



THE RIDDLER

Frank Gorshin on acting the Prince of Puzzlers.

By Bob Garcia

"Riddle me this, Batman," was a phrase indelibly imprinted upon a generation of Batfans. Frank Gorshin's Riddler was the consummate Batman foe. With a grandiose performance, he transformed a rather minor comic book villain into the Prince of Puzzlers, who so delighted in outwitting the Dynamic Duo that he couldn't restrain his laughter and glee. Gorshin brought the audience in on the joke. Clearly, this Riddler was so intelligent and in control, that the heroes were easy marks. Heck, in the first episode he even got away. With a hard edge, Gorshin convinced a nation that he was indeed a super villain to be reckoned with.

It was Bill Dozier who recognized that the screen actor and impressionist would be the perfect Riddler. Having seen Gorshin's work at Screen Gems

The Riddler of the comics, art by Win Mortimer, the character's first appearance in October 1948.



while he was its head, Dozier decided to call him in for the part. "I was flattered that he did think of me," said Gorshin. "And I was excited too, because as a kid I loved Batman comics and I never thought that someday I might be able to play that character that wears the question marks and left the riddles. I relished it. I wanted to do it. I didn't have to audition or anything. They asked for me, and I agreed."

When Gorshin received the script, he became even more excited. "It was definitely going to be a comedy. When I found out they were gonna have balloons on screen saying POW and ZAM, how could it be anything else? Then I read the dialogue and it was pretty apparent that it was going to be tongue-in-cheek. It was going to be for laughs and at the same time it was going to have an appeal for kids, because there was going to be a lot of action involved with it.... I thought it was really clever. Lorenzo Semple was a brilliant writer, and I thought, "This is going to have legs."

"It was a pioneer. It was a whole new thing. It was also exciting being on the first show, and setting the pace, so to speak. I was the forerunner, and I love that responsibility, because I thought it was going to last a long time."

But while Gorshin's enthusiasm was high, and his spirit was with them, during the pilot's preproduction, Gorshin himself couldn't be. He was booked into Las Vegas and New York and couldn't make it to Hollywood for the initial fittings, which caused a certain amount of headaches for Jan Kemp, the costume designer.



Attacking the role of the Riddler with a manic intensity, Gorshin took a minor villain in Batman's comic book pantheon and made him a classic character.

"I had a lot of coordinating to do with phone calls to get measurements and to plan the costumes without his body to fit them too, initially," said Kemp. "For his first outfit in the series, I had planned a set of leotards covered with question marks, then later added a suit with more question marks. When he finally got time to come to the studio he kept the entire wardrobe department in stitches with laughter at his jokes and impressions."

Gorshin remembered that the guidance for how to do the character was minimal, after he got to Fox. "Nobody talked to me about it. They just gave me *carte blanche*," he said. "What I wanted to do was carry umbrellas all the time and I wanted to talk like a duck: quack, quack, quack. But they said no, some-

body else is already doing that."

Noted Bob Butler director, on the pilot episode, "Frank Gorshin got the Riddler immediately. I hadn't pictured that the part would be that juicy and giddy as he made it. As soon as he started performing it that way I thought it was hilarious. He's an excellent actor. He's a guy who can stay in character. He gets in and stays in, very consistent, very thorough and convincing.

"That ultra-intensity was very real for him. He just invented a world for himself, where he was having a great time all the time. He was goofy: wonderfully excited and exhilarated, just wonderful choices.... That originally came from Lorenzo [Semple] too. Frank couldn't have done that if the material hadn't been written as



Gorshin as the Riddler and a captive Robin escape from the Riddler's overturned car, with Batman in pursuit, in the series' pilot "Hi Diddle Riddle."

kind of giddy and kind of crazy to begin with...He stayed on the text. Spiritually he was free and wild, but he stayed on the text one hundred percent...Of course, Frank took it to the top."

Noted Gorshin, "I think it's relatively easier to play the villain than to play the straight guy," said Gorshin. "It's easy to tear down the scenery...to be big, bigger than life. But to just be able and stand there and talk to someone and be believable and accepted, is really difficult to do."

To play *this* merry villain, Gorshin created a laugh that was so distinctive it became his signature. "Richard Widmark had done a picture some years ago called *KISS OF DEATH*," said Gorshin. "He pushed an old lady down the stairs and when he did that he laughed and it became indelible, that character Tommy Udo. To this day, people remember Richard Widmark having played Tommy Udo...because [of] what he did while he was laughing.

"I tried all kinds of laughs. I thought, 'Well, the laugh, if anything, has to be honest.' [As the Riddler,] I'm really enjoying life, and I'm not doing it for laughs. I'm doing it because I love it. I love outwitting the law, outwitting Batman, leaving riddles and so forth. There was nothing I couldn't do. I was a genius. I could do Shakespeare. I could be a scientist. I could do anything. But I chose that...So it's got to be a sincere laugh. And I found that whenever I do laugh at something really, I get

this high-pitched [laugh]. And I thought, 'Well, I'll just do that. I'll just be honest with it.'

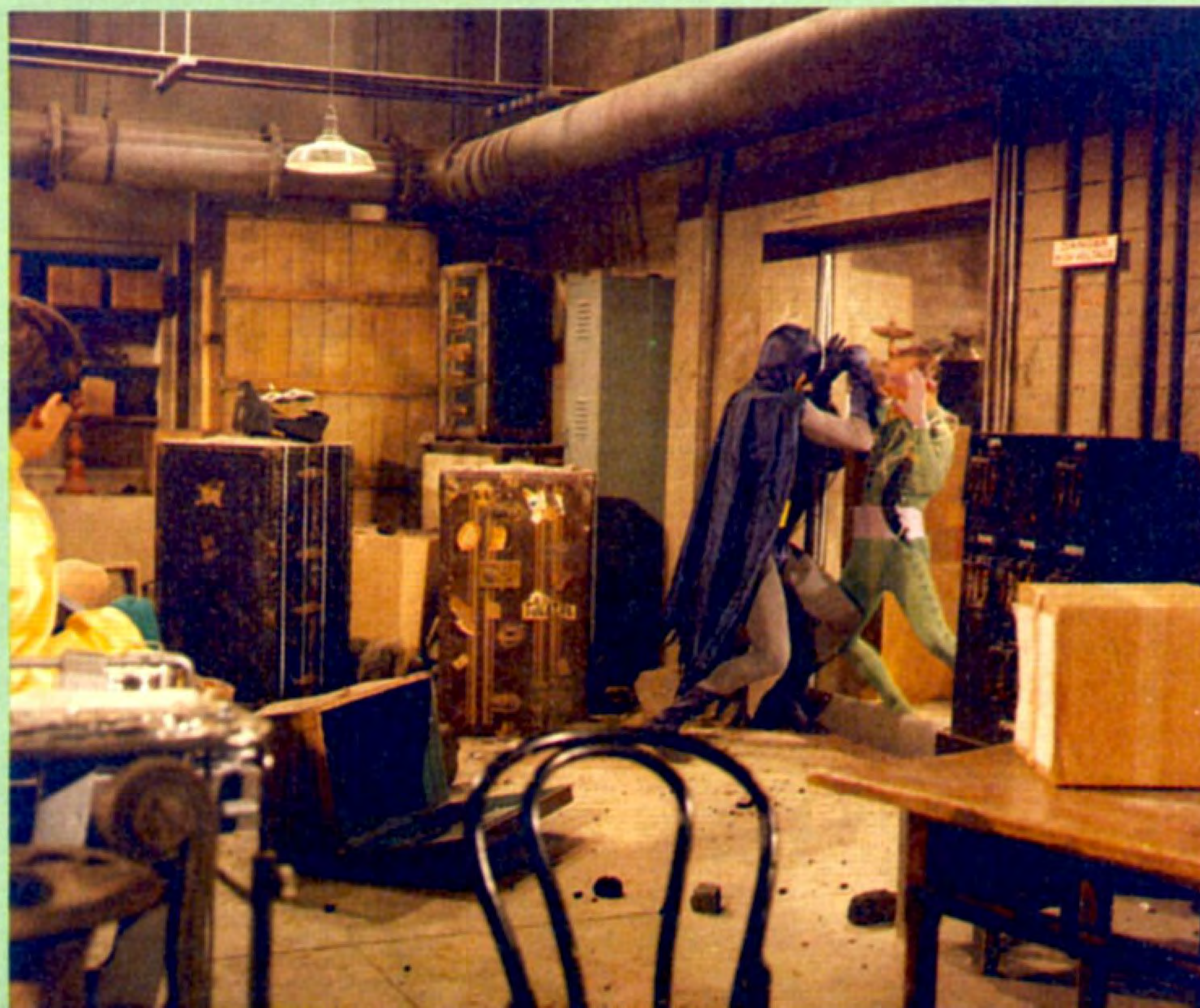
After the pilot aired, it was reputedly difficult to get Gorshin back to play the Riddler as a recurring character. "Frank Gorshin always felt that he was a serious movie actor," remembered unit production manager Sam Strangis. "He kind of looked down a little bit on television, looked down on the character and the show. Because he always thought he was one step above that. He thought he was the next James Cagney. It was hard to get Frank to understand what we were doing on the show, because after the pilot he didn't want to do any more. It was only through Bill Dozier that we got Frank to continue doing some of them."

Eventually, the character of

the Riddler grew to have its own life for Gorshin, and when the show was cancelled, Gorshin wasn't happy. "I didn't even get to do half of the things I thought the Riddler was going to do. When I got the scripts I couldn't wait to do it. I thought, 'Yeah. They gotta do this and they gotta do that.' I saw it going everywhere. I would [have liked] to see him do the things I thought he would do, being the genius that he thought he was. I would have loved to have seen him doing Shakespeare, being an actor even for his own little community; getting involved with some scientific project; or doing some of the things that a genius would do. He would want to entertain all of that, to show the world what he could do, and how well he could do it."

As the years have gone by,

As Batman comes to the aid of a captive Robin in the series' pilot "Hi Diddle Riddle," Gorshin as the Riddler flees as a plexiglass door seals off his escape.



the notoriety brought on by the show has worn hard on the actor. "I enjoy the recognition but at the same time it's frustrating because you'd like to be recognized for something else, too," said Gorshin. "Whatever that might be. I would have liked to [have] created something else somewhere along the way. It's frustrating to know that that's [been] over twenty years ago... It's to be enjoyed and yet it's not enjoyed by me. I enjoy the recognition, but I don't enjoy the fact that there isn't recognition for something else since then.

"It was a job. I had to do a job. It wasn't any different than doing anything else. [Not] any different than the first time I worked with Bob Wagner and Broderick Crawford in a picture called *BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL*, and I had met these people for the first time. It was just great to work, and I can't separate that experience from the other experience. It was always great to be involved with something." □

Quotes by Frank Gorshin in this article, by producer William Dozier in the main story and by Cesar Romero in the Joker article on page 42 were provided courtesy of Kevin Burns at 20th Century Fox Television, part of an interview for *BATMAN*'s twentieth anniversary. Copyright © 1989 20th Century Fox Film Corp. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.