



WARNER BROTHERS, 2005

Demented City

Better bat tale takes us back.

BATMAN BEGINS: Directed by Christopher Nolan. Characters by Bob Kane. Story by David S. Goyer. Screenplay by Christopher Nolan and David S. Goyer. Produced by Larry J. Franco, Charles Roven, and Emma Thomas. Executive Producer Benjamin Melniker. Starring Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Morgan Freeman, Liam Neeson, Katie Holmes, Gary Oldman, Cillian Murphy and Tom Wilkinson. Warner Brothers, 2005. PG-13. 141 minutes.

With *Batman Begins* director Christopher Nolan returns the Batman franchise, if not to respectability, than at least to the first tier of movies based upon comic books. The last two Batman movies were so limp, so full of tepid neon and pastel that they were good only for the opportunities they afforded for making jokes about the bat-suit's articulated nipples. But merely making a favorable comparison between *Batman Begins* and its immediate predecessors would be damnation by faint praise. Nolan has made a genuinely entertaining movie that reminds us why we were interested in Batman to begin with.

The most widely known villains having already been mined for use in recent Batman movies, *Batman Begins* lacks a familiar antagonist. However, this limitation is a fruitful one. Rather than another tired iteration of a demented super-criminal's creation/destruction cycle, we are given an extended elaboration on the Batman creation story — boy watches parents shot by mugger; powerless to help them, he vows to strike fear into Gotham's criminal class.

Focus on the man behind the cowl places more emphasis on the Bruce Wayne character than in the previous films, and Christian Bale excels at the role. Bale has the sort of cheekbones that hardly need a bat mask to look lethal, and his natural intensity conveys Wayne's inner torment far more convincingly than any of his predecessors.

The film begins in the Far East, where a young Wayne has gone to immerse himself in the criminal world and thereby learn how to fight it. There he meets Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson), a member of the secret brotherhood the League of Shadows. Ducard brings Wayne to the League's headquarters and trains him in the art of being a

ninja. And why not? What better way to incorporate sword fighting and mountaintop redoubts?

We've seen this master/apprentice story before, and Nolan deserves credit for making Wayne's development under Ducard's tutelage seem necessary. After Wayne abruptly severs relations with Ducard and the League and returns to Gotham, we watch as he slowly pieces together his new identity.

The wait pays off when the action finally comes in the form of an extended chase through and above the streets of Gotham. The Batmobile that Wayne crashes through buildings and concrete barriers is not the waspish, aerodynamic car of the earlier movies. Instead, it resembles something that the road warriors in *Mad Max* might have driven if they only had spare tank parts and oversized tires with which to work.

Less effective is Katie Holmes, playing an assistant district attorney who was in love with Bruce Wayne as a child. Although there is little spark between Holmes and Bale, this being *Batman Begins* we know that eventually Wayne will encounter Kim Basinger and Michelle Pfeiffer, so feeling pity for his lack of a worthy romantic counterpart is somewhat out of the question.

The rest of the cast is excellent. Gary Oldman, Morgan Freeman and Michael Caine are wonderful as always. And with all respect to Jack Nicholson, Cillian Murphy's performance as a psychiatrist with a few mental issues of his own is so assured and sly that he is easily the most interesting villain in any of the Batman movies.

Despite his successes, Nolan allows the movie to drag in the last quarter. The action sequences take over and much of the fighting feels incoherent. Nolan also tends to simply invoke the rainy, blighted atmosphere of *Blade Runner* (but with tenements) when he wants to establish Gotham's menace rather than imbue the city with its own particular dementia.

Nevertheless, *Batman Begins* is entertaining, and the pleasures it affords give one hope for high-standard sequels. **EW**

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