

"Batman Begins" Is Faithful, but Not Much Fun

Written by Mike Schulz

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BATMAN RETURNS

Many Hollywood blockbusters feel so generic as to have been formed by committee, and in *Batman Begins*

, that committee appears to be comprised entirely of comic-book bloggers. Just how afraid of Internet fanboys have movie studios become? It has been widely reported that this new installment in the superhero franchise is a deliberate rebuke to director Joel Schumacher's beyond-campy

Batman Forever

and

Batman & Robin

, and I couldn't be more on board with that; Schumacher managed to turn Warner Brothers' moody franchise into a half-assed Mardi Gras spectacle, minus the debauchurous fun. (Only in Schumacher's hands could Uma Thurman come off as a depressed drag queen.)

But in *Batman Begins*, director Christopher Nolan has gone the opposite route, treating his material with a solemnity that feels suspiciously like fear. The movie is so mired in the surface details of its mythology – all the Bat-minutiae – that it barely exists *except* as an exercise in Keeping the Fans Happy, and it exudes such reverence toward its source material that even its attempts at comedy feel sour.

Batman Begins

never fails to remind us that it's a Serious blockbuster; it *ignores*

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its inherent silliness and seems all the sillier for it.

Granted, several of the movie's details are quite satisfying. The relationship between Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) and Alfred (Michael Caine) has been forged with care and even grace – it helps that Bale and Caine are marvelous together – and viewing the origin of Batman's costume and numerous utility-belt gizmos is a kick. A nice detail: learning that our hero's garb was originally designed for military use, and that Wayne's initial order of 10,000 Batsuits had to be returned when the Bat-cowl proved faulty. *Batman Begins* actually gets a lot of mileage out of Wayne's billionaire-playboy character; the flipness with which Wayne spends his fortune is a great, surprisingly well-sustained running gag.

The film could have used a lot more of this insouciance. You can argue that the mostly dour presentation perfectly befits a pretty dour comic-book character, and you wouldn't be wrong. Yet a mopey superhero doesn't do much for a movie audience, and neither does dialogue that takes itself far too seriously; lines like "To conquer fear, we must become fear" may look and sound just fine when coming out of a cartoon balloon, but when hearing them emerge from live actors, they fall flat and die.

A few performers fool you into thinking the material is wittier than it actually is. Caine and Morgan Freeman, as inventor Lucius Fox – the Q to Bruce Wayne's Bond – are so formidable that they can make even expository dialogue sound clever, and whenever they have a halfway decent punchline the audience laughs appreciatively. Both actors have a beautiful, natural gravity about them yet deliver their lines with a wink; you're grateful whenever they're on-screen. And when he gets the chance, the intense, well-cast Christian Bale reveals the subversive comedian behind his stone-faced exterior; his eyes, glimmering with secrets, show Wayne's unexpected amusement at his masquerade. Bale is a pretty terrific Batman, but he's a *great* Bruce Wayne.

Would that Nolan and co-screenwriter David S. Goyer gave *Batman Begins* a presentation as smart as these three performers. Yet every subplot, from the exposure of Gotham's corruption to the machinations at Arkham Asylum to Wayne's romance with a perky young lawyer (Katie Holmes), feels free of vigor and personality. Scene after scene mopes along with the same lugubrious rhythm, and the movie winds up feeling heavy-spirited and even a little aimless. Only when the action scenes arrive does the movie's tempo vary, and when it does, you might find yourself *missing* the slow, pokey scenes. Nolan's superhero set-pieces are so incoherently edited that you often can't tell what's going on or even gauge the quality of the effects; after a scary opening attack

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by a group of bats, the relentless cutting of the action sequences – all limbs flying and cameras swirling – becomes headache-inducing. (Nolan's *Memento* was less confusing than this movie.)

And while elaborate time and attention was certainly paid to Batman's gadgets, couldn't a moment have been spent telling us how Batman continually *finds* his prey? He keeps popping up out of nowhere and surprising people as they're coming out of doors, but we never glean *how* he performs this miraculous feat. The movie is excruciatingly precise about specific details and naggingly vague on others.

Every once in a while, though, someone will show up to again capture your interest; Nolan knows that a sharp actor can lighten a very heavy load. Tom Wilkinson and Gary Oldman both play against type well – Wilkinson as a threatening mob boss and Oldman as a beaten-down, pre-Commissioner Gordon – and Liam Neeson, with his stately underplaying, has moments of effectiveness. But Neeson has already played variants on his ass-kicking-sage role in *The Phantom Menace* and *Gangs of New York*

. The movie is smart enough to turn him into a potentially nefarious figure, but the movie's Evil Genius plotline – involving Neeson's plan to contaminate Gotham City's water supply – is so dopey as to undermine both the character's and the actor's credibility. Neeson is certainly in there trying, though, and reads his functional dialogue with finesse.

These polished pros, though, have the unintended effect of making Cillian Murphy and Katie Holmes appear all the more out of place. Murphy has cornered the market on "creepy" but seems less like a mad scientist than a mad scientist's *intern*; as the requisite uber-villain, his Scarecrow is a bit of a featherweight. And while Holmes' lightness of spirit is a welcome contrast to the rest of the film's incessant dourness, she's in no way believable as an assistant D.A., and her romance with Bale feels tacked-on and inconsequential. The actress doesn't yet possess the kind of confidence or star quality that would disguise her lack of character; she seems like a pipsqueak in a world of grown-ups. The movie kind of *needs* Katie Holmes; it just needed her to be *better*.

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Though the movie's art direction is often inspired – Gotham City's four-tiered monorail system is exquisitely designed – *Batman Begins* is an action-adventure without much visual thrill; Batman is a legendary character, of course, but the movie – in the name of faithfulness – spends far too much time turning him into a *legend*. The sad truth is that, one day soon, this funereal approach to comic-book adaptations will feel as dated as the goofy "Batman" series of the '60s or Tim Burton's extravagant, MTV-influenced 1989 version. (Remember Jack Nicholson's Joker prancing around to a Prince soundtrack?) This high-minded action flick is so somber, so devoid of spontaneity, that you even start to make jokes about the parts of the movie you

like

; when Bale and Caine first started bantering in Wayne's impossibly luxurious hallways – Wayne petulant and egocentric, Alfred clipped and supremely tolerant – I started chuckling, realizing that

Batman Begins

had just turned into a super-serious remake of

Arthur

.