The Den of Geek interview: Adam West

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Despite a long and uninterrupted career as a screen actor, and despite being one of the most sought-after voices in animation for movies and TV, Washington-born Adam West carved his most enduring notch in popular culture over 40 years ago as TV's Batman, which ran for 3 seasons and 120 episodes between 1966-68, garnering plaudits, imitators, celebrity guests queuing to appear and a 1966 movie, which is scheduled for re- release in a Blu-ray edition on July 1st.

Den Of Geek was very lucky indeed to get a little time to chat exclusively with Adam, and we were delighted to find that he entirely lives up to his trademark suavity, good nature and wit. Some prefacing chit-chat about the weather led us on to talk of the show itself…

I remember that every time the Batman show had a scene in London there was always a stock shot of London Bridge in a terrible pea- souper fog.

Wasn't that fun? [singing] A foggy day…Yeah, we decided to have the theatre of the absurd exaggerate from time to time.

When you were making the Batman movie, were you aware of slightly improved production values, with extra time for takes, and so forth…?

I think the latter. Except, not really that much extra time; when you're doing a movie in thirty or thirty-five days, it's like 'old Hollywood', I guess. Like with the westerns – you've got to run from rock to rock and get on your horse and get going. It was a little difficult because it was in the heat of the summer and we'd just finished all those episodes. It was like eating the same meal over and over. But I think the trick is to keep it fresh. That's part of the actor's responsibility, isn't it?

So how did you manage to do that – to keep invested in the role and find new dynamism for it very week?

By thinking funny [laughs]. I have the curse of thinking funny! And so with each script and new situation, I saw something funny in it. But I could never let the audience think that I thought it was funny. But I think if you hold that back, there's kind of a twinkle or a sense that the audience gets of something trying to…burst out of that mask, and tell us something more.

As a kid I loved the show for the straight heroics and the obvious humour, and now I enjoy it for that second layer of irony…

Sure.

…was that a hard balancing act to pull off?

It was just diabolically hard [laughs]. It wasn't easy, but we had some wonderful writers and great guest stars. Most of them got it. When I came in everyday I tried to make everyone have fun and laugh, and realise the absurdity of it!

And yet it always seemed very important for you to preserve the dignity of the character, that he never should become a figure of fun.

Thank you for recognising that. It's taken you years, Martin! [laughs] Yeah, it was a conscious effort that I always felt. I was at war with the producers at the beginning because of that. They wanted it to be stiff and at one level. I wouldn't do it. So the letters and memos flew back and forth, but after a week or so, a wonderful thing happened – they trusted me. They said 'Let him go, let him do what he's doing'.

So you really had quite an influence on the actual tone of the show?

Oh yes. I think that if I hadn't I don't know which direction it would have gone. And I'm not being immodest, but I think there was a cadre of us who all knew or sensed the way it should go, and I think that first script really set the tone.

If you could go back and change something about Batman – maybe not even necessarily a big thing – what would it be?

I think I'd have some new tights – those were itchy [laughs]. I don't know on a more intellectual or creative level what I'd do, except give Bruce Wayne a few more pages so I'd get out of the damn cowl [laughs]. But that's been the complaint of everyone who's played Batman – the costume.

However that costume has changed over the years, it's always been a sexy costume which women seem to love. What's the appeal?

It's my legs [laughs]. I don't know – I think it's just because there's some goofball running around in it that maybe they think they can have their way with. And they're right!

Most men have fallen for the wrong type of woman at least once – did you have some sympathy for your character for his love of Catwoman?

Oh yes. He was just a poor soul. He was so torn, Martin…it was heartbreaking! [laughs] He had these curious stirrings in his utility belt, and yet he knew she had to be put away in the slammer.

Catwoman aside, were you ever tempted to explore the crazier side of the character, as the films have occasionally done?

Oh yes. But not with our Batman. It would have violated the tenor – or as you put it – the tone of the show. I think our Batman had to be fun, light- hearted, funny, tongue-in-cheek…and I think that made kind of an homage to those earlier comic books, where Batman always had a quip or something. Now if I were doing it today, I'd make changes, but I wouldn't make it as violent, as loud, as noisy, with the explosives going on and on…the crashes…as what they're doing now to try and titillate a younger, teenage audience. I wouldn't do that. I'd just make the relationships more important.

Well, at least four actors have portrayed the role in your wake – did any of them get near to the spirit that you approached it in?

I don't know – I'm really not a critic and I can't tell. I think…Val Kilmer? Moment to moment. But I haven't really seen all the movies in their entirety.

Your fans, including me, have been waiting nearly twenty years for you to make a guest appearance in the new Batman movies…

Well I'd love to. I like Christian Bale. I've heard he's a big fan of mine, but I certainly reciprocate. I think he's really very good. I'd love to play his father. The older Batman comes out of the woodwork, when times get really tough…maybe a few tips here and there…

You drove the coolest car on the planet – how did it handle?

Well, it was wonderful on film [laughs]. I'll give you a little quiet information – you'll be privy to the fact that it didn't drive well. It was out of balance and it was rather dangerous, and I think that Burt Ward was very courageous to sit there with white knuckles, gritting his teeth [laughs] every time I got behind the wheel. And the crew was too, you know, because we never knew when the brakes would fail or what would happen. I tried to keep it under thirty-five miles an hour [laughs].

But it looked great on film, and it's so funky – and it goes on and on. On the Blu-ray, if you punch it in, they take you on a tour of the Batmobile.

I look forward to that.

You might even get to drive it to the local pub.

At what point do you think you became a cult figure in your own right, to the extent that you frequently play some version of yourself, such as in Family Guy?

I think that happened when I realised, after all the work I'd done…some stupid films, some real chestnuts, some good stuff, the regional theatre, the Mark Taper forum in LA…on and on, that no matter what I did, or the reviews I got, that people loved my Batman. So I might as well make an agreement with it and enjoy it as they do. So that's what I decided to go ahead and do. And it's worked beautifully, in that I don't mind having fun with myself and my character.

It's a tightrope, though – you've got to be very careful to retain a certain kind of dignity, and yet think funny. To be an icon…I guess that's a privilege.

You've done so much voice-work in animation in movies and TV, I would imagine that your popularity with kids goes well beyond Batman…?

Well, now it's Family Guy with – maybe - the 15-35 year-olds, and under that age it's The Fairly Odd Parents and the Disney films I've done in voice-over…so, you know, I keep trying to re-invent myself [laughs]. And a little parody here and there doesn't hurt.

Do you ever regret turning Cubby Broccoli down for James Bond in Diamonds Are Forever?

Not really. No, wait a minute. Yes [laughs]; one night, when I heard somebody saying that they liked Bond better than Batman. Then I thought 'Well, why can't I do both?' [laughs]. But I thought that was a little greedy.

Batman was chock full of celebrity guests. Were there any that maybe even you were in awe of?

Oh yes. Yeah. We were so fortunate to get all those good people. I loved Burgess Meredith, what he did with Penguin. He was never crude or vulgar, and so funny, comedic and elegant, that to me, he really filled that costume - beautifully.

Have to agree with that!

And Frank Gorshin was always on the edge of anxiety and madness as Riddler. And I like that. I love to do scenes with people who are on the edge and who really explore every little nuance.

Is there anything you'd like to see film-makers change about the current Batman franchise?

Oh gosh, no. I think I'd be really presumptuous, in that they're simply doing their thing, and doing what they think brings the biggest return. When I see bits and pieces of the movies, to me they're too violent, too noisy and they rely too much on the score and sound effects, etcetera, but they're brilliantly done as far as the CGI is concerned…all those things that they can do in modern times.

But even in those movies, I would rather see warmer relationships. More meaningful relationships. And more subtle, tongue-in-cheek comedy of some kind. You can go around killing dozens of people, but you've got to be sort of funny doing it.

Adam West, thank you very much!

And thanks too to Lesley Chen for arranging this chat, and to Gaye Birch, Rob McLaughlin and Carl England for chipping in with questions to Adam.

Batman: The Movie is out on Blu-ray on July 1st