



Once enchanted critics with its cheery Celtic charm. PHOTO COURTESY OF ATOM CINEMA

Deep into the 'Knight'

Heath Ledger as the Joker in 'Dark Knight' embodies the id in all its sad, frightening glory

BY BOB STRAUSS
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, LOS ANGELES

Just when you think *Batman: The Dark Knight* can't get darker — or more twisted — Christopher Nolan takes the audience deeper into the abyss.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stranger," muses The Joker, the film's maniacal villain with a cracked, painted-on clown smile that covers his facial scars.

The line, which occurs early in the film — a play on Nietzsche's over-quoted axiom — doesn't just apply to the psycho bad guy, though, but, as we learn, to Batman himself.

"It was a question of how to follow on from *Batman Begins* with this idea of escalation," says director/writer Nolan of his widely acclaimed first film on the Gotham City superhero.

"Batman's created himself as this extraordinary presence to stand against crime in Gotham, but it's warped into a withering response from the criminal element, particularly manifested in The Joker," referring to the role played by the late Heath Ledger, whose frighteningly intense performance is already drawing talk of an Oscar nomination.

But Ledger's performance is hardly the only impressive thing about *The Dark Knight*. Like *Batman Begins*, it is filled with spectacular stunts to get the juices flowing in action fans, (but even better — they flipped an actual 18-wheel semi for one of many insane automotive sequences) and six major sequences shot with IMAX cameras, a first for any Hollywood feature film.

Still, the most wowing thing of all might be what a rich, multifaceted story *The Dark Knight* tells. More than any other comic-book movie ever made — and more than most big-studio productions of any type these days — the Bat-sequel offers great character work, thoughtful underlying themes, a true sense of realism for this kind of thing and multiple plot threads that dovetail beautifully in its edge-of-your-seat final act.

"I started from the end of the film; I knew exactly what I wanted the story process to lead up to," the London- and Chicago-raised Nolan explains in an erudite English accent.

Christian Bale reprises the dual role of playboy billionaire Bruce Wayne and Batman from the last movie. The film follows the vigilante's efforts to clean up corruption-prone Gotham City once and for all with the help of stalwart police Lieutenant Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman again) and crusading new District Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart).

But then the anarchic Joker ("I choose chaos") appears out of nowhere. And with seemingly limitless resources and imagination, he throws the whole city into pandemonium, testing even Gotham's best commitment to its cherished ethics.

"Bruce Wayne is no longer the angry, naive young man" he was in *Begins*, says Bale. "We've seen that journey of his hardening, his toughening-up, delving into the underbelly of the world and understanding desperation and need. Now he's more mature and has the burden of responsibility of power, vs

IMAX:

Six of *The Dark Knight's* sequences, including its three biggest action set pieces, were filmed using large, heavy and very noisy IMAX cameras. Unparalleled for the clarity and resolution of their images, this is the first time the cameras, usually employed for their sister theaters' giant screen documentaries, have been used for a make-believe Hollywood movie.

"We wanted to make the biggest film that's ever been made," director Christopher Nolan says with only a hint of a "just joshing" smile.

"And when you see these sequences on the IMAX screen, it creates a very, very immersive, very much larger-than-life feel for the film.

"Working with the IMAX cameras was difficult, but we found our feet with it pretty quickly," Nolan adds. "I actually felt that whatever production issues we would face — which were considerable — they were actually much more controllable in a theatrical fiction film.

"Even when you shoot in a real location, you put your own light in, you control the whole environment. So I actually think IMAX is pretty well-suited to Hollywood filmmaking. And the Hollywood production machine is amazingly efficient, so it was able to absorb the extra demands of IMAX incredibly effectively."

Just in case, though, IMAX provided some handy advice for the actors.

"You know, there's a booklet that comes with the IMAX on how to act," marvels Gary Oldman, who plays Batman's police ally Jim Gordon.

his attempts to attain power, to do good; he's not abusing that power. But we have somebody who really deserves credit and is getting none. In fact, he's been accused of being responsible for the rise in a different quality of crime, hence the attraction of freaks to Gotham, with the ultimate freak being The Joker."

And the late Ledger played him to the max, as a far more demented and terrifying force than Jack Nicholson in Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* or Cesar Romero on the campy 1960s TV show did.

"We decided The Joker would have no origin story or arc to his character," says Nolan, who wrote *Dark Knight* with his brother Jonathan and David Goyer.

"He cuts through the film like the shark in *Jaws*. He's simply a motor for the film, a catalyst and disrupter for the other characters. The emotional arc of the film comes from the Harvey Dent character and his tragedy. Those two things in combination are what we hinged everything on."

As any Bat-fan worth his comics collection knows, Dent undergoes a life-changing trauma. Like every other aspect of the 69-year-old Batman mythos that the film touches on, this has been freshly reimagined and carries huge thematic weight. It also bears a pathos never before seen in filmed incarnations.

"The Joker really is the engine that's pushing everybody's buttons and moving the action forward," Eckhart

"You have to make it really subtle because it's going to be so much bigger."

"An instruction booklet? I missed that one," Bat-actor Christian Bale contends. "As far as I'm concerned, whether the camera pointing at me is digital, IMAX, 35mm or whatever the hell it is, I'm doing the same thing."

TWO-FACE FACE:

The Joker may be getting all the early attention, but once people see *The Dark Knight's* other villain, Two-Face, they'll likely be talking as much about him. The ultimate split personality, one side of the character's head has been horribly burned while the other, sane half looks just fine.

It's the one part of the movie where computer effects-averse director Nolan felt that CGI was the appropriate way to go.

"I wanted the look of it to be so extreme as to be a little bit fanciful," Nolan says. "When we were doing sculptures in clay of how the degraded face would look, the more subtle the mutilation the more horrible and depressing it was, somehow. So it's the one area of the film where I felt being a little less realistic was preferable. We don't want people throwing up their popcorn or looking away from the screen. We want them to be able to engage with this character, so we went for just a lot of interesting sculptural detail for the audience to look at and have a sort of morbid fascination with."

BATSUIT:

Batman gets a wardrobe makeover in *The Dark Knight*. And not a moment too soon.



The Dark Knight was the last film completed by Heath Ledger, who died on Jan. 22 in New York City of a prescription drug overdose.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WARNER BROS.

The *Batman Begins* suit was made from just three suffocating pieces of neoprene. The new job has 110 pieces, mostly of more elastic urethane, connected to a base of polyester mesh.

"It was a relief and an aid," Bale says gratefully. "It was just so much superior to the first one, and in keeping with the story, the Batsuit should evolve as well. It's far more the look of a future soldier's military gear."

"And it was far more comfortable to wear. It was heavier, but you didn't notice that because it was a lot more mobile. The first one, I fought against the suit to be able to do the fights. Therefore it was tiring, the cowl was constricting, and I couldn't breathe very well. It took 15 minutes to get out of it!"

"This one, I could turn my head! And it was compatible with fighting, so I could do so much more, keep going for so much longer; I had so much more energy within it. And it was leaned-out as well — and cooler."

there is the totally biased — but not necessarily inaccurate for it — view of his key collaborator.

"It's a better movie than the first one," Bale asserts. "For *Batman Begins*, Chris had an idea, and people got behind the idea. This time, he had proof that his idea worked, so people got behind him in a stronger fashion, and he was able to make true his vision of Gotham and Batman."

"Therefore, we have a genre movie, but one that really breaks free of the restraints of that genre. I think this movie stands up against any other film."



A musical that is easy to fall in love with

On the streets of Dublin, two people connect over a shared passion — music

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Periodically — about twice a year, by my calculation — someone tries to breathe new life into the movie musical by putting together a lavish song-and-dance spectacle like the ones they used to make, full of big numbers and bigger emotions. (See, most recently, *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray*.) Against this trend, *Once*, a scrappy, heart-on-its-sleeve little movie directed by an Irishman named John Carney, makes a persuasive case that the real future of the genre may lie not in splashy grandeur but in modesty and understatement.

Filed with more efficiency than elegance on the streets of Dublin, Carney's movie, a favorite at Sundance earlier this year, does not look, sound or feel like a typical musical. It is realistic rather than fanciful, and the characters work patiently on the songs rather than bursting spontaneously into them. But its low-key affect and decidedly human scale endow *Once* with an easy, lovable charm that a flashier production could never have achieved. The formula is simple: two people, a few instruments, 88 minutes and not a single false note.

And this is true even if the main style of music is not quite your thing. The principal male character (Glen Hansard) — neither he nor his female counterpart (Marketa Irglova) are given names — is a street musician who favors the wailing-white-man-with-a-guitar mode of folk pop. His songs, full of ringing open chords and vague lyrics, are earnest and self-dramatizing. Their subject seems to be heartbreak, which he has recently suffered at the hands of a straying girlfriend who now lives in London.

This information is extracted from him by his new friend, a young Czech woman whose forthrightness he finds irritating at first. He fixes her vacuum cleaner (his day job is working in his father's repair shop) and makes a half-hearted, bluntly rejected pass. But while there is an evident spark of attraction between them — Irglova's teasing directness works beautifully with Hansard's shuffling sincerity — *Once* is far from a conventional love story. It is, instead, the story of a creative partnership that develops by chance and that involves a deeper, riskier bond than mere sex ever could.

She, it turns out, is a musician as well, a classically trained pianist with an interest in songwriting. Her professional prospects are, if anything, less stellar than his, since she lives in a small apartment with her mother and small daughter and supports herself by cleaning houses and selling flowers on the street. But she responds to his songs and is happy both to sing harmony and to write lyrics for one especially challenging tune.

It seems silly and grandiose to lavish praise on a movie whose dramatic crux is the recording of a demo tape, and there is some danger that the critical love showered on *Once* will come to seem a bit disproportionate. It is not a film with any great ambitions to declare, or any knotty themes to articulate. It celebrates doggedness, good-humored discipline and desire — the desire not only to write a song or make a recording, but the deeper longing for communication that underlies any worthwhile artistic effort.

The special poignancy of the movie, the happy-sad feeling it leaves in its wake, comes from its acknowledgment that the satisfaction of these aspirations is usually transient, even as it can sometimes be transcendent.

Neither Hansard, who fronts a band called the Frames, nor Irglova is an established professional actor, though both are gifted composers and performers. Their guilelessness protects the movie from its sentimental impulses. A good song — even a bad one heard at the right moment — can cast a glow of enchantment over ordinary circumstances.

Once understands this everyday pop magic about as well as any movie I can think of, and communicates it so easily and honestly that you are likely to want to see it again.

Film Notes

ONCE

DIRECTED BY: JOHN CARNEY

STARRING: GLEN HANSARD (THE GUY) AND MARKETA IRGLOVA (THE GIRL)

RUNNING TIME: 88 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY