

Batman

US : 1966 : dir. Leslie Martinson : 20th Century Fox / Greenlawn : 105 min
prod: William Dozier : scr: Lorenzo Semple Jr : dir.ph.: Howard Schwartz

Adam West; Burt Ward; Burgess Meredith; Cesar Romero; Frank Gorshin; Lee Meriwether;
Neil Hamilton; Alan Napier; Madge Blake; Reginald Denny; Stafford Repp

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Big screen thrills means some extra hardware for the boys – but the gags remain the same Source: indeterminate

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

“Quickly made feature to cash in on then-hot TV series pulls out all the stops, features The Joker, Riddler, Penguin, and Catwoman trying to undo the Caped Crusader. Really misses the mark; the campy humour worked better in the TV series. Bears no relation to the 1989 blockbuster. ** ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

“Just in time to cash in on the current success of the TV series of the same name, all the stops are pulled out in this quickie mishmash. Joker, Riddler, Penguin and Catwoman all do their best to rid themselves (and us) of the crusader with the cape, but alas they do not succeed. For immature minds only. ** ”

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"The cloaked avenger saves an important executive from the clutches of four of the world's most notorious criminals. Glossy feature version of the old and new serials about the comic strip hero who scurries around in his Batmobile making sure that justice is done. The scriptwriter's invention unfortunately flags halfway, so that despite a fairly sharp production the result is more childish than camp. Score: Nelson Riddle. * "

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"The comic strip Batman first appeared in 1939 and became a movie serial in 1943: that was edited into a feature-length movie in 1965, which led to a TV series so popular that it loaned its Batman (Adam West) and Robin (Burt Ward), together with some of its campy villains (Burgess Meredith, Cesar Romero, Frank Gorshin), for this venture, which is genial enough – but it is geniality of a tiresome kind, with deliberately feeble Special Effects and little wit. For those who don't know, superhuman do-gooder Batman is a millionaire when not in tights, Robin is his nephew helper; they are pitted against those for whom no deathray is too abhorrent in order to gain world domination¹. * "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"The dynamic duo's arch enemies team up to rub out the caped crusaders and control the world. ** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Caped Crusader Adam West and his little buddy Robin from the TV series in a full-length feature, introducing all the favourite villains – Catwoman Lee Meriweather, Joker Cesar Romero, Penguin Burgess Meredith, Riddler Frank Gorshin; director Leslie H Martinson * "

¹ For those who don't know, but do care about accuracy, Batman is an ordinary mortal with a circus family background, Robin is his orphan ward, no blood relation, and no-one was ever killed in the series or this film.

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Colourful film based on the famous television series. Fine fun for children (and perhaps some adults!), with a great performance from Burgess Meredith who squawks splendidly as the Penguin, waddling rings round his fellow-villains. **"

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

" **"BATMAN"** is packed with action, clever sight gags, interesting complications and goes all out on bat with batmania: batplane, batboat, batcycle, etc, etc. Humour is stretched to the limit, the colour is comic-strip sharp and the script retrieves every trick from the highly popular teleseries' oatbag, adding a few more sophisticated touches.

It's nearly impossible to attempt to relate the plot. Suffice to say that it's Batman and Robin against his four arch-enemies, Catwoman, The Joker, The Penguin and The Riddler. The quartet have united and are out to take over the world. They elaborately plot the dynamic duo's death again and again but in every instance the duo escape by the skin of their tights.

The acting is uniformly impressively improbable. The intense innocent enthusiasm of Cesar Romero, Burgess Meredith and Frank Gorshin as the three criminals is balanced against the innocent calm of Adam West and Burt Ward, Batman and Robin respectively. "

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Holy success story! The caped crusader and his youthful sidekick jump from their popular mid-1960s television series into a full-length feature film. Adam West and Burt Ward keep quip in cheek as they battle the Fearsome Foursome: the Riddler (Frank Gorshin), the Penguin (Burgess Meredith), the Catwoman (Lee Meriweather), and the Joker (Cesar Romero). Very silly material played with ludicrous seriousness, resulting in a lot of fun. *** "

The Films of 20th Century Fox – a Pictorial History review:

“A feature spin-off from the popular TV series, with Adam West as Batman and Burt Ward as Robin, and a great many of the lovable villains, such as Cesar Romero as the Joker, Burgess Meredith as the Penguin, and Frank Gorshin as the Riddler, with Lee Meriwether as Catwoman. Together the villains plot to take over the world, but the fearless duo see to it that they are foiled. The film employs precisely the same tone, mood and devices as the TV series and for what it is, depending on taste, it is everything a fan might expect. Produced by William Dozier. Screenplay by Lorenzo Semple Jr, based on characters created by Bob Kane. Photographed in DeLuxe Color by Howard Schwartz. Music by Nelson Riddle. ”

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times reviews:

“Forget Michael Keaton and George Clooney; this is the movie spin-off from the hit TV series of the sixties, with Adam West as the Caped Crusader and Burt Ward as the Boy Wonder. Director Leslie H Martinson allows the pace to slacken occasionally, but Lorenzo Semple Jr's script overflows with the kind of throwaway gags that Joel Schumacher's recent **"BATMAN AND ROBIN"** cried out for. ****”

“Action adventure in which the dynamic duo's enemies team up to take over the world. ”

“Crime-busting, comic book adventure.** ”

TV Quick note:

“Adventure. Holy caped capers, the Sixties TV crimefighters hit the big screen. Pow! ”

What's On TV note:

“Comic-book superhero romp with Adam West as the Caped Crusader. ”

Daily Mirror note:

“Adam West as the campy caped crusader in a zap-pow retread of the comical TV series. ** ”

Source unknown:

“Adam West plays the caped crusader in this spin-off from the comic-book TV show.”

“Crime-busting action with Adam West, Burt Ward, Cesar Romero.”

All the same complaints apply here as to the TV series whence it sprang, Either you find the high-camp style – going beyond self-parody and into self-mockery – hilarious, or you find it a tiresome, overworked joke between adults at the expense of a favourite boys' character.

Batman, in the DC Comics of the sixties, was a clean-cut master detective with kid sidekick, an array of techno-gadgets and a repertory of larger-than-life criminals to outwit. There was no bat-phone, no bat-pole, no palm-fisting "holy this and that" exclamations from the Boy Wonder. A cross between Zorro and Sexton Blake, he was portrayed, as all superhero characters were, without a hint of parody. In the wake of the TV show's popularity, some of the conventions of the comic book itself were modified, but it never lapsed into outright mockery of its readers. Just as TV Westerns of the sixties all but killed off the Western genre in cinema, so television's camped-up "**Batman**" effectively did for its comic book progenitor. He went into purdah and re-emerged – without boy sidekick, naturally – as the bleaker, more amoral, sulky nemesis "The Dark Knight", familiar from Tim Burton's film.

The "**Batman**" series was itself the culmination of a trend on American TV towards plodding lampoonery, epitomised by the ineffably unfunny "**Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In**". TV adventure series – from "**Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea**" and "**The Man From U.N.C.L.E.**" to "**Lost In Space**" and "**Star Trek**" – descended by degrees to the level of full-blown farce, imitated in the UK by the likes of "**The Avengers**" (which also began as a straight crime-buster series). The 1978 big budget "**SUPERMAN**" film (from the same comics stable), with its wisecracking Lex Luthor and his oafish sidekick, quickly displayed an inclination to follow the same track.

As a reader of Batman comics when the series was first televised in the UK, I did not see the joke at all, and thirty years later, I still fail to see why so many adults thought it a riot at the time. Like numerous cinema attempts at comically debunking the Sherlock Holmes character, it doesn't work and is far too pleased with itself. As with James Bond or Tarzan, the Batman character is essentially too preposterous to bear lampooning, and only works when told straight. That's precisely why audiences were relieved to see the back of Roger Moore's 007 and the arrival of Pierce Brosnan. It's why the "**BATMAN**" and "**SUPERMAN**" cinema franchises self-destructed in one or two sequels.

This "**BATMAN**" spin-off feature, at 105 minutes, offers little new to entertain the audience, and outstays its welcome by a good 75 minutes. The Dynamic Duo are given some extra hardware for the big screen: a Batcopter, Batcycle and Batboat, but the tacky studio-bound look of the series remains, and there's not a single impressive action set-piece to the film. Writer Lorenzo Semple Jr, unable to contrive an interesting new villain to pit them against, took the safe option of throwing at us a conglomerate of the series' favourite villains-of-the-week. But by making the whole bunch of them join forces – "United Underworld" – he inevitably diminishes their stature as adversaries, and they put up such a poor fight of it that Robin could have taken on the lot with one gloved hand behind his back. This would have had the extra benefit of preventing him punching his palm at regular intervals.

The tone is set in the first few minutes, as we see Batman doing battle with a patent rubber shark at the end of the Batcopter's "Batladder". By the mid-section he's reduced to out-and-out Mack Senate schtick, running to and fro with a smoking bomb lofted over his head, his way blocked at every turn by women with prams, Salvation Army bands, and ducklings in the harbour. "Some days you just can't get rid of a bomb!" he protests to the camera. The script is ripe with corn: "Batman!" cries Robin, "We're helpless in this monstrous invisible grip!"; the heroic duo are saved from an enemy torpedo by the selfless sacrifice of a passing porpoise;

the Batcopter plummets earthward to land on a fortuitous foam rubber display. Were the kids hooting at all this in their matinee theatres? I imagine some of them were groaning inwardly, as I would have done, having hoped for something more approaching the 1989 "**BATMAN**". But no, the kids' Batman had to be killed off so the character could be re-marketed for adult audiences.

For what it's worth, the plot entails the kidnapping of a British inventor whose new contraption has been perverted by The Penguin et al into a weapon for dehydrating and rehydrating people. They mean to hold the world to ransom by dehydrating the U.N. Security Council in mid-session. Catwoman poses as a Russian reporter (would you believe for the "Moss-cow Bugle"?) in order to lure Bruce Wayne into a trap, and give the film a spurious "love interest" (for those still disconcerted by the suggestion, current at the time, that Batman's bachelor lifestyle with the Boy Wonder was "a homosexual wish-dream" – the TV series hastily invented an "aunt Harriet" character to counter such rumours). For most of the film Burgess Meredith's Penguin takes the lead, and he has its one funny line: as Catwoman helps him scoop up the dehydrated residue of five of his minions, for later rehydration once he's penetrated the Batcave, Penguin squawks "Careful! Every one of 'em has a mother!"

What of jolly Robin, whom the costume department had to clad in skin-coloured tights to conceal hairy adult legs? Well, given that he should rightly have been a 13-year old (Douglas Croft was 14 in the 1943 serial), Burt Ward makes a very lame sidekick, not even landing himself in peril from which Batman must extricate him. Most of his lines are barked robotically, even in his civilian guise as Dick Grayson, and the writers just plain forgot that Robin's role was to give young fans in the audience a vicarious excitement through his heroics. Father-of-two Ward, with his "Holy heartbreak!" exclamations, his mugging, and his strait-laced asides about alcohol and the like, makes for a very unappealing junior crimebuster. When, during the final punch-up, Catwoman plants her foot in his arse and sends him head first into the briny, no-one could have faulted her much for that.

In its visual style and level of humour, "**BATMAN**" is like "**BARBARELLA**", but stripped of all the sexual innuendo. "**BARBARELLA**" too was spectacularly camp and unfunny, but at least Jane Fonda didn't need to hide her hairy legs, or a doughy paunch like Adam West's. Lampoonery, as Kubrick showed with "**DR STRANGELOVE**", is best reserved for deadly serious topics. It should leave children's comic books to the kids who enjoy them.

See the original TV series, the 1943 serial, the 1949 "**BATMAN AND ROBIN**" serial, and the 1989 "**BATMAN**" with its diminishing string of sequels. There was also a 1993 animated feature, "**BATMAN AND THE MASK OF THE PHANTASM**", which falls outside the remit of this archive. See subject index under **BOY SIDEKICKS**, **COMEDY** and **COMIC BOOKS & SUPERHEROES**.