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'Batman' movie creator coming to Virginia Tech

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By Amy Matzke-Fawcett 381-1674



Want to go?

- What: Michael Uslan, creator of the "Batman" movies, speaks on "Pow! Zap! Oy! How Jewish Immigrants Created Super-Heroes"
- When: 7 p.m. Tuesday
- Where: Colonial Hall, Squires Student Center, Virginia Tech
- Cost: Free
- Contact: 951-2060 or hillel@vt.edu

Courtesy of David Buchalter

Batman. The Hulk. Superman. Moses?

Michael Uslan -- creator and producer of the modern "Batman" movies starting with 1989's "Batman" to last year's blockbuster "The Dark Knight" -- is coming to Blacksburg next week.

Uslan will give a presentation Tuesday at Virginia Tech on the history of comic books and how many of the original creators' Jewish faith helped mold superheroes, starting with Superman.

He worked on the 2008 documentary "The Legends Behind the Comic Books," which helped create the presentation from stories he'd collected while making the film.

On Wednesday, Uslan, 57, answered a few questions about his presentation, as well as the "Batman" movies.

What made you want to take this out there and give presentations [about Judaism and superheroes]?

MU: Being a history buff, as well as a lover of comic books and a comic book historian, I recently did a documentary "Legends Behind the Comic Books," directed by Chip Cronkite, son of Walter, and we captured on film truly the last of the survivors from the 1930s to 1960s of golden to silver age of comics -- the men and women who created these characters and brought their adventures to life each month.

We got their first-hand history captured on film before it disappeared completely. And there's only about two dozen or so left at this time, the youngest ones being in their 80s, the oldest ones being in their late-90s.

So it was fascinating to hear their stories about how this all came about, what they were thinking, what they were doing and the circumstances in which they were working. And this theme just kept coming back and back and back to just how amazing how many were Jewish and how much of what they did reflected something in their culture, something in their heritage, something in their folklore in mythology.

These are people that never got the proper respect and attention and place in history that they deserve because for so many years people thought comic books were simply cheap entertainment for children, nothing more nothing less. ...

Finally, society is paying them homage and recognizing what they did as a legitimate American art form, and I just thought it was real important to bring their first-hand stories to life and let them know how this all came about.

How did you get involved with Batman?

I was a comic book nut. My mom swore I taught myself to read before I was 4 by comic books. When I was 8



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years old, I became a Batman fanatic. He was my favorite superhero -- more than Superman or the Hulk or Spider-Man -- because this guy had no superpowers, and so I could identify with him more strongly. I think of my heart of hearts, when I was 8 years old I believed that if I worked out real hard and studied real hard and my dad bought me a cool car, I could be this guy. That was part of the whole thing.

And then I collected comics avidly, and the collection would be about 60,000 right now, but I've donated 45,000 of my comic books to the Indiana University rare books library, the Lilly Library, so it's always been a part of my life.

In general, how do you feel about the current success of comic book movies?

It's great, I think we're in the golden age of comic book movie-making. And the reasons for that are varied.

Number one, for me, being in the trenches for 33 years fighting this battle [for comic book recognition] we've finally gotten Hollywood to understand and accept the fact that comic books and superheroes are not synonymous -- that there are comic books and graphic novels that are based on anything you can find a Barnes and Noble or Borders bookstore as you walk through: romance, war, westerns, science fiction, horror, humor and that's why we're now getting comics based on comic books, "Road to Perdition" and "The History of Violence," "300," and it's not just all about comic books and superheroes. The other thing is they finally understand comic books are not a genre, they're not hot one summer and cold the next.

They are an ongoing source of great stories and great character just like plays, just like novels and that was breakthrough. ...

Which interpretation of Batman do you enjoy the most?

For me, it's always been about the Batman of 1939, the creature of the night stalking criminals from the shadows, up against the greatest gallery of villains in history. That to me is really the essence of that's what it's all about. That's my favorite.

What can we expect from you in the future?

A couple of the upcoming projects I have: I'm partnered with Sam Raimi, who directed the "Spiderman" films, and Josh Donen on a brand-new version of "The Shadow" at Sony Pictures, and I'm working with director Pete Segal, who did "Get Smart" last year and "Tommy Boy" ... and Michael Ewing on "Shazam," at Warner Brothers, which is the Captain Marvel story.

And for the San Diego Comic-Con in July, we hope to be in the position, if the movie gods are kind to us, to officially announce two new projects that I'm very excited about. So it's a lot of fun, I get to be 16 for the rest of my life no matter how gray I'm getting. It's a great job.

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