

## Worthy Adversaries: Villains Take Center Stage

From the Big Screen to Reality TV, the Bad Guys are Stealing the Spotlight

BY SONA CHARAIPOTRA

Aug. 7, 2008

Who doesn't love a good villain?



Now more than ever, it seems showbiz is all about the bad guys, from Heath Ledger's deliciously devilish turn as The Joker in "The Dark Knight" to Spencer Pratt's train wreck tantrums on MTV's reality soap "The Hills."



In fact, the Hollywood Reporter recently speculated the next film in the "Spider-Man" saga may well focus instead on Spidey's nemesis Venom. And there have been reports that Oscar-nominated actor Johnny Depp may step up to play The Riddler in the next installment of "Batman."

"The bottom line is, it's fun to be bad on screen," said Tim Kring, the creator

and executive producer of "Heroes," which will be all about villains this season. "There's a kind of delicious fun to play -- and it's certainly fun to write. We're doing those big scene-stealing kind of bad guys. For us, it's a cultural shorthand."

The rise of the villains can be attributed to the dark times we're facing, said professor Jonathan Young, director of the Center for Story and Symbol.

"On a social level, the rise of unusually virulent adversaries reflects collective fears," Young said. "We now have horrific dangers such as terrorism, a sinking economy and environmental devastation. As chaos swells in the political world, the viciousness of movie villains intensifies. These film images mirror our stresses and provide an artificial but satisfying temporary focus for our emotions. We can walk out of the show chanting, 'It's only a movie,' when, in fact, such characters signify tangible dangers in the real world."

And it seems Hollywood history is repeating itself.



But Hollywood's penchant for bad guys is nothing new.

"It goes all the way back to Shakespeare and Richard III," said Adam B. Vary, staff writer at Entertainment Weekly. "You cannot have a hero unless you have a villain -- and your hero is only as interesting as the villain. In classic storytelling, you wouldn't have someone to root for unless you had someone to root against."

These days, though, Hollywood's all about exploring the bad guys' baggage.

"Villains have always been important, but now they're definitely more complex and nuanced than ever before. So when you create more interesting characters, naturally, the trend feeds on itself," said The Hollywood Reporter's Steve Zeitchik. In regards to the "Batman" nemeses, "If the Nolan brothers are writing these ambitious, meaty parts, then the talent is going to be there to meet the challenge. So when you have someone of Heath Ledger's caliber putting out an Oscar-worthy turn in 'Dark Knight,' you'll have interest from other high-caliber actors in the next one."

Zeitchik noted that even the heroes in Hollywood have gone gray.

"Look at a film like 'Hancock,'" he said. "Is he the hero or the villain? He seems like a little bit of both. And that's what made the film a hit. It turned the boring, tried-and-true superhero tale on its head. People could relate, because even the superhero had issues."

Similarly, Oscar winner Diablo Cody's next film after "Juno," the horror coming-of-age flick "Jennifer's Body," due in the spring, is about an evil cheerleader who goes on a boy-killing rampage.

"It's not black and white anymore," said Daniel Dubiecki, whose company, Hard C, produced the film with partner Jason Reitman ("Juno," "Thank You for Smoking"). "This movie flips the script -- instead of the pretty cheerleader being the victim, she's the unexpected villain. There's more depth, more layers. And that's exciting."

"Heroes" creator/producer Kring calls it the "yin and yang of storytelling."

He said, "All of us have within us the good and the bad, the dark and the light. And our circumstances determine our choices. So if you're predisposed to good and you can walk through walls, you can walk through a wall to save somebody's life. But if you're predisposed to be bad, then you may walk through a wall to rob a bank. So it really comes down to free will."

This season, the villains' duality will be more fully explored on "Heroes," he said.

Entertainment Weekly's Vary points to baddies like the "X-Men's" Magneto, who's currently at the center of an "X-Men" script in development.

"He's a mutant like the others, but he leans in a different direction," Vary said. "So this project sort of focuses on how he got to be who he is."

Similarly, Vary added, "Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince," due Nov. 21, explores the origins of Voldemort's negative behavior.

"It turns out he was abandoned as a child," explained Vary, who notes that the character is played by Oscar winner Ralph Fiennes. "So he carries all that baggage with him into adulthood. No wonder he's a villain."

Today, the villains have "more choices to make," Kring said.

"They're a lot more gray. In fact, they're sometimes more relatable than the heroes, because everyone's flawed, really. We live in a morally gray time," Kring said. "So the whole idea of who's good and who's corrupt is really blending. We can no longer see things as black and white. Take politics, for example. You just can't hide anything these days."

And a lot of "reel life" villains don't want to hide at all -- so they're showing their stripes on reality TV, said Damian Holbrook, a senior writer for TV Guide.

"Reality villains just pop," he said. "Look at *Omorosa* or *Heidi and Spencer*. I mean, really, what do they do? Nothing. But people can't get enough of them. They really know how to milk it."

Holbrook, who penned TV Guide's Top Reality Villains list, said he'd be keeping an eye on "The Hills'" Stephanie Pratt this season. Another recent character to follow is Ed Westwick's troublemaker Chuck Bass of "Gossip Girl."

"She stole Lauren's boyfriend, and she sold out her brother for screen time in a heartbeat. But she learned from the best with *Spencer*," Holbrook said. "I mean, you have to be really smart and really calculating to stay in the spotlight as long as he and Heidi have without really doing anything."

Currently, there's a fascination with the dark side, Kring said. "For a lot of us, there's a sense that the world is in a very dire place. The economy, global warming, diminishing resources, terrorism and the economy. There's a very palpable fear, and that naturally translates to pop culture. So the idea of good triumphing over evil is very reassuring."

But is good triumphing over evil? Psychologist Pamela Jaye Smith isn't so sure.

"We are inundated these days by reports from around the globe and close to home that all is not well with the world," said Smith, author of the book "The Power of the Dark Side: Creating Great Villains and Dangerous Situations."

She said, "The individual these days has very little power against giant companies and giant governments, both typically either corrupt and/or callous. Goliath has gotten so huge that David has simply shrugged, folded up the sling and tossed down the stone. Depending on your perspective, it can at times look as though the dark side is winning the war for the world and for humanity, and it's simply a natural animal tendency to side with the winners, hence our increasing fascination with villains."

Plus, said the Center for Story and Symbol's Young, it's all about catharsis, at least temporarily.

"Watching a movie is simultaneously an escape from everyday life and a safe way to encounter these terrors," he said. "It provides a ritual of entering the perilous saga to gain a sense of control and mastery. We may emerge from the theater less afraid, feeling more capable and with a renewed optimism about ourselves and the world."