

BATMAN BEGINS

Directed by Christopher Nolan
Produced by Larry Franco, Charles Roven, and Emma Thomas
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 2005

Sometimes stars do make a difference. Tom Wilkinson, Liam Neeson, Morgan Freeman, Gary Oldman, Katie Holmes, Ken Watanabe, and Michael Caine contribute to the astronomical budget of *Batman Begins*, but they make the film work. These stars certainly are a draw for many, but their importance to the film is something else. By virtue of their talent and warm familiarity, this new Gotham City becomes a place to which the audience can identify, a place to which it can eagerly return, at least in time for the sequel.

This Gotham looks to be the home of 30 million people, justifying a comparison to ancient Rome made by Ducard (Liam Neeson). Gotham's design is consistent with reality, which goes a long way to establishing a sense of immediacy and wonderment.

The origins of the Caped Crusader are handled creatively. Much of the established back story is discarded. Instead of the cinema, the Waynes were attending the opera, and young Bruce asks that they, three, leave. They are not safe in a crowd, but vulnerable and alone as they exit to a foreboding alleyway, where they are met by a thief.

Bruce feels guilt as well as anger at his parents' deaths. The comic book legend was that he trained himself in fighting and chemistry and developed the persona of the Batman with no outside help. But in *Batman Begins* we see that bats are his great fear, we see him plan the murder of his parents' killer in an ill-thought attempt at justice. We see him train with the anarchy-enabling League of Shadows. And we share in his slow realization that all of Gotham is in major trouble, and crime boss Falcone (played by Tom Wilkinson) is at the center of the storm.

Falcone is a good example of the film's strong characterizations. He is a bad guy, for sure, but we get to see in a confrontation with Jonathan Crane that he fears someone more powerful than himself (Ducard). Later he is trapped in horrors imposed on him by the Scarecrow.

Earlier on, in a confrontation with indifferent collegian Bruce Wayne, Falcone tells him that he doesn't really know the painful hardships of life, and we get the sense that Falcone fought his way to the pinnacle of might out on the meanest streets of Gotham; whatever power he has, he earned it, and never forgot the lessons of that journey. Later, when an unknown assailant (Batman) is making mincemeat of his gun-wielding dock workers, Falcone investigates the situation himself instead of just running away. This speaks to his bravery.

Apart from Bruce Wayne the most important character in the film is the butler, Alfred. And the relationship at the heart of the film is not between Bruce and the leading lady (the case in 1989's *Batman*) but between Bruce and Alfred. We see Alfred cajoling, inspiring, chastising. With Alfred's succor, Bruce Wayne is able to gird himself, enduring the difficult transition from vexed survivor to vigilante. The challenges are two-fold: He must restrain himself from the temptations of vengeance and, on the other extreme, overcome an understandable desire to

slink away from the fight he's brought to bear, fearing he'll continue to make the situation worse.

The scene that best conveys this dynamic between the two, the best scene in the film, begins as Alfred clocks one of Ducard's men with a golf club and enters the burning mansion to save Bruce. Hitting the six keys on a piano that is seconds from incineration, Alfred carries Bruce into the secret passageway. They escape a blast of fire cascading down the elevator shaft. As Bruce looks up at the destruction of Wayne Manor, lamenting his choices, Alfred reminds Bruce that not all is lost. The Waynes did much more than build a mansion. His father's passive, altruistic, naive concern for the downtrodden will be redeemed in his daring son, who, here on the verge of victory, sits broken, spirit vanquished.

Thomas Wayne did not recognize the true infection of Gotham, the crime behind the poverty (not the poverty behind the crime). His son learned it firsthand and now Alfred, perpetually questioning the wisdom of Bruce's nocturnal exploits, now emboldens him, spurring him to triumph. No, he had never given up on Bruce, and it is only with his strength that the victory is possible. And so, once more, Bruce returns to battle.

The fight scenes in *Batman Begins* are numerous and frenetic—exciting stuff but shot too close, edited to the point of abstraction, conveying danger and confusion, but denying the audience the chance to revel in Batman's skill. One doesn't know who's kicking, who's winning. All that's clear is that a fight is on and it must be intense because it's cut every eight frames.

Visual effects in the movie are outstanding. The promise of the computer animation revolution has been realized incrementally as one big advance is canceled by the tasteless work of another director who throws caution to the wind, seeing the new technology as the license to do anything. In *Batman Begins* we only know we're seeing effects because we reason that nothing like *that* could be shot in real life, it is so incredible. This is what visual effects should always be, an aid to the story, and not a show unto themselves.

Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard seem reluctant to attempt a theme, any theme, after the triumph of Danny Elfman's *Batman* anthem, used in the two Michael Keaton—Tim Burton films, as well as the animated series. The score is fair, but a real statement needs to be made with the music in this kind of film.

For whatever reason, perhaps the multitude of characters, some confusion lingers. Is Rutger Hauer's Earle, the head of Wayne Enterprises, the real villain? Why fire him? Is it just to avenge Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman)? And what of Falcone? Did he escape from the asylum with everyone else? We can assume that the Joker (referenced in the last scene of the film) is one of the products of Arkham. This was a bold, confident gesture on the part of the filmmakers in keeping with the many surprises and delights of this extraordinary film, the greatest of all Batman adventures, and the start of a new franchise. The fire is rekindled and the heat will be intense.