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Topic: Batman Begins (First Portion Spoiler Free)

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Posted by: Guest

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The first portion of the actual review will be entirely spoiler-free. After that, I won't give away anything you don't get in the trailer, but if you've been avoiding the trailer or anything related to the movie, stop reading at that point.

Yesterday morning, I was at work at around 8:30 when I got a text message from my friend Patrick: "Got free tickets to an advance screening of Batman Begins tonight at 7:30. You MUST be at my house by 6. You in?" I had to be up for work by 5 AM this morning, and the theater it was going to be at was over a half hour away. Like me, Patrick is a diehard Batman fan, and a movie junkie. Whenever we see a movie together, if possible, we go out for a beer afterwards to compare notes. I wouldn't be getting home until at least 11 PM. In spite of my misgivings, there was no way I could pass this opportunity up. My response was an emphatic "Hell yes!"

We hit the theater around 6 PM. There was no substantial line yet, so we went to a bar within the same entertainment/shopping complex, and were met by two of Patrick's friends. What I surmised about his friends: One of them grew up on comics, but wasn't a diehard fan and hadn't kept up with things for years, while the friend's wife knew the major characters, but had never read a comic in her life.

We settled in for the film, giddy with excitement that Batman was finally back and hopefully getting the treatment he deserved. I'll put it simply: This movie didn't live up to expectations, it obliterated them. This is, quite simply, one of the best movies I've ever seen. It destroys every other superhero film with the exception of the original Spider-Man. No, that isn't an exaggeration, it destroys the X-Men films, it destroys the Superman movies, it destroys Spider-Man 2, The Crow, and all of the previous Batman movies, including the original with Keaton and Nicholson. This movie even destroys four of the six Star Wars movies; only Empire and the original escape Batman's fury, and I'm shocked to say this movie is on the same plane of greatness with those films.

But this wasn't just my opinion, it was shared by Patrick and his two friends, passing comic fans at best. This is the first movie I've seen in a theater where the audience actually stood and applauded at the end since the original Spider-Man. The brilliant thing about this film and the original Spider-Man movie was that both captured the characters and what motivates them so perfectly. From Spider-Man's almost-cartoony CG movements to his sense of humor, it nailed both Spider-Man and Peter Parker. This movie does the same for Batman and Bruce Wayne. It's dark and realistic without ever crossing the line into shock value or misrepresenting the character. In short, it's the closest thing you'll ever have to living in Gotham and spying on Bruce Wayne. It really is that good.

I am a movie junkie. I usually see at least two movies in theaters every month, and several more on cable and DVD. Out of all the movies I've seen over the last few years, Spider-Man is the only one that compares. I adored Shaun of the Dead, Kill Bill, and X-2. I loved Blade: Trinity, The Lord of the Rings films, Sin City, and The Incredibles. None of those movies come close to this.

I never expected to see a Batman movie capture the dark, psychological nature of Batman and his rogues gallery. I never expected to see a Gotham live up to my mental vision of the city and actually be a living, breathing character in its own right, which is central to Batman's story. Even though I enjoyed his previous works, going into the film, I didn't think David Goyer (screenwriter for this and the Blade movies) had the writing chops to pull off a character as complex as The Bat. I was wrong on all counts.

The rest of this review contains very minor spoilers. If you haven't watched the trailer, this is your last chance to stop reading, but if you have, I won't be giving away much more than you could see there.

Christian Bale is flat out the best Batman outside Kevin Conroy, voice actor from Batman: The Animated Series. Those are the only two actors to portray Batman and capture his duality and his split life between Batman and his masked persona, Bruce Wayne. The rest of the cast is also dead on in their portrayals of characters close to Batman. Michael Caine effortlessly captures the strength and dry wit of Alfred, and easily fills the roles of parent, advisor, and friend. However, Gary Oldman in particular stands out as a perfect young Gordon, a good cop in a bad city. He portrays strength mixed with confusion and fear amazingly well, and you actually get the sense that he doesn't know what to do when Batman shows up, but knows he has nowhere else to turn. His role in the film is small, but steals the show. Even Katie Holmes, easily the weakest member of the cast, turns in an adequate performance.

I enjoyed the original Batman quite a bit, but, as amazing as he was, Jack Nicholson wasn't the Joker, it was Nicholson playing the Joker. Furthermore, while Keaton was a great Batman, he was a terrible Bruce. I don't blame him, I blame the material he was given. Finally, I can describe Tim Burton the same way the Joker once described Superman: "More powerful than a locomotive! And just about as subtle." Gotham City doesn't need stark, gothic architecture to stand out as a vibrant, essential part of the movie or Batman's history.

Christopher Nolan and David Goyer obviously love Batman, his history, and his world, and have created a movie filled with relationships that ooze subtlety, including the relationship between the Waynes and Gotham. Also, unlike the previous films, the characters have layers and depth. Not one major character in this movie is a caricature or one-dimensional. They all have complex motivations that are entirely plausible within the context of the film.

The creators do a fantastic job of making Batman believable. Every superhero requires a certain amount of suspension of disbelief, but Batman requires the least. This movie captures that. The technology might be bleeding edge in some cases, but it's never so far removed from our real world and real limits that it seems impossible. I actually giggled when Bruce made his first Batarang. Patrick commented to me after the film that this was the best version of Gotham yet, because you could actually understand how a place like it would create someone like Bruce. He's right.

The small, loving details in this film such as Bruce making his first Batarang are what make it such a stand-out. I won't ruin the scene here, but the sequence where Bruce and Alfred create the cave and the batsuit are astonishingly enjoyable and add still more realism to Batman's mythology. There are little moments like that throughout the movie.

When I saw the trailer, I was terrified that this movie would feature two villains who wouldn't be fleshed out, and the film would therefore fall prey to the same mistakes made in the last three Batman movies. I didn't think they could possibly cover Batman's origin, his training, his battles

against the mob, and still feature one classic villain, let alone two. I was wrong yet again. Batman's early battles against supervillains Ra's Al Ghul and Scarecrow meld seamlessly with Batman's training, origin, and methods of operation; We all know that criminals are a cowardly and superstitious lot. Furthermore, the movie needs both villains and their respective plots and motivations in order to fully realize Batman's motivations. The fear Batman uses to his advantage is beautifully contrasted with that inspired by Scarecrow, Ra's, Joe Chill, and even the bats who attacked Bruce as a child. Cillian Murphy, an actor I didn't know prior to this film, is excellent, and does justice to Dr. Crane. He is appropriately smug, smarmy, creepy, corrupt, and best of all, fearless, even in the face of people who are more powerful and influential than himself. His performance and the material he's given add new depth to a character who could have been (and often has been, in the comics) nothing more than a gimmick. Fear is obviously the underlying motivation for many of the characters' actions and the overall theme of the movie. Without using Ra's Al Ghul, Carmine Falcone, and Scarecrow, this theme would have been substantially weakened, or just not worked at all.

My one criticism of the film is the final fight scene. It's Batman, so throughout the film the fight scenes are dark, but they're filmed VERY close-up. It works well when Batman takes on thugs; the disorienting angles, murky view, and the proximity of the camera to the action create a sense of confusion, exactly what the thugs must be feeling when fighting the Dark Knight, and Batman is a dark blur bordering on invisible the entire time because his costume is so incredibly black. It doesn't work nearly as well, however, during the climatic final battle against Ra's Al Ghul. The lighting is much brighter during this sequence, but pulled me out of the scene, as Ra's should be more than a match for Batman and not subject to the same perplexity as the nameless goons.

Still, this movie isn't about the fight scenes, it's about Bruce and Batman. It's a psychological movie, every bit as deep and dark as *Seven* in its own way, where the emphasis is much less on action than getting inside Bruce's head. And it does a shockingly good job of doing just that.

This is a must-see film for anyone who is a fan of superhero movies, Batman, or just enjoys good movies. The bar has been raised, not just for superhero films, but all summer blockbusters. Fire up the signal; The Bat is back.

Four of four stars. A+