By Arlen Schumer

A new series of animated TV films, brilliantly conceived and designed, offers Gotham City's Dark Knight in classic form—the archetypal Batman. Any resemblance to other recent filmic interpretations is highly unlikely.

1.

2.

WAYNE'S WORLD

For over half a century, Batman has been an artistic as well as commercial success in comic books. All the great comic book artists have at one time or another delineated his exploits, and because he has no super powers, his adventures have been largely story-driven, resulting in some classic scripts. But in other venues—movie serials, television series, feature films—Batman, while he has succeeded commercially, has failed on an artistic level. None of the film and TV Batmen to date has captured the comic book character accurately.

This is admittedly a highly subjective and difficult proposition, as Batman is a multi-sided, non-super superhero: equal parts streetwise detective, criminologist, circus acrobat, and master of physical combat. His visual personas have ranged from the 1940s hard-edged graphic cartoon style of creator Bob Kane to the slick photorealism of Neal Adams in the early '70s. Could any one filmic treatment of Batman, then, possibly communicate this comic book character in all his diversity?

As a longtime Batman reader who can remember breathlessly anticipating the debut of the Batman TV show on January 12, 1966—only to be crushed upon realizing it was making fun of my favorite character (I found out later this was known as "camp")—and who then, almost 25 years later, winced through the twin Batman movies, never getting over the gross miscasting of Michael

Keaton in the title role, I can report that there is at last a Batman we can all be happy with: He appears in Warner Bros.' "Batman: The Animated Series," 65 half-hour episodes that began broadcasting on the Fox Television Network last fall.

"The Batman we've done is, to my mind, the definitive, dark detective Batman who everybody knows and loves," declares Bruce Timm, the original designer and one of three producers of the series. "But there are many different interpretations of Batman that are all equally valid." Quoted in the December 1992 issue of Comics Scene, story editor Paul Dini adds, "In the animated series, Batman is an amalgam of all his different personas. We wanted to present a classic vision of Batman, a sort of archetypal Batman."* By drawing inspiration from all the best comic book incarnations over the years, Timm, Dini, and the rest of the staff at Warner Bros. Animation have succeeded where all others have failed: They have brought Batman to life.

To *life*? How can an animated character be more "lifelike" than a live actor? "Ultimately, the best way to do a superhero character is with animation," asserts Boyd Kirkland, director of some of the standout episodes of the series. "When you try to do them with live action—I don't care how good the special effects are—you lose the fantasy of it that you have with a graphic image. Not that some of the superhero live action movies haven't been entertaining, but if you're really

going to capture the same feeling of escapism that these bigger-than-life heroes entail, you've got to do it with animation."

Writing in a 1989 issue of Prevue magazine about the first Tim Burton movie, former Marvel Comics writer/artist Jim Steranko was more pointed in his criticism: "The root of the problem is a failure to comprehend the nature of the subject's sometimes indefinable quality that gives the character universal appeal." But Batman's indefinable quality can be easily defined: Simply put, he's the coolest-looking comic book character of all, the archetype of the masked hero. Batman's mask is his defining visual; in the comics, Batman's eyes are white slits. They are not revealed through apertures in the cross-eyed-looking cowls worn by Adam West in the '60s TV series and Keaton in the movies. Along with the stylized billowing of an impossibly long cape into bat's wings, the animated Batman's demonic visage gives credence to Bruce Wayne's original vow to adopt a disguise that would strike terror into the hearts of criminals. None of the live-action versions have been able to do that.

Batman's impressive physique is what one would expect from someone who has trained himself to physical perfection from childhood, and bears no relation to the pot-bellied posture of West or the insignificant musculature of Keaton, which, in the latter case, was made all the more obvious by the use of molded "body armor" (read: muscle pad-

*Quoted in Bob Miller, "The Joker's Keeper," Comics Scene, no. 31, December 1992.

1, 2. Batman and his alter ego, Bruce Wayne, as designed by Bruce Timm for the TV series; Timm's Batman, while an amalgam of many different visual personas of the character (see Figs. 6-12), also bears a resemblance to Hanna-Barbera's cult-favorite *Space Ghost*, designed by legendary comic artist Alex Toth in 1966. Timm's retro-GQ Bruce Wayne was loosely based on Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy*, square jaw and all.

3-5. Pop-up promotional press kit folder for the series, designed by Elena Lazovich of Warner Bros.' Marketing and Advertising Services. The piece features reflective-surfaced Bat-eyes on the cover (Fig. 3) and lavishly printed interiors inset with varnished cel animation reproductions. Opening the kit causes the miniature Batman figure, attached by a clear plastic "arm," to "swing out" over Gotham City (Fig. 5).


3.
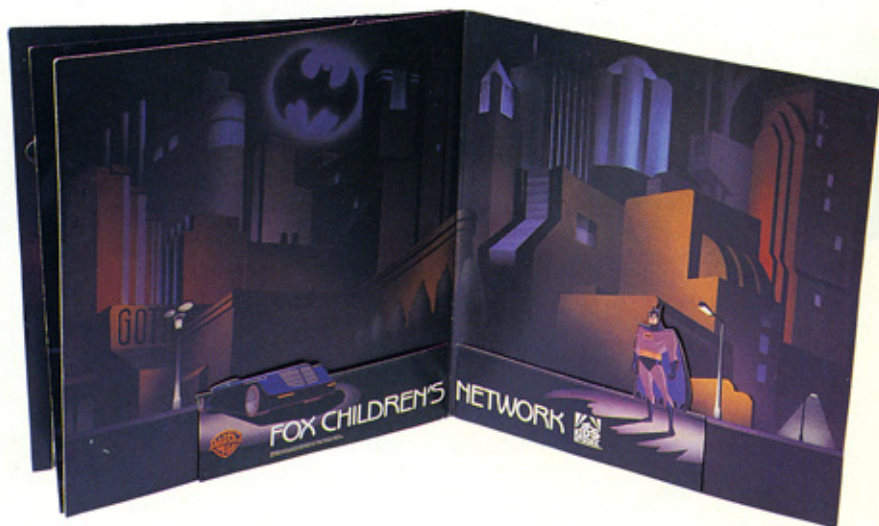
4.

5.

6-12. Influences from all these different Batman models can be found in Bruce Timm's Batman (Fig. 12), from creator Bob Kane's original 1939 conception (Fig. 6) to, most recently, Steve Rude's 1991 version (Fig. 11), itself done in homage to Kane's. Fig. 7, also by Kane but done in 1940, shows how, within only one year, Batman's batwing-like cape lost its batwing-likeness; this coincided with the introduction of Robin into the strip, which served to make Batman less of a shadowy, frightening creature of the night and more of a grinning barrel-chested swashbuckler (befitting his new status as adolescent guardian). As the 1940s receded, Batman

6.   7.   8.   9.   10.
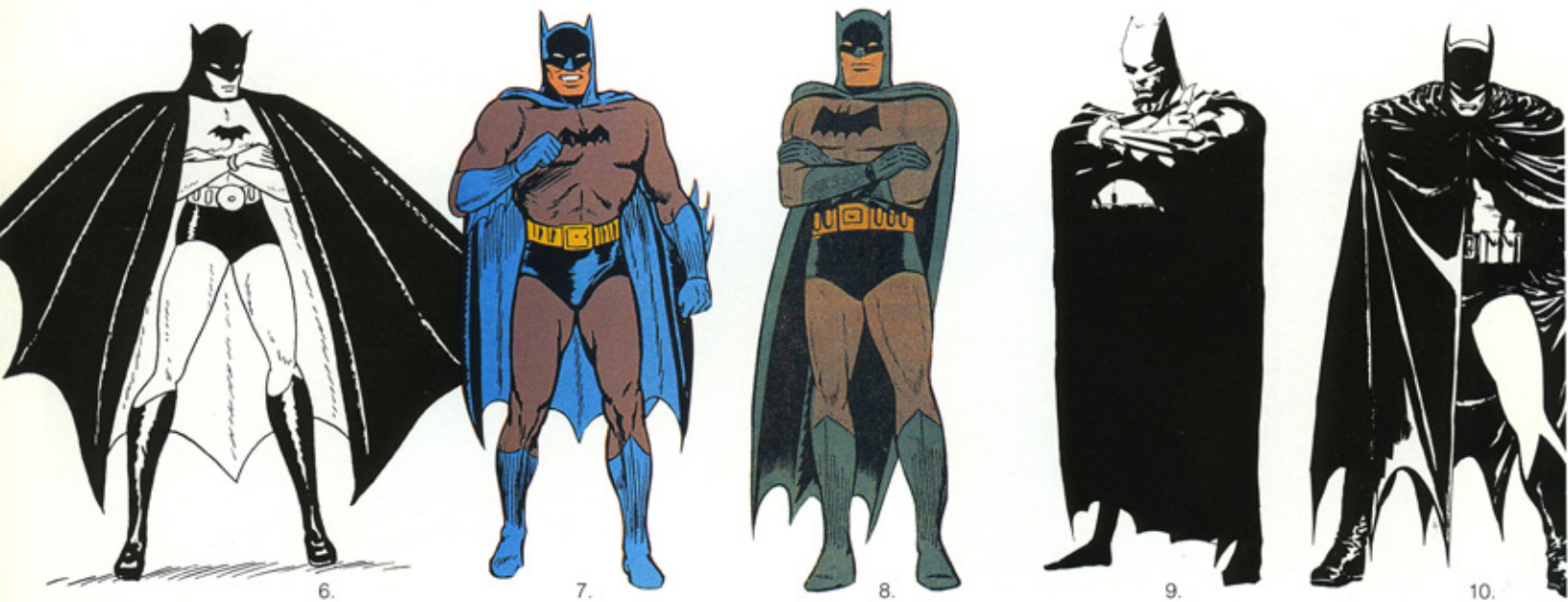
ding), culminating in the bloated, ridiculous-looking neck brace of a Batmask. Commenting in the October 1992 issue of Comics Scene, Alan Burnett, producer of the animated series, was conciliatory: "The movie Batman is interesting in his stiff, almost knight-like look. Our guy wears cloth clothes. Ours is much more fluid in motion. Ours harks back to the classical Batman."*

Bruce Timm is the man most responsible for this classical Batman design. Previously, he was one of the animators of "Tiny Toons," Warner Bros. Animation's first big project for television syndication. When production was nearly completed, executive vice-president Jean MacCurdy let the entire staff know that Batman was next up for development, following the huge financial success of the first Warner Bros. film, produced in 1989. Timm was excited: "I had always loved Batman since I was a kid, and for years I tried to draw him the way I always saw him in my mind. Nobody else had ever drawn him the way I thought Batman should look. I liked Neal Adams's comics, I liked all the different artists' versions, but I kept wanting to do my own Batman, and I'd never been able to. Then one day I had this 'Tiny Toons' storyboard I was supposed to finish, and I said, 'Forget it! I'm gonna draw Batman!' So I sat down and did this one sheet of Batman sketches. And it was like, BING! There it is! So the next time we had a development meeting, I brought this sheet and Jean said, "'Perfect! That's

exactly what he should look like."'

Timm preserved the integrity of Bob Kane's original, angular stylization—Batman as a graphic symbol of a bat—so his Batman is bigger and more barrel-chested than the more accurately proportioned Adams version. He stresses the necessity of his simple, reductive style over Adams's realism: "You can't just take his design and put it on the screen; it has to go through the cartooning process. Even when you remove all the detail and cross-hatching, there are so many subtleties to his drawing; you've still got very complex shapes for the face and musculature. It has to be translated. Cartoons have to be stylized. And it's beyond just being simple. It can't just be a few lines, it has to be pushed lines. It almost has to be caricature."

Yet Timm's Batman moves as fluidly as one imagines the Adams Batman would move if brought to life—as if the mind's eye filled in the spaces between the panels, much the way an animator draws the "in between" motions of a character's movement. For an animated character that wasn't rotoscoped (shot as live action and then animated over), the Timm Batman moves more realistically than any live actor playing Batman. Having the insight of directors like Boyd Kirkland helps. "Most action-adventure cartoons that have been done over the years don't have any sense of realistic pacing or timing, either in the way the characters move or in the flow of the story from scene to scene," he observes.
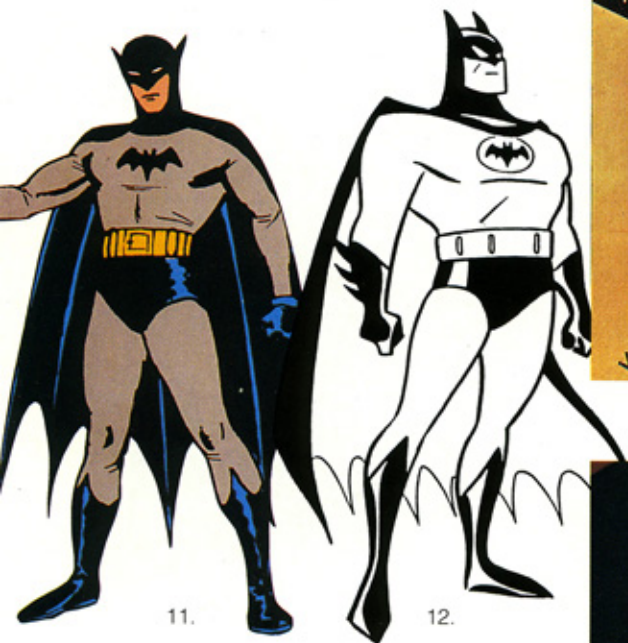
"That's one of the director's jobs. It's something that a lot of people don't necessarily notice unless they work in the business; they see it, but they may not know what it is. And that's the timing, the pacing, the flow of things. I have very good storyboard people, and we continue to figure out ways of staging things to give a very live-action feeling."

Surrounding Timm's Batman is a production design patterned after the old Fleischer Studio's Superman cartoons. These were 17 8-minute shorts, produced between 1941 and '43, that have come to be considered the greatest realistic figure cartoons of all time. Within this series, Superman operated in a Metropolis more out of Fritz Lang's 1927 film of the same name than out of the comic books drawn by Joe Shuster. The remarkably *film-noir*ish cartoons, lavishly illustrated and heavily rotoscoped, were directed like the live-action movie serials of the day, with a budget twice what it normally cost to do animation of that length. Their influence on today's comic book creators has been acknowledged: Frank Miller dedicated his breakthrough graphic novel of 1986, *The Dark Knight Returns*, to the Fleischer brothers, Max and Dave. It was Miller's work, transposing the Fleischer Metropolis into Gotham City, that set the tone for today's Batman and garnered the media attention necessary to get the stalled Hollywood movie in gear.

"I see similarities to Fleischer's Supermans," Burnett conceded in the Comics

became softer and more rounded, culminating in the Batman of the 1950s by Dick Sprang (Fig. 8). Timm bypassed the more realistic, slick '60s Batman best illustrated by Carmine Infantino, as well as the

11.

12.

13.

14.

photorealistic Neal Adams Batman of the '70s, but was greatly influenced by Frank Miller's "Dark Knight" of 1986 (Fig. 9). Miller posited a much older Batman coming out of retirement so that he could draw the Batman he preferred—a throwback to the bigger, bulkier Batman of the '40s and '50s. David Mazzucchelli synthesized Miller's Dark Knight with the early Kane Batman (Fig. 10) for the Miller-scripted graphic novel *Batman: Year One* (published by DC Comics in 1987).

13, 14. Poster by El Lissitzky from 1920 (Fig. 13) clearly indicates that Russian Constructivism was one of the graphic influences on Bruce Timm's and fellow animator Eric Radomski's styling of their series' opening sequence, which climaxes in a rooftop battle between Batman and some Gotham City hoods.

15, 16. Timm's Batman model sheet drawing (Fig. 15) captures the spirit of Neal Adams's more realistic Batman (Fig. 16), taken from the cover of *Detective Comics* #404 (1970), but in a simplified, stylized, almost caricatured form, demonstrating what Timm refers to as "the cartooning process."

Scene article, "but our look is softer and more—to use a phrase—cartoony. Those [Fleischer] cartoons also had a dark palette . . . . [and] Batman has the darkest palette I've ever seen for TV animation." Eric Radomski, a third producer on the Batman series, lays claim to that. Like Timm, Radomski had labored on "Tiny Toons," and had come up with some development ideas for stylizing the Batman backgrounds. In an unorthodox switch from traditional painted cel animation backgrounds, he decided to paint the cels totally black, like an artist laying down a coat of white gesso on a canvas before applying the paint. Then, over the black, he began painting in the Deco lines and spires of Gotham City, inspired not only by the Fleischers but also by the Radiant City of the Mr. X comic book series of the 1980s. "The Mr. X comics were a really big influence on us, probably more than anything else early on in the development of the show," Radomski says. "Because of the city—the simplicity of it, the hugeness of it. Tiny characters with huge backgrounds. Big broad areas of black. Suggested pieces of Art Deco design." The resultant design, dubbed by Burnett "Dark Deco," was lush and rich-looking, suggesting detail rather than showing it.

This emphasis on composition over detail carried over into all aspects of the design—not just backgrounds, but characters as well. The villain Two-Face is an example of a char-

15.

16.

17.

18.

19.

acter who benefited from the limitations of animation: He is much better designed than his comic book counterpart. As originally created, Two-Face was a district attorney whose face—half of it—was horribly scarred when a vengeful criminal threw acid at him. This warps his personality, and in true comic book fashion, he begins wearing suits divided in half, usually plaids against stripes. The patterns posed a problem for character designer Timm. "We can't animate plaid," he explains. "So if we can't have plaid and we can't have stripes, what are we going to do? Then it dawned on me: Why don't we make him black and white? Evil and good. It's so obvious, it's surprising nobody's ever done it before."

After seeing Radomski's Dark Deco designs, Jean MacCurdy hooked him up with Timm and his character designs, and asked them to produce a 60-second promo/pilot to sell the animated series to Warner Bros. "It took us a month and a half to make this Batman cartoon," Timm relates. "Eric painted all the backgrounds, I did the board, we timed it, we shipped it. The actual animation was done in Canada in a little commercial studio in Toronto." Reaction to the short film was enthusiastic. "I couldn't believe my eyes," Alan Burnett is quoted as saying. "It was the best action-adventure animation I'd ever seen for television. That promo clip got me here, and I've been jazzed about the show ever since." Paul Dini concurred: "You can't

look at the version of Gotham City that Eric and Bruce created and just not love it. It's a stunning and unique visual. It's the coolest-looking world on television."

Certain physical elements of this cool world were directly inspired by production designs from the first Burton Batman film: the heavy metal Batmobile, the Batcave, and props like Batman's grappling gun. But Timm is quick to point out, "When people say our show looks like the Tim Burton movies, what they're actually saying is, there are design elements from Burton's films that are the same as ours. But we're basically stealing from the same people—the German Expressionists and the '30s architect Hugh Ferriss. It's the same with the Fleischer Superman cartoons. They were influenced by the same people we're influenced by."

The 1960s series served as a model of what not to do, since its overall tone of high camp is sharply at odds with Dark Deco. However, everyone involved with the animated series expresses a fondness for the TV show (Timm says he got his first exposure to the character from it), born of respect for the confidence and consistency of its vision— the one thing the two shows do have in common. Actually, some elements of the TV show that were accessed by the animated series' creators might have been initially dismissed out of hand as being too campy. "The villains," story editor Dini related in his account for the press, "were played pretty

much for laughs in the 1960s show. They had their affectations, and there were some great actors performing them. But in our series, we looked beyond the bizarre costumes to find out, 'What's unique about the Mad Hatter that's compelling? What's the story behind the Riddler? Why is Poison Ivy a murderess? What prompts them to do these things?'"

A case in point is Mr. Freeze, who epitomizes the outlandish, gimmick-laden villain of the TV show. A mad scientist turned criminal who can survive only in sub-zero temperatures, he wears a sci-fi bubble helmet and wields an ice gun. Batman foils him by wearing Bat–long underwear. Against this history, Dini scripted the episode "Heart of Ice"; the title alone, with its allusion to emotional coldness, foreshadowed a dramatically different Mr. Freeze. Dini posited, "What if you had a man sitting in this refrigerated room crying, and as he wept, his tears turned to snow? What would cause him to cry? The way I wrote 'Heart of Ice' is, I worked backwards from this visual." The episode, directed by Bruce Timm, reveals Freeze to be a scientist distraught over the death of his wife in a cryogenic experiment gone awry, and out for revenge against the corporate head who is responsible for the accident. By investing him with this unexpected motivation, Dini transformed Mr. Freeze from just another campy Bat-villain into a rather tragic figure.

A high level of writing is evident throughout the series, and both its producers and

20.

21.

17. Architectural rendering by Hugh Ferriss, based on a design by Harvey Wiley Corbett (1922).

18. Early concept illustration by Bruce Timm of Gotham City and Batman (find him at top center) taken directly from a Ferriss rendering.

19. *Mr. X* was a comic book series published sporadically by Canada's Vortex Comics starting in 1983, with different artists taking their turns delineating Radiant City, a crazy-quilt of 20th-century architects' utopian—and dystopian—cities of the future. Timm and Eric Radomski cite illustrator Seth's version, shown here from his first issue, *Mr. X* #6, 1986, as having the most influence on their Gotham City "Dark Deco" design.

20. The villain Two-Face, taken from the 1946 Batman syndicated newspaper strip, illustrated by Jack Burnley.

21. Bruce Timm's redesign of Two-Face simplified his split-suit motif for animation, while emphasizing the black-and-white/good-and-evil moral schism of the character's split personality.

22. The visual logo of the TV series, designed and drawn by Timm, painted by John Calmette.

23. Batman confronts a giant jack-in-the-box Joker, who, like many of the classic Batman villains, is voiced by a prominent actor: Mark Hamill, of *Star Wars* fame.

24. For the look of the Penguin, Timm wanted to use some older comic book designs of the character, but had to conform to movie director Tim Burton's costume design for actor Danny DeVito in *Batman Returns*.

22.

23.

24.

29.

34.

30.

35.

31.

36.

32.

37.

33.

38.

39.

25.

26.

27.

28.

25-28. Frames from the Fleischer Studio's Superman cartoons, released in 1941-42 (Figs. 25, 26), shown alongside frames from Warner Bros.' Batman (Figs. 27, 28) point up the two series' similar qualities: realistic figures dynamically modeled with light and shadow, depicted against Hugh Ferriss–inspired city backdrops.

29-38. Frames from the 55-second opening sequence that begins each Batman episode, designed by Bruce Timm and Eric Radomski, and animated by a Japanese studio, Tokyo Movie Shinsa. The dialogue-less opening is scored by Danny Elfman, who also scored both Batman movies for director Tim Burton. Fig. 34 is an outtake, drawn by Timm and painted by John Calmette.

39. Warner Bros. promotional art, drawn by Timm and painted by Calmette.

directors uphold the primacy of the story. Director Boyd Kirkland acknowledges, "You can put the greatest graphics in the world on the screen, and all the best-looking explosions and cool-looking costumes, but it all comes to nothing unless there's a really good script, a really good story with strong characters. It's all in the writing."

One of Kirkland's favorite episodes is "Perchance to Dream," in which Bruce Wayne awakens one day to find that his Batman identity is all an apparent delusion. His parents, he is startled to learn, are very much alive. And Alfred, his butler, professes never to have even been near a Batcave. Like a character in some great "Twilight Zone" episode, Wayne struggles to maintain his sanity while falling further into madness. "When I got the script to 'Perchance to Dream,' it was really fun to read," Kirkland recalls. "Instead of just trying to get through it, I couldn't wait to turn the page." The episode climaxes with a *Vertigo*-like scene atop a bell tower in the rain, with Wayne battling his alter ego.

Stories like "Perchance to Dream" aren't exactly standard after-school programming fare. Steeped in the night, Batman seems out of place in daytime, both literally and figuratively. The series' mature storytelling style would seem to require prime-time evening exposure. But as Kirkland points out, "In America, there's still this attitude that comics and animation are for kids. In Japan, they run the gamut from pre-school kinds of pro-

grams to X-rated cartoons. Same thing in Europe. But here, in the country of their origin, cartoons aren't respected as adult forms of art and entertainment."

The situation may be changing, if incrementally. Last December, the Fox Network began airing "Batman: The Animated Series" once a week in prime-time. Of course, its time slot—Sundays at 7 p.m.—puts it up against "60 Minutes," one of the top-rated shows on television. But still—progress is progress. Notes Kirkland with some pride, "It's the first time I'm aware of that a show sold on the basis of being a kids' series was considered sophisticated enough to make the switch to prime-time. I don't know of another animated series that's ever done that."*

Plans for expanding the series' audience include an original 70-minute direct-to-video episode for release this Christmas, free of the daytime children's programming restrictions that the series is usually subject to. For Kirkland, this is a step in the right direction. "The thing I would love to work on," he says, "is a flat-out theatrical feature with full animation done with an action comic book character, like Batman. There's a lot of us in this business who would like to see that happen."

But for now, Kirkland is happy to be doing exactly what he's doing: "Because of the character, and because we're doing something that for many years was unattainable, we've been able to draw people in who might otherwise have left the animation business. To

the credit of the management here, they've been willing to stand back and let us all have fun with this." Timm agrees. Animation magazine quotes him as saying, "All the special designs, the special care that we take . . . would all be meaningless if Warners didn't back us up."** Added producer Burnett: "Warner Bros. is trying to do a quality product. . . . I gathered people who love Batman and they've taken the show to places I couldn't have gone without them. It's a real team effort, with everybody working at the top of their craft. We want to make this Batman special."

In American popular culture, the successful commercial entertainment that also succeeds on an artistic level is almost always made possible by a laissez-faire management style: finding creative people with a passion for what they do and then letting them do it. Orson Welles's Mercury Theater Productions of the '30s come to mind, as does Rod Serling's "Twilight Zone" of the '60s. Warner Bros. Animation's *Batman* now belongs to this exclusive club. In making their Batman "special," they have succeeded not only in creating the definitive Batman, but in creating the definitive treatment of any of this century's great comic book characters.

Arlen Schumer is co-principal with his wife, Sherri Wolfgang, of The Dynamic Duo Studio, in Westport, CT, which specializes in comics-style commercial illustration. He is author of Visions from The Twilight Zone *(Chronicle Books, 1990).*

* In late March, Fox regrettably pulled "Batman" from its prime-time "adult" slot.

** Quoted in Bob Miller, "Dark Deco in the Afternoon," Animation magazine, Fall 1992.