

MOVIES

Comic's 'Spawn' arrives intact on big screen

TICKETS PLEASE



JOHN MONAGHAN

When artist Todd McFarlane left a cushy job at comic giant Marvel a decade ago, he vowed to create a different kind of action figure. Spawn has been just such an animal, a Hell-spawned super hero whose inner turmoil and amazing powers make Batman's look wimpy in comparison.

It's a bit of a letdown, then, that Spawn's feature film debut should fall into the trap of that Hollywood action movie. While it flexes some eye-popping special effects, its high concept premise reverts to the simple revenge tale we've seen a million times before.

A government assassin (Michael Jai White) finds himself double-crossed by his boss (Martin Sheen), who wants to control a deadly virus and then the world. The assassin goes literally to Hell, where he makes a pact with the Devil that if he can set things straight up above, he will lead an army against Heaven.

Cloaked and disfigured, he re-enters the world through a rain-soaked alley. Here he's briefed and taunted by Clown, a fellow demon who toils behind the scenes to foil Spawn's plans to save the world.

On his other shoulder is Cogitator (Nicol Williamson), a former knight who would rather see Spawn use his power for good.

Jai White, who played Mike Tyson in an HBO movie, opens the movie with Shaft-style martial arts moves. Transformed as

Spawn, he still manages to elicit a sympathetic performance beneath the makeup and body-altering special effects.

And what a bagful of tricks these are. Industrial Light and Magic outdoes itself by filling almost every frame with computer-generated effects, from the opening montage and credit sequence to Spawn's climactic battle with Clown, who morphs into a huge, hulking monster.

The demon dog lord of Hades may look a little hokey, but his domain, full of writhing, tortured bodies and murky, yellow flames, generates real heat and one of the movie's most impressive sequences. Back on earth, the set-piece recalls the Gothic feel of "The Crow," with nonstop rain-fall and artfully-placed doves hopping around the buttresses of abandoned churches. Many scenes are staged at night, probably to more easily integrate the

special effects into the action.

Most impressive is Spawn's supernatural suit of armor, which can take on various shapes. A flowing red cape (it hovers like a mist around him) allows him to glide to safety while chopping chains and spikes protrude from his shoulders.

John Leguizamo ("The Pest") has his aces around lovely irritating characters. Though physically an odd choice to play the almost spherical Clown, he waddles through a barrage of non-stop banter, twice as gross as Michael Keaton's Beetlejuice but only half as funny.

The movie has a built-in audience among the loyal fans who have made "Spawn" the top-selling comic book in America. They should be happy that the movie successfully blends the worlds of live action and comics and brings their hero more or less intact to

the big screen.

John Monaghan welcomes your calls and comments. To leave

John a voice mail message, dial (313) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1806.

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Los Angeles Times, 8/1/97

Picture Perfect

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★★★★★ SPAWN IS UNFORGETTABLE!

"'SPAWN' RULES! IT'S THE ULTIMATE SUMMER THRILL RIDE!"

"'SPAWN' DELIVERS ACTION, INTENSITY AND ONE HECK OF A KICK!"

"'SPAWN' ROCKS!"

"'SPAWN' IS BY FAR THE BEST MOVIE OF THE SUMMER!"

SPAWN

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BACKSTAGE PASS



ANN DELIS

soon we may all be getting really cranky from the constant sweat, mustache and the sticky, clingy clothes. The solution? Well, at a lot of Metro area venues, you can enjoy the arts in air-conditioned comfort! And tonight on Backstage Pass, at 9:30 p.m. on Channel 56, we continue to help you sort through Detroit's myriad arts options, starting with some cool music.

The story of hometown rock trio Hoarse is a cool addition to Detroit's rock legacy: after a local radio station's program director saw a live performance by the band, he asked if he could leave with material. At the time, all the boys had pressed was the single "Diamond." The station started playing it, even though the band didn't have any product in stores. Despite the song being relatively buried in the play lists, more likely at first to show up in the wee hours than during drive time, the phone lines started lighting up with requests. It went into an increasingly heavy rotation and even started winning listener call-in polls.

Well, the major labels were all over that. It didn't take long for them to notice, and now the band is signed with RCA Records. We had them in the Detroit Public Television studio early in July, and it was obvious why that radio guy left their live show impressed — these guys rock! Tuesday marks the actual release of their first CD, *Happens Twice*, and on Monday night, Aug. 11, they're having their release party at Record Time on Gratiot in Roseville, complete with a performance and a midnight CD signing. Tonight, we'll show you the previously unheard "extra" song they did for us in July called "Tuesday Morning," which will be the second single off their CD (after

"Diamond").

We're also taking a look back at a story of hope from the Backstage Pass premiere about the ground-breaking production of the play, "I Am a Man." To the people who produce drama in the metro area, the theatrical gulf defined by Eight Mile Road has been an ongoing source of frustration. To tell me art isn't relevant — here's the artistic community addressing urban-suburban tension, a huge social problem. However, last February saw positive movement with a coproduction of "I Am a Man." The show pulled together resources from Wayne, Washtenaw and Oakland counties. Director Gary Anderson brought his actors from Detroit's Ploshares Theatre, of which he is also artistic director. The script was written by Ann Arbor playwright Oyama and the production was mounted at the Meadow Brook Theatre in Rochester. The resulting show

won raves from critics and audiences alike, and the powerful scene that actors "Mississippi" Charles Bevel and Lou Berry Jr. performed for us in studio shows why.

Happily, cross-county collaborations didn't end with "I Am a Man." That show's success — on every level — has paved the way for another Ploshares-Meadow Brook coproduction, the play "Thunder Knocking on the Door," coming in January. Both venues are currently in summer hiatus, but Meadow Brook's season opens in September with "Over the Tavern," an Irish family drama, and Ploshares' season begins in November with "Zora Neale Hurston," a theatrical biography.

At some point during our first season it dawned on us: we were doing more than just reporting on art, we were creating it, and not just by capturing great live performances in the Detroit Public Television studio. A care

in point is the segment *Backstage Pass* art correspondent Martha Miro brought us about influential artist Magdalena Abakanowicz, a truly beautiful piece. Granted, it helps to have such strong, moving content. Magdalena grew up in Poland during the atrocities of World War II. She often draws on disturbing images from her childhood to create sculpture that is deeply personal and haunting. The piece is a must-see.

We'll also air another song from Rolling Stone magazine's songwriter of the year, Freddy Johnston, who came in the studio and knocked our socks off with his artistic intensity. Tonight we'll show you a killer acoustic version of the title song from his breakthrough CD, *Bad Reputation*. That's tonight on Backstage Pass at 9:30 p.m. on Detroit Public Television, Channel 56. Now get out there.

"Steppin' Out"

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Win tickets to see a timeless performance by the legendary Tony Bennett



Send a postcard with your name, address, and phone number to "Steppin' Out" With Tony Bennett, Palace Sports and Entertainment, 2 Championship Drive, Auburn Hills, MI 48326. All entries must be submitted by Thursday, August 14. The winner will receive four pavilion tickets to Tony Bennett at Pine Knob Music Theatre on Friday, August 22 at 7:30 p.m. Employees of Palace Sports and Entertainment and the Observer & Eccentric are not eligible.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Scheduled to open Friday, Aug. 8

"CONSPIRACY THEORY"
A conspiracy-obsessed NY cable and a skeptical Justice Department attorney are thrown together in a search for the truth when one of the cable's craziest plot theories turns out to be real. Stars Mel Gibson, Julia Roberts.

"DEAR WITH THE FIRES"

At the Main Art Theatre. Story of a nervous young man who has given up on the world in an aborted suicide attempt. He meets a charismatic character who gives him a high spirited crash course in living life on the edge. Stars David Arquette and Brad Hunt.

"TWO WILLY'S"

A 10-year-old boy whose father is running an illegal whaling operation is faced with a dilemma when Willy and his pod are threatened. Stars Jason James Richter.

"LOVE BARENDA"

Back comedy about two sisters in rural Australia who find themselves in a stormy battle for the affection of the new man in town. Stars Miranda Otto, Rebecca Firth and George Shevtsov.