In the show, Reilly's alter ego isn't called Spider-Man, he's The Spider, a nod to other masked heroes of this era like *The Spirit* and *The Shadow*.

“This character's very different from the Peter Parker from the movies. He's older and jaded, and not afraid to punch a guy in the face drunkenly,” Miller told *Esquire*.

With *Brand New Day* and *Spider-Noir*, 2026 is turning out to be quite the year for web-heads. Excelsior!



Bill Bixby as “David” (not Bruce!) Banner with Lou Ferrigno as his alter ego



Bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno Hulks out

Making Spider-Man “real” was, sadly for fans, very much the series' USP. Out went radioactive monsters and super-powered scientists and in came plutonium thieves, cult leaders and terrorist kidnappers. Spider-Man may have been introduced in a comic book titled *Amazing Fantasy*, but there was little that was fantastical about CBS' series.

Fantasy it may have been running low on, but the series was, even its harshest critics had to accept, often amazing. Fans had been waiting a long time to see Spider-Man scale buildings in real life, and the series showcases some truly astonishing stuntwork, as Spidey ascends some of LA's most sky-scraping offices (though it's set in New York, it was mostly filmed in the City of Angels). If you in any way suffered from vertigo, then *The Amazing Spider-Man* was a show you daren't go anywhere near.

FAST FACT!

HILLY HICKS PLAYED THE COMIC CHARACTER ROBBIE ROBERTSON OF THE DAILY BUGLE IN THE PILOT, THOUGH HE WASN'T RETAINED FOR THE SERIES

Nicholas Hammond with Ellen Bry, Chip Fields and Robert F Simon as J Jonah Jameson

The pilot performed impressively in the ratings, pulling in 17.8 million viewers, and CBS were so pleased they released it as a theatrical film overseas. Ordering an initial run of five episodes, the series did well enough for the network to okay a second season of eight episodes. Only the show struggled to attract older viewers, which the network relied on for advertising, and so for the second series producer Lionel Siegel (fresh from *The Six Million Dollar Man*) was tasked with making the show more “adult” and “relatable”. Spidey’s superpowers were dialled down and the plots became even more street-level. Episodes like “The Captive Tower” (thieves trapping people inside a building, a la *Die Hard*) and “A Matter of State” (stolen NATO plans) felt like rewritten episodes of *The Streets Of San Francisco*, compared to anything from the pages of Marvel Comics.

That repackaged pilot episode, though, had proved popular outside America, grossing \$9 million at the box office, and so CBS decided to stitch together two other two-parters for overseas release. *Spider-Man Strikes Back*, released on 8 May 1978, told the story of a gang of college students

“ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WITH THE SERIES WAS THAT PETER PARKER AND SPIDER-MAN WERE SO OPPOSITE”



The special effects were impressive for the time

who build a bomb protesting nuclear dangers, before an arms dealer steals it to blackmail the government. A third film, *Spider-Man: The Dragon's Challenge*, was put out in February 1981, comprising both episodes of “The Chinese Web”. Look out for an appearance from a pre-*Cheers* Ted Danson in this one.

By this time, however, *The Amazing Spider-Man* series was no more. “The Chinese Web: Part 2” had been its final broadcast episode in 1979.

Talking to Television Academy in 2004, Stan Lee explained why he thought the series didn’t work. “They left out the humour,” he said. “They left out the human interest and personality and playing up characterisations and personal problems.” The Marvel generalissimo did, however, grant the programme-makers one compliment: “On a technical level, I think they did a good job,” he conceded. “The scenes of [Spider-Man] climbing on the wall – in those days, they didn’t have the wherewithal that they have today, and they did a very good job with that.”

The Incredible Hulk was eventually canned by CBS in 1982, three years after *The Amazing Spider-Man*, only its stars would return six years later in the TV movie *The Incredible Hulk Returns*. But as Hammond revealed to *SFX* magazine in 2002, there were plans to bring back his Spider-Man in a feature-length film with Bill Bixby’s David Banner. The actor recounted how, in the early ’80s, Bixby asked him once if he would ever play Spidey again. “My response was only if I could have more control over the character,” Hammond explained. “I wanted to make him more humorous and was interested in doing more of the physical stuff. I felt one of the problems with the series was that Peter Parker and Spider-Man, who was played by a stuntman, were so opposite and lots of the believability of the character was lost.”

Bixby later told Hammond he was planning on making a television movie that would unite the Hulk with Spider-Man, with a plan for it to air in spring 1984.

“Just as everything was running smoothly, Bill phoned again,” Hammond told *SFX*. Bixby informed him the film had been cancelled, because Lou Ferrigno, who played the Hulk, was unavailable. “I was a bit upset because I was looking forward to doing it again and the script was good, and I never got the chance to work with Bill. A shame really.”

Today, Nicholas Hammond is better known as the eldest of the von Trapp boys from *The Sound Of Music* than as Peter Parker. He may not be the definitive screen Spider-Man, but his place in the record books is assured as the very first actor to bring three-dimensional life to the comic book world’s greatest superhero. ■

