Sam Hamm – *Batman* screenwriter

Interview by Randy Parker

During the summer of 1989, Sam Hamm, who wrote *Batman*, appeared at a comic book store in San Francisco for a comic book signing. Hamm is a San Francisco screenwriter whose credits include *Never Cry Wolf* and three issues of "Detective Comics." After the signing, Sam and I chatted about the Caped Crusader.

Q: Was writing *Batman* difficult? With the studio needing a hit and all the batfans to satisfy, it seems like it would be a really challenging project.

A: Well, *Batman* was actually extraordinarily easy for me to write. I had a great time doing it. The thing that's bizarre is that now there's a huge amount of publicity surrounding the film. At the time I started on it, it was kind of a dead project. Nobody really thought it had much chance of getting off the ground. It had been sitting around at Warner Brothers for six or seven years. And it was before the sudden boon that's come about in Batman and Batman products. So, yeah, being an old comic book fan from when I was a kid, I certainly wanted to do something that would be true to the spirit of the comic book, but since I was so immersed in that stuff when I was a kid, it really wasn't that much of a challenge to do. It was a picture that had gone through a lot of permutations before I came on it. They had talked about doing a period Art Deco Batman. They had talked about doing a camp version that would be similar to the TV series, a big budget comedy starring Bill Murray and Eddie Murphy as Robin. That sort of thing had been batted around back and forth. And when I came in and suggested we do something that stayed fairly close to the actual tone of the comic books, it was received as a radical suggestion. But it seemed like the easiest thing in the world to me, the most natural way to approach it.

Q: I was wondering how you first became involved in the new Batman movie. Of all people, why did they choose Sam Hamm to write the film?

A: Just basically by accident. I had a term deal at Warner Brothers; I had written a couple other scripts for them. And essentially, one day I saw a script for *Batman* sitting on someone's shelf. And being an old comic book fan, I took a look at it, and thought, "Well, you know, this is something someone could do something interesting with," and so I basically started nosing around behind the scenes over there to find out what the status of the project was. And after about six months of trying to find out if there was a way I could wangle the job, I hooked up with Tim Burton and we got along pretty well. And he asked me if I'd like to take a crack at it. And that's basically a very simple story, but that's how it turned out.

Q: So Tim Burton was already attached as a director by the time you came along?

A: Yeah, Tim had been on the project for I think about six months when I came in, and that was in spring of 1986.

Q: You mention that you were a big comic book fan as a kid. So I was wondering if you were in particular a Batman fan and also if you watched the TV series.

A: Yeah, I was a Batman fan when I was a kid. The first superhero comic I started reading was Superman. And when I was about four or five, I read a Superman comic which had Batman as guest star and quickly switched loyalties. So I followed that character pretty regularly throughout my youth. I was very excited when the TV series came on. I thought it was really cool. I was, of course, one of the kids who watched it and took it totally straight. I didn't realize it was supposed to be camp. And it just looked like some pretty good rip-snorting Batman stuff to me.

Q: Yeah, I watched it seriously too, and it's always funny to watch it now and see it as it really is, as a comedy.

A: Yeah, I remember I was shocked when the series was nominated for an Emmy for Best Comedy, and there was a big buzz among the kids in my neighborhood. Everybody was shocked: "What are they talking about!? Batman, a comedy?" And maybe that was one of first forays into total pretentiousness, because I pretended like, *"Well, yeah, I knew it was a comedy all along!"* But, of course, I was lying, because I had been taking it just as seriously as they had.

Q: A lot of critics have argued that the visual look of the film is stronger than the story. Does Tim Burton's movie do justice to your screenplay?

A: Well, I have to say I'm pretty happy with the way the movie came out. There were a lot of changes obviously to the way that I did the movie, and I think, you know, they made a couple of mistakes in things that they removed, things that they reshuffled, but I can't say that the things that were taken out, the things that are missing, are things that really detract from the movie as a whole or whether they're just things that I miss. I mean, obviously, if it were entirely up to me, I would have done some things differently; I would have done some things the same. I think certain aspects of the movie came out better than I had hoped, and certain aspects less so. But on balance, I think it works pretty well....

And I think the great surprise of the movie to me is Michael Keaton's performance; I think he's

absolutely terrific. I will admit that I was one of the doubters when he was initially cast, but I think that that's proved to be a gamble which has paid off terrifically. I think he gives a very, very crafty and subtle and suggestive performance.

Q: This may be a tough question to answer, and I'll sort of put you on the spot. The movie grossed a record shattering $43 million over its opening weekend. The Prince soundtrack has already gone platinum. The Bat Merchandise is everywhere. Batman is the #1 selling comic book. In short, Batman has become a cultural phenomenon. How do you account for Batman's enormous popularity?

A: I think it's probably my original script. No, I'm sorry, just kidding there, obviously. I'll tell you the truth; I really don't know. I've sort of watched this phenomenon growing over the last couple of years, and it's really developed independently of the movie. The movie just happens to be coming along at a perfect time to capitalize on it. And I think the publicity surrounding the movie is sort of energizing the public's interest in Batman, and I think the public's interest in Batman is energizing the movie at the same time. As to what the reason for all this is, I don't really know. I know that Batman became extremely hip as an iconographic figure a couple of years back. It may have something to do with Frank Miller's "Dark Knight" comic, which created such a splash, but as to why the Bat signal has suddenly been adopted by every art student on Melrose Avenue, I really don't know. It's strange.

Q: Do you think that the other comic book adaptations currently in the Hollywood pipeline will be as successful?

A: Again, hard to say. It's, I think, going to depend in large part on the quality of the movies, number one, and also on just how many of them they can get out in the market place before the public feels like there's a total glut. I don't think that there's going to be a huge trend towards superheroes beyond the first three or four that will probably come out in *Batman*'s wake, because the Hollywood tendency is to take a formula like that that's proven successful and then beat it to death. And it usually doesn't take very long for that beating to occur. So it's hard to say. Again, I don't like to predict. I mean I have a couple of comic book adaptations in the hopper myself.

Q: There have been many different renditions of Batman, from Kane's original to the campy '60s TV series to Frank Miller's dark reinterpretation in "The Dark Knight Returns" and finally, of course, the new movie. Which do you think is the most definitive Batman? And do you have a personal favorite?

A: You know I started reading "Batman" when it was in one of its silliest phases: it was in what I call "the pink aliens in time travel phase," when Batman was going back to visit the Aztecs and Batman was repelling alien invasions, and it seemed basically like they'd run out of ideas for what to do with the character. The stuff that I really responded to when I was a kid was the material from the late '40s and early '50s. It was very noirish stuff, and the villains tend to be horribly disfigured—the Joker, Two Face, characters like that, in really the same sort of vein as Chester Gould's more extreme characters in "Dick Tracy." I think if I had to pick, that would be the Batman that I remember the most fondly. And I also liked that big clunky Batmobile with the huge fin on the back. So that's a factor as well.

Q: Did Frank Miller's "The Dark Knight Returns" or any of his other graphic novels influence you at all in writing the screenplay? The movie does seem somewhat similar to Frank Miller's work.

A: Yeah, there are some obvious tonal similarities. Actually, when I started working on the story, I think only the first, or possibly the first and second issue—I can't remember exactly—of "The Dark Knight" had come out on the stands. And it was really more of an energizing influence than anything else, because it just sort of showed that you could play loose with the character a little bit and examine the darker implications of what he's about. Of course, since that comic book series was set in the future and dealt with a 55 year old Batman coming out of retirement, there really wasn't much we could lift from it in terms of plot or incident or anything like that. But, yeah, it was certainly an inspiration. And I have to say that I like Frank Miller's and David Mazzucchelli's "Batman: Year One," which came out a year or so later, even better than that. I think that's really a terrific piece of work and wish I had had it to use for an inspiration when I was writing the script initially.

Q: You wrote issues number 598 to 600 of "Detective Comics," which I believe was in celebration of the 50th anniversary of Batman. How did that came about?

A: Well, I got into it totally ass-backwards. I had

written the script for the Batman movie, and the people at DC Comics, who were monitoring the progress of the film, read the script and had very kind things to say about it. And so, I think they were casting about for some kind of special gimmick to set the 50th anniversary issues apart from the usual run of the series and took a chance on bringing in a total novice—namely me. And the opportunity was too much of an honor to pass up, because when I was a kid, I had always wanted to write and draw comic books. I had no idea how you get into it, how you go about it. The approach I took was a fairly complicated one: to go out and write a movie based on a comic book character and on the basis of that get a job writing the comic book itself. But it was a great treat for me and great fun to do. And it worked out nicely because we were in the midst of a screenwriter's strike in the summer of 1988, and I got to kill some time working on a legitimate job, which was doing those anniversary issues of "Batman."

Q: So did you have anything to do with the artwork or was it primarily the story that was your forte?

A: Oh, exclusively the story. I don't have the chops to be a comic book artist, unfortunately.

Q: How does writing comic books compare to screenwriting?

A: It's twice as hard. Essentially, when you're writing a comic book, you have to figure out everything very precisely in terms of the action that takes place in an individual panel, who's going to be saying what when, how you get exposition across, and you have to describe everything in extreme detail. The simplest action, for example in a script you would say, "The car turns around the corner and crashes into a wall." And that's a sen-

tence; that's what you would write in a script. And it's the directors job to go out and figure out how you break that down into shots. Do you start out with a shot of white knuckles on a steering wheel? The wheel twisting. The front wheels of the car turning. The fender going up over the curb. Knocking over a fire hydrant. People diving out of the way. The car crashing into the wall. It's not the screenwriter's job to figure all that kind of stuff out. When you're writing a comic book, you have to figure all that stuff out. You have to figure out how many panels it's going to take you to get a particular action across. You have to figure out what the breakdown of the action is going to be, because it's a static medium. And that was a really, really difficult transition; it's a whale of a lot more work than screenwriting. And I'm glad, frankly, to be back in an easier discipline.

Q: What can we look forward to next from Sam Hamm, besides your further comic book adaptations?

A: Among the projects I have which are kicking around in active development right now, it's about an equal mix between big extravagant adventure and comedies, which are on a much smaller scale. So I don't know. It depends on the vagaries of the industry, really, what's going to be making it to the screen next. But among the things I'm doing are a comedy called *Pulitzer Prize* for Touchstone, a basketball recruiting comedy called *Hang Time* for Warner Brothers, a Philip K. Dick adaptation, *Time Out Of Joint*, and a comedy which I don't have a title for yet that just went into MGM, but which is going under the provisional title *Let's Fall In Love*. So what I'm looking forward to most at the moment is taking a vacation.

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