


A Dark Night in Gotham City

By ADAM PIRANI



Batman (Michael Keaton) rescues Vicki Vale (Kim Basinger).

Among the shadows in the deadly streets, a grim detective faces the clown prince of crime.

This *Batman* is *much* closer to the comics than the TV show," explains actor Robert Wuhl, a veteran of *Bull Durham* and *Good Morning Vietnam*, currently playing one of Gotham City's more inquisitive residents. "The TV show had *nothing* to do with the comics. The TV show was like a sitcom. It was jokey, like *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family*. OK, that's fine, it's entertaining, and they had some great actors playing the villains, but it's *not* the Batman comic book, and it's *not* the Batman story.

"First and foremost, there's no real *danger* involved in the TV series. Nobody really dies. You don't see any blood. Nobody gets maimed, nobody gets *hurt*."

But there's a fundamental difference. This time it's for *real*. Wuhl explains, "The Joker is very, very dangerous. Gotham City—which is a *huge* character in this piece, it's very important—is this dark, depressing, futuristic, almost *Blade Runner*-ish world, where criminals run wild. It's almost like Bruce Wayne said, 'I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore.'

"He *does* something about it. Quietly, alone, he goes out and gets the bad guys. It's like he says when he grabs the first guy, 'I *own* the night.' He's a dangerous man. Batman would break your arm! The Joker will

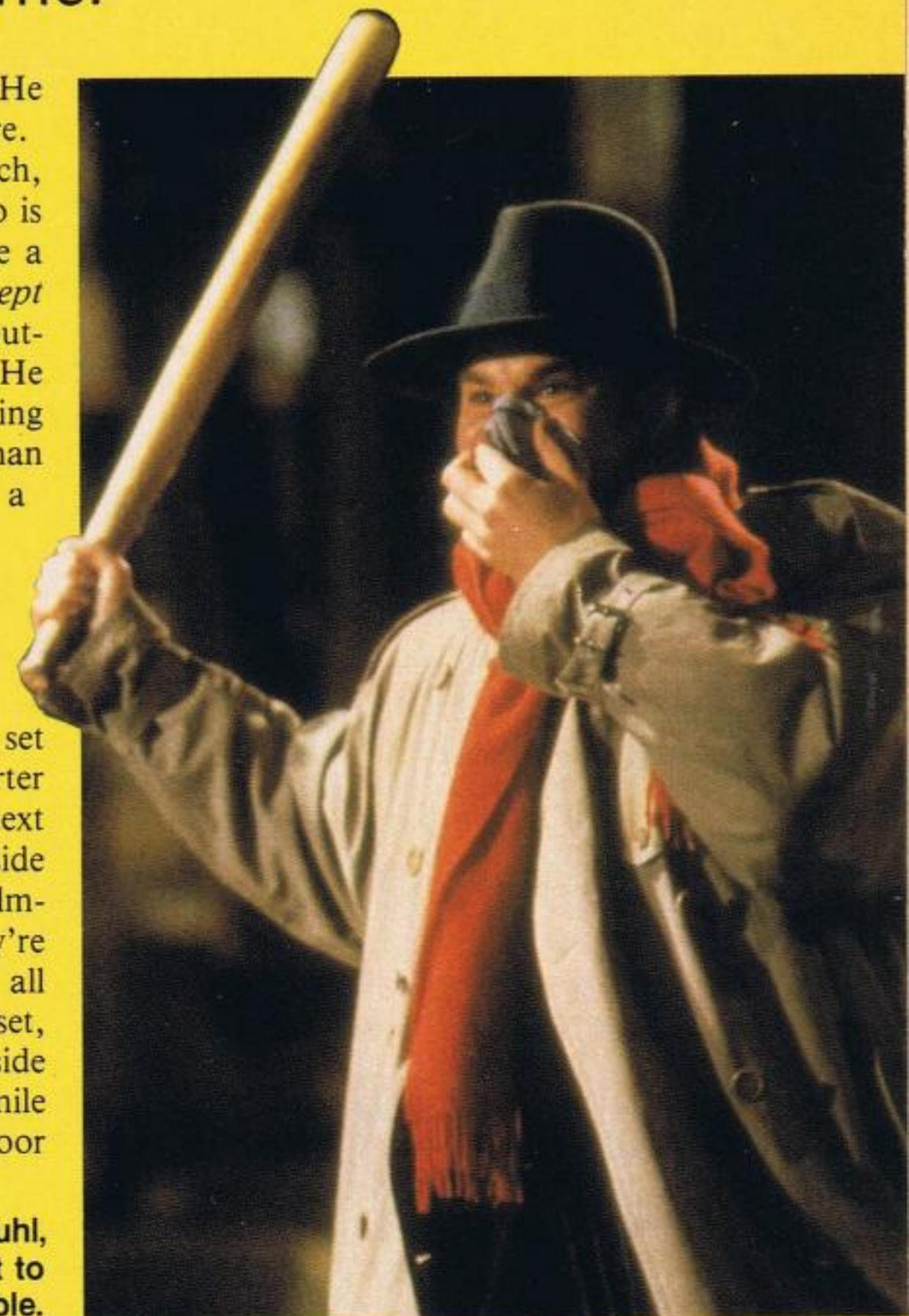
kill you; he'll kill hundreds of people! He doesn't care! There's definite *danger* here.

"Batman is Bruce Wayne, a very rich, very eccentric, very hi-tech scientist, who is not unlike most scientists in that they're a little preoccupied. He's not all there, *except* when it comes to going out at night and putting on the cape and fighting crime. He becomes totally focused. There's nothing campy, there's nothing jokey about Batman in this movie. He's *not* funny. He has a sense of humor about him, but he takes his work very, *very* seriously. It's like 'Dirty Harry meets RoboCop.' "

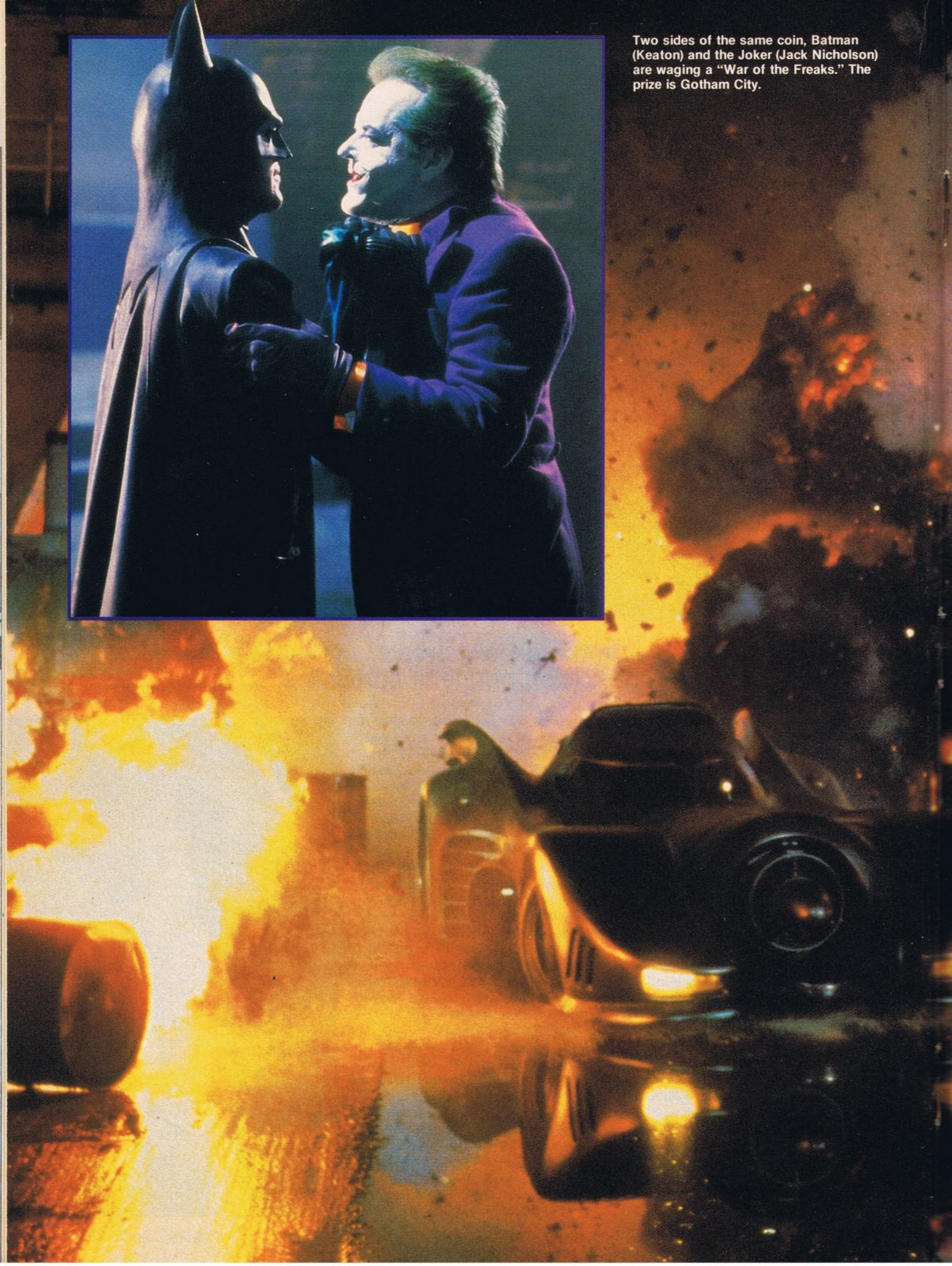
Dark Crusades

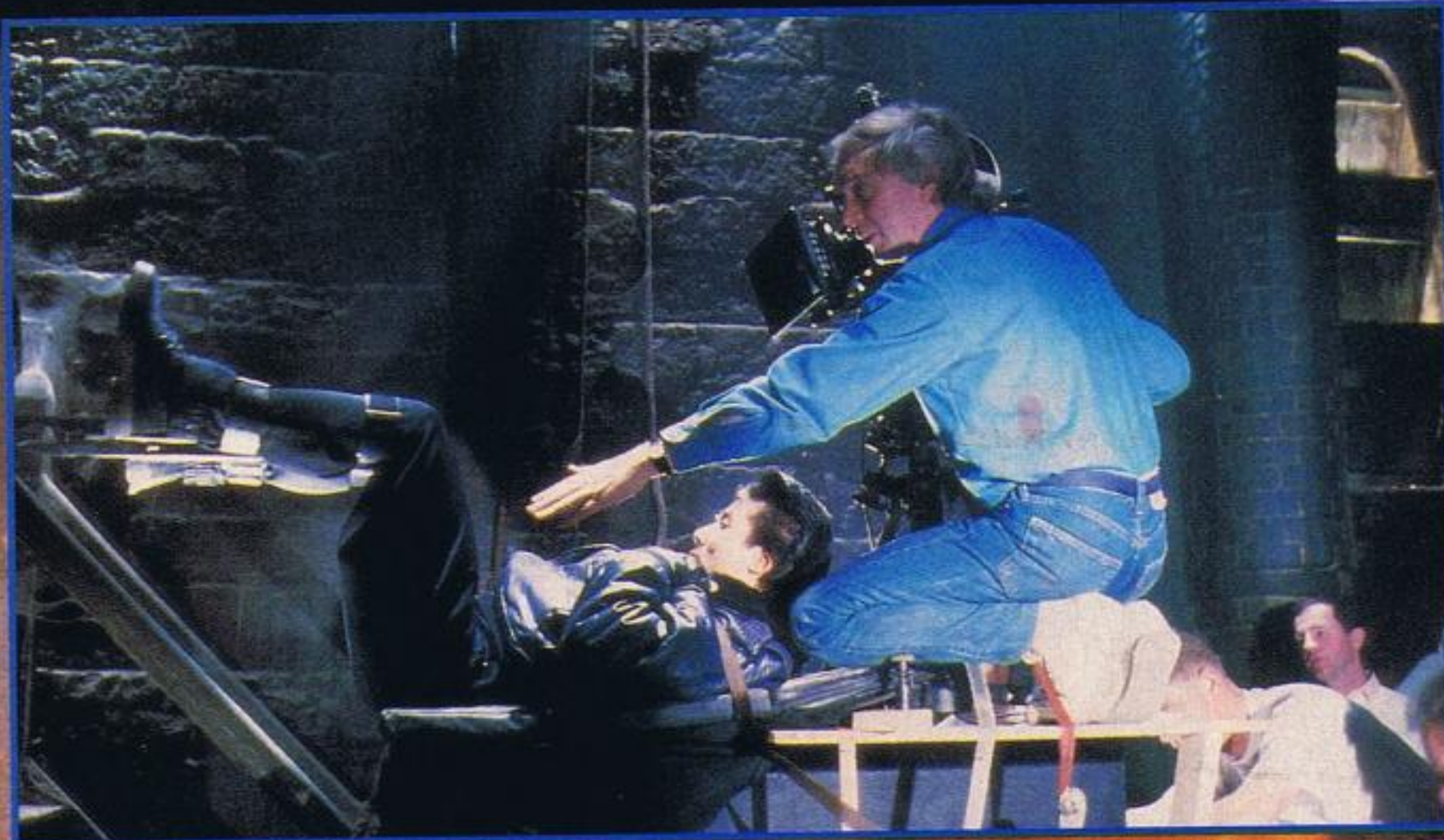
There's no Darknight Detective on the set today, but Wuhl, who plays the reporter Alex Knox, is there, preparing for his next scene. At Pinewood Studios, just outside London, England, it's the 47th day of filming on Warner Bros.' *Batman*. They're shooting nights—as they have been all week—on the Gotham City main street set, constructed on the studio backlot alongside the massive 007 Stage. At a quarter of a mile long, it's reputed to be the biggest outdoor

"I'm the *bat*-man," jokes Robert Wuhl, who, as reporter Alexander Knox, is out to make Bruce Wayne's life miserable.



Two sides of the same coin, Batman (Keaton) and the Joker (Jack Nicholson) are waging a "War of the Freaks." The prize is Gotham City.





"It's not vicious. It's scary, but fun," reveals second unit director Peter MacDonald, who oversaw the majority of the Batmobile action sequences.

street set built since *Cleopatra*, more than 25 years before.

It's winter in England, and it's *cold*. The crew have been working six days a week, 12 hours a day to meet a tight schedule. During night shooting, that typically means getting home at 6:30 a.m., in bed by 7:30, up at 2:30 in the afternoon to leave home at 4:00 p.m. just to arrive back in the studio in time for the next round of filming.

But tonight, there are 100 extras on the set who are new to this routine. In the movie, it's the 200th anniversary of Gotham City, and the extras, spread out along one side of the street, are here to play "Mixed Crowd" in this grand parade scene.

Although Batman (Michael Keaton) and the Joker (Jack Nicholson) aren't filming tonight, the Joker's henchmen are. Uniformed in black trousers, purple jackets and black berets, it's obvious that these Goons (as the script refers to them) have no intention of helping the grand parade pass off smoothly.

A voice comes booming over the loudspeakers into the cold night. "If we could have a nice bit of panic from the ladies—a nice bit of screaming, please, girls." It's first assistant director Derek Cracknell, giving direction to the massed extras for the next shot.

"Action! Slate 379, Take 5 B/C!" There are clouds of green smoke. Extras run down Gotham's main street (screaming nicely). Four of the Joker's Goons, wearing gas masks, jump off a float and run toward ropes hanging from the sky.

Enter Robert Wuhl. He comes running on, swinging a baseball bat at the Goons. There's gunfire, confusion, two of the Goons are lifted 15 feet into the air, hanging on to the ropes as they rise quickly into the sky, then—"Cut!"

It's all over in seconds. The two stuntmen playing Goons are lowered gently to the ground, securely holding their ropes which were lifted by a crane mounted on a truck.

Director Tim (*Beetlejuice*) Burton retreats from his position on the set to the video playback machine to watch the take replayed in black and white.

Meanwhile, Wuhl contemplates his moment of spontaneous action. "I get to be the hero! I hit them with the bat! I'm the *batman!*" he jokes.

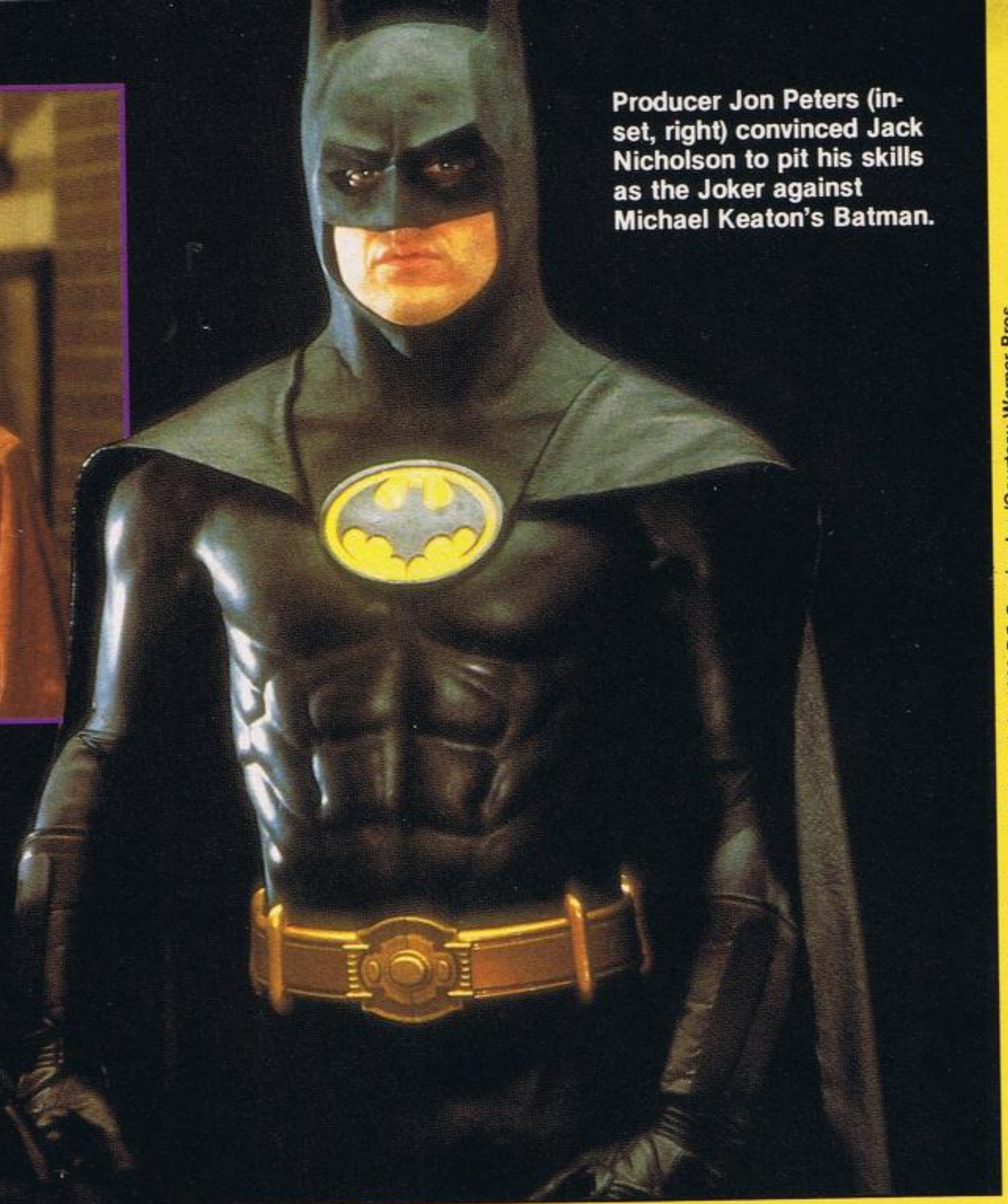
But who is Alexander Knox? "Knox is a tenacious young reporter out to prove that a vigilante crime-fighter dressed up in a bat costume *exists*," Wuhl explains, "despite the police's denials. The people on his own newspaper laugh at him while he's printing these stories, but eventually he's proven right.

"At the same time, he also has a crush on Vicki Vale—Kim Basinger—who has fallen *inexplicably* for Bruce Wayne, who Knox thinks is a total rich jerk and who *is*.

"Vicki is a photojournalist who teams up with Knox to get a picture. She's the only one who believes him. She thinks this Batman story is a great one and she would love to get a picture of him, so they team up to try and win the Pulitzer Prize."



Producer Jon Peters (inset, right) convinced Jack Nicholson to pit his skills as the Joker against Michael Keaton's Batman.



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Batman Photos: Murray Close/Trademark & Copyright 1989 DC Comics Inc./Courtesy Warner Bros.

A major driving force behind the *Batman* movie is producer Jon Peters. As well as producing such 1970s hits as *A Star Is Born* and *Caddyshack*, since 1981, when he teamed with former Columbia studio head Peter Guber to form the Guber-Peters Company, Peters has been producer or executive producer of such films as *Rain Man*, *Gorillas in the Mist*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Innerspace*, *The Color Purple*, *Flashdance* and *An American Werewolf in London*.

For California-born Peters, a tanned, striking and dynamic presence on a movie set, the filming of *Batman* represents the culmination of many years' work. "We acquired the rights from DC Comics nine years ago, and then we started developing the picture," he says. "We brought in writers, directors and screenplays, and it took nine years to get it to this point."

What Peters spent nearly a decade looking for was "the screenplay that we liked and the director that we liked and the cast that we liked. In other words, it took many, many, *many* shots at different drafts of a screenplay with different writers, and working with various directors, and finally Tim Burton over the last three years to make it happen."

For the 30-year-old Burton, director of *Beetlejuice* (STARLOG #130), *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and the unreleased live-action short *Frankenweenie*, *Batman* is by

ADAM PIRANI, STARLOG's British Correspondent, profiled Robert Zemeckis in issue #140.

far the biggest project he has yet undertaken. "When we saw those three films," Peters notes, "I felt that Tim was a very inventive director. Mark Canton [Warners production chief] had worked with him before and introduced us. We really felt that he was very inventive and very creative and had a different approach to things."

What Peters liked about the screenplay, by Sam Hamm (COMICS SCENE #3 and STARLOG YEARBOOK #4) and Warren Skaaren (who co-wrote *Beetlejuice*), was that "ultimately, it worked out the story. It had a dark side and an aggressive, avant garde quality that the others didn't."

"We cover how he began, and then we pick the story up when he's a grown-up, where he is in fact a man in search of his own identity, trying to deal with all of the crime and saving Gotham City. He's powered by his own pain, the loss of his parents, and dealing with that as an adult."

"The Joker is the king of Gotham, dedicated to crime and to the complete control of the city by intimidation and menace. And Batman is the *only* thing that stands in his way."

The casting of Michael Keaton, veteran of such comedies as *Mr. Mom*, *Johnny Dangerously* and *Night Shift*, surprised many people. "We wanted to have somebody play Batman that wasn't the conventional choice, you know, the perfect Superman-type person," Peters says. "Originally, when we got involved with the project many years ago, we were thinking about Bill Murray, somebody who could be

funny, offbeat and aggressive.

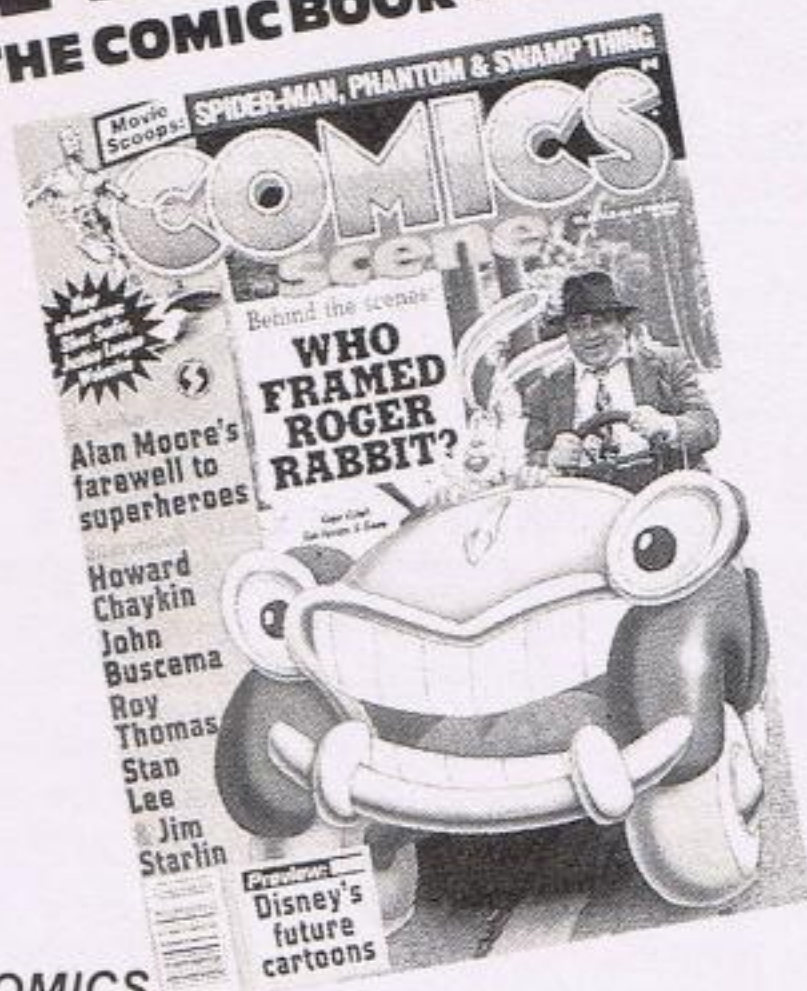
"And when Mark Canton, Peter Guber and I saw *Beetlejuice*, we went, 'Wow!' Michael is so explosive in that character and almost *dangerous*. We already knew that he had the sweet side, the lovable side and the funny side, but I really didn't know he had that dangerous side. And that's when we decided to go for it. It was a big risk, but that's what makes a movie like this fun and exciting, taking those risks."

The casting of Jack Nicholson as the Joker provoked a more positive response, but how was Nicholson, one of Hollywood's most in-demand actors, persuaded to take the part? "We made *Witches of Eastwick* together," Peters says, "and while we were working on that film, one night, about 4:00 in the morning, he and I were together, and I started telling him about *Batman*. At first, he laughed at me. Convincing people to do things, or drawing pictures in one's mind, it takes a while."

Six months later, Nicholson was seriously considering donning the clown face. "I flew Jack to London," Peters explains, "he met Tim and saw *Beetlejuice*, which he loved. Also, when we told him that we wanted to put in Michael Keaton, he liked that idea because it was non-conventional. Jack said, 'Ooh, that's interesting.' And once Jack got in the picture, we kept writing new scenes and expanding the part."

The producer thinks that alongside Nicholson's classic performances in such films as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*,
(continued on page 72)

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Batman

(continued from page 40)

Chinatown and *Prizzi's Honor*, the Joker will stand up well. "I believe that this is one of the most outrageous, wild, inventive characters he has ever played," Peters says.

But why did Peters agree to spend nine years working on *Batman*? "I grew up on *Batman*, I was a *Batman* fanatic," Peters confesses. "One of the reasons that we took on such a thing: When I was a kid, I always used to go to parties in a *Batman* outfit, and jump off second stories onto people. *Batman* has always been the kind of superhero that I loved."

Grim Times

Other actors in the movie include Pat (*Hang 'Em High*) Hingle as Police Commissioner James Gordon, Billy Dee Williams as newly elected D.A. Harvey Dent, Michael (*Konga*) Gough as Bruce Wayne's butler Alfred and Jack Palance as Gotham crime lord Carl Grissom. Model Jerry Hall cameos.

The primarily British crew on the movie includes co-producer Chris (*Empire of the Sun*) Kenny, production designer Anton (*High Spirits*) Furst, director of photography Roger (*Brazil*) Pratt, editor Ray (*ALIENS*) Lovejoy, costume designer Bob (*Dune*) Ringwood, visual FX supervisor Derek (*Superman*) Meddings, prosthetic makeup artist Nick (*Willow*) Dudman and special FX supervisor John (*Superman IV*) Evans.

The production team member who has been working on the project the longest is Bob Kane (COMICS SCENE #6-7). Kane, who created *Batman* 50 years ago, is a consultant to the movie. "He has been helpful, in going back to ideas, material and graphics from the beginning," Peters says. "He's the father of *Batman*, so it's like dealing with his child. We're trying to keep some of the integrity and yet be creative in making our own vision."

On the studio backlot, they're filming close-ups of Robert Wuhl as he reacts to gunfire. However, on Pinewood's E Stage, *Batman*'s second unit is lensing. It's a deserted Gotham City street scene: *Batman* fighting a Goon swordsman.

The atmosphere on the set is relaxed. The lighting for the next shot is being prepared, while the stuntman who doubles *Batman* gets into the Batsuit. The section of road, complete with occasional puddles of dirty water, is home to several shabby shops. A sign on one reads, "Gotham Paper Tube Products Corp."

Second unit director and cinematographer Peter MacDonald is conversing with two crew members. The stuntman playing the Goon who will fight *Batman* practices a rapid twirling routine with two highly polished swords. Three or four other stuntmen crowd around, watching the routine, commenting and wisecracking.

The stunt-*Batman*, wearing the main body of the costume, appears on the set,

and he and the Goon (dressed in distinctive purple jacket and black sunglasses) run through some of the fight moves. Then, the assistant director says, "Cape up," the stunt-*Batman* puts on his hood and cape, and the breastplate with the bat insignia is screwed on.

Director MacDonald indicates where the camera should be placed, and they begin rehearsing the shot in more detail.

"The most important thing about any second unit," MacDonald says, "is that you can't tell the difference between the second unit and the first unit. It must have the stamp of the first unit, both in photography and style of direction. That's why, when I do second unit, I always photograph *and* direct, so you try to copy what the first unit does as much as possible. You *mustn't* be on an ego trip and do your own style. Your material *has* to cut into theirs; it must fit in exactly so no one can tell the difference."

MacDonald, an Englishman who worked for 20 years as camera operator for the renowned cinematographer, the late Geoffrey (*Superman*) Unsworth, has been second unit director on such films as *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Cry Freedom* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. He recently made his debut as a director of an *entire* feature, *Rambo III*.

"What we've been doing on *Batman*," MacDonald says, "is *most* of the action sequences, including the majority of the stuff with the Batmobile; a *huge* car crash which we did on the backlot set, which included about 15 cars, all eventually smashing into each other; and the fight scenes.

"What we've always tried to do with this is to get a little fun in amongst the action, so it's *unlike* Sylvester Stallone or Chuck Norris, it's not vicious. It's *scary*, but fun.

"Tim Burton is very happy with this situation because he's more used to handling actors rather than big action sequences, and obviously I've been used over the years to work on action films a lot."

MacDonald returns to helping *Batman* finish off one of the Joker's Goons. "There is much more depth to *Batman* as a character than I thought he would have," the second unit director notes. "Tim, being the way Tim is, has made him a stranger character than maybe people would realize it's going to be at first. It's very difficult walking around in a rubber suit, so Tim has made him quite a strange person. There's a certain worry about *Batman*'s sanity sometimes."

Robert Wuhl puts it another way. "*Batman* is closer to *early* James Bond. When you watch *Doctor No*, and you watch *From Russia With Love*, Sean Connery's James Bond, early on, was a *killer*. And *Batman* has a little bit of that to him. I mean, in a world infested with all criminals, like Dirty Harry, you *go after* the criminals! You fight fire with fire! That's what he does. In the TV series, it was like, 'I'll pull out my photoelectron-neutron. This'll only put him to sleep.' *No!* This *Batman*'s in trouble? This bad guy is going to be *eliminated*. 'I've got to *terminate* him.' "