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David Heuring

A Dark Knight Revisits Chicago: Latest Batman Feature Makes 2007 a Year to Remember

During the height of summer 2007, Chicagoans coming into the city on the Kennedy Expressway may have noticed an unusual sign: “Lower Wacker Drive Closed.” Those who assumed the closure was due to run-of-the-mill construction reasons were wrong.

The inconvenience was attributed to the return of a certain moody superhero. Director Christopher Nolan, cinematographer Wally Pfister, ASC and their large cast and crew spent three weeks filming nighttime chase sequences for “The Dark Knight,” their follow up to “Batman Begins.”

Nolan and Pfister previously collaborated on “Memento” (2000) and “Insomnia” (2002). In 2005, they shot most of a 10-minute, heart-stopping chase scene in “Batman Begins” on Lower Wacker. That movie re-tooled the Batman legend and earned Pfister cinematography nominations from both the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC).

The filmmakers followed that picture with “The Prestige,” which earned Pfister a second Oscar nomination. “The Dark Knight” is slated for release in July 2008. Christian Bale returns as Batman and Heath Ledger is introduced as The Joker.

“The Dark Knight” was originally slated to be shot entirely in England. “Chicago was the right choice for a number of reasons ranging from the creative to the logistical,” says Pfister when recalling the thought process that led the team back to the Windy City.

“Chicago was wonderfully successful for us in ‘Batman Begins.’ Chris [Nolan] and Nathan Crowley, our production designer, originally scouted New York City, London, Hong Kong – they searched everywhere to find the perfect template for our Gotham City. Chicago fit it best. It has many of the right kind of nondescript buildings, and it has a look and feel that fits Chris’ gritty original version. Lower Wacker turned out to be a great place to shoot a nighttime car chase. You effectively are protected against rain, and you have a place that is naturally a little darker, which is a great advantage when you’re shooting on short summer nights.”

Perhaps most importantly, the city was willing to close down all of Lower Wacker Drive and LaSalle Street in the heart of the city for weeks at a time. “That was extraordinary,” comments Pfister.

“Also, the Chicago crews are fantastic,” he adds. “Key grip Michael Lewis rigged the IMAX cameras to every possible type of vehicle, and he was always two steps ahead of me. Practically the entire grip crew was made up of locals who worked with us on ‘Batman Begins.’ The production-friendly attitude, in addition to the experienced crews, means that the system simply works extremely well here.”

“The Dark Knight” spent a total of 66 days in Chicago, with another 53 in London and five in Hong Kong. Other Chicago locations used included the imposing Ludwig Mies van der Rohe- designed IBM building at 330 N. Wabash and the old Post Office at 404 W. Harrison.

The hulking post office edifice was built in 1921, underwent a major expansion in 1932, and was vacated in 1997. The cavernous interior spaces were used for certain large scenes, and the production built several smaller sets within, using it as a soundstage.

Like “Batman Begins,” the look of “The Dark Knight” will be dark and moody. But the visuals will reflect some important differences in Pfister’s approach, including several sequences originated with 65mm, 15-perf IMAX cameras.

“While shooting ‘Batman Begins,’ I was meticulous about the photography,” says Pfister. “I wanted to make the look dark and interesting, while still commercial enough to be acceptable to the studio. It was the biggest picture I had done up to that point, so it was important to have some caution in the mix. After that, Chris and I did ‘The Prestige’ using a much more relaxed, shoot-from-the-hip style. Both of us felt more secure taking a free-form approach. For ‘Dark Knight,’ Chris wanted to maintain the faster, more flexible approach we had used on ‘The Prestige.’”

At the same time, Pfister and Nolan wanted to elevate and intensify the imagery. That led to an unprecedented decision to shoot several action sequences in IMAX format, which uses different cameras and a larger negative to capture images 10 times larger in area than standard 35mm.

Scenes filmed in IMAX will open and close the movie. When these sequences roll out at theaters, the images will expand to fill the entire screen. The goal is to make the action seem to jump off the screen.

“No existing technology compares with IMAX in terms of its ability to throw the audience into the action,” says Nolan.

“I remember a conversation with Chris from a long time ago about shooting IMAX,” says Pfister. “Also, an IMAX version of ‘Batman Begins’ had been created from the 35mm negative using the DMR process, and it looked fantastic. We felt that originating in the IMAX format would take everything a step further. Doing the entire picture that way wasn’t feasible, but we’re photographing several action sequences using the 65mm, 15-perf IMAX cameras. Chris and I talked about which segments would best take advantage

of the big format, and I spent most of pre-production learning the process and making sure we had everything covered. The dailies look incredible.”

Because shooting in IMAX complicates all aspects of the cinematography, Pfister and his crew are often inventing solutions as they go. Sometimes remote heads and other camera mounts must be beefed up to handle extra weight, for example.

The IMAX cameras are loaded with Kodak Vision2 500T 5218 film, a 65mm version of the 35mm emulsion used on the majority of that movie.

“It’s ironic, because many filmmakers are trying out digital cameras that actually capture less resolution and information,” says Pfister. “We’re going in the opposite direction, and upping the ante by capturing images with unparalleled resolution and clarity. I’m really looking forward to seeing the final product.”