

Marvel at the changes

DC Comics 'Supes' up images of popular icons

By Chris McCubbin
Divisions Editor

Over the last three or four years officials at the DC and Marvel comic-book companies have subjected themselves to massive programs designed to kill off deadwood characters and generally bring their chaotic, imaginary universes into some sort of rational order acceptable to the comics fan of the '80s.

This is especially a challenge for DC, whose continuity extends back more than 50 years. DC's super-hero books started out as lurid, pulp-style adventures in the '40s, became cutesie kiddiebooks in the '50s, became "socially aware" books in the '60s and Marvel clones in the '80s — with emphasis on characterization and human drama along with the fight scenes. Naturally, not all of these elements fit together perfectly.

Now DC is wrapping up a three-part plan to make its continuity "rational" enough for Marvel fans while still keeping its own unique flavor.

Comics Now

Part one was the confusing but well-done maxiseries "Crises On Infinite Earths." Part two was last year's unreadable miniseries "Legends." Now they're trying to pull it all together by introducing completely revamped versions of some of their oldest and best-known characters.

This is no light matter, culturally speaking. Many of these characters have become major American icons. If you're messing around with Superman or Batman, you're messing with the childhoods of most of the population. DC's task is to make these comfortable old friends exciting and believable again without destroying their mystique.

This week I'm going to talk about what's going on with DC's big three: Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman. Next time my turn on "Comics Now" rolls around I'll talk about the changes in The Flash, Green Lantern, the original Captain Marvel and the Justice League.

Action Comics, John Byrne and Dick Giordano;

"Superman," John Byrne and Karl Kesel;

"The Adventures of Superman," Marv Wolfman and Jerry Ordway

For years John Byrne was the most popular and prolific artist/writer at Marvel. Last year DC lured him away for an undisclosed sum and carte blanche to do whatever he wants with the world's best-known comics character — Superman.

Byrne started out with last summer's six-issue "Man of Steel" miniseries, where he played around with Supes' beginnings. After that they gave him three monthly books. Action Comics, where Superman debuted in 1939, became a team-up book featuring Supes and some random DC characters. Adventure comics turned into "The Adventures of Superman," and because even Byrne can't do everything, this book is written by DC veteran Marv Wolfman and drawn by Jerry Ordway. Finally, DC canceled its Superman title and immediately started it up again, starting with a new issue No. 1.

Byrne has monkeyed around quite a bit with the character. His Superman is a lot less powerful than he used to be. His Clark Kent is much more assertive — and kind of a yuppie. Byrne also changed the look of Krypton and returned Clark Kent to being a news reporter. (You did know that Clark Kent had been a TV anchorman for about the last 15 years, didn't you?)

The reaction to the new Superman has been, at best, mixed. One local fan has been distri-

buted renderings of Byrne's Superman over the words, "Remember what happened to new Coke?"

I like it. Byrne's stories are simple and a little goofy — his books look like nothing so much as the '50s live-action TV show starring Steve Reeves — but he brings an energy and an engaging sense of humor to the character. The art in both Byrne books is crisp, clean, funny, exciting and great.

The Wolfman-Ordway book is OK, too. The writing and the art make Superman into an impressive, kind of scary guy. I like that. Wolfman also goes deeper into the characters than Byrne does. The big problem with this book is silly, cliched plots that pretend to be socially or politically relevant, like the terrorism story that just started, or the juvenile-delinquency plot that's going on now.

Batman 404 to 407, Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli

These four issues are "Batman Year One": a miniseries within a series. Frank Miller, who did last year's superb Batman epic "The Dark Knight," was called in supposedly to do what Byrne did on Superman.

Miller doesn't really revamp the Batman, simply because he doesn't have to. Way back in the '70s the Batman was switched from the silly campiness of the '60s to a neat film-noir feel. This concept still works and Miller doesn't monkey with it.

Miller does clean up some of the deadwood that's accumulated around the Batman's origin. He gives the Catwoman a nasty new origin as a dominatrix. Most importantly, Miller effectively brings new psychological depth and definition to this strange and complex character.

Even if it's not epochal, "Batman, Year One" is first-rate comics storytelling. The art, by Miller and David Mazzucchelli (who also shares plotting and scripting credit) is gorgeous, primitive and exciting. It reflects the look of the original Batman of the '40s. "Year One" is finished now, but look it up in the back-issue bins.

Over the next few months DC will continue to re-evolve the Batman in two other stories — "Batman, Year Two" and "Did Robin Die Tonight" — by different creative teams.

Wonder Woman 1 to 5, George Perez, Len Wein, Bruce D. Paterson

Of all the revampings going on this was probably the most necessary. Charles Moulton's original Wonder Woman was a strange and delightful book, but, continuity-wise, it was a mess. I mean, it was science-fictional, mythological, pulp and pop culture flying everywhere. Let's be straight. Wonder Woman has never made a lot of sense, even for a comic book. For Moulton this was an asset, but for most of the people who have done the character since, it's just been a source of confusion and boredom.

This version, mostly by Perez, DC's own resident superstar artist, works very, very well. Basically, Perez has decided to emphasize the mythological aspect of the character (a tactic Marvel's also used recently to good effect on Walt Simonson's Thor).

One bit of "realisticizing" that I liked was Perez's making Wonder Woman's main squeeze, Steve Trevor, an older man. In World War II it was pretty common for a senior officer to be very young, but no more. Perez's Trevor is in his late '40s, about right for a fractious, but competent Air Force colonel.

Perez is one of the most painstaking artists in the business, and the minutely detailed art on this book is a marvel to behold. Perez's Wonder Woman is the first rendition of the character I've ever seen to portray her as an attractive young woman who's neither a sex kitten or an Olympic shotputter. I have nothing bad to say about this book.

Theater classes for kids

The Lincoln Community Playhouse, 2500 S. 56th St., is offering winter classes starting this week. Classes are offered in theater, script writing, creative drama, stage makeup, juggling, puppets and adult acting. The classes are supported in part by the Nebraska Arts Council.

- Introduction to Theatre, a beginners course, is Saturdays at 9:30 to 10:45 a.m. for 7- to 9-year-olds and 11 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. for 10- to 12-year-olds. The class includes creative dramatics, pantomime, technical theater, role playing and a demonstration on the last day. First class meets Feb. 28.

- Advanced Theatre classes are Tuesdays from 4 to 5:15 p.m. for 8- to 12-year-olds. The class includes workshops at a TV station, basic acting techniques, vocal production and a performance/demonstration at the conclusion. Prerequisite for the advanced course is Intro to Theatre. First class meets Feb. 24.

- Script Writing classes are Thursdays at 4 to 5:15 p.m. for 9- to 12-year-olds. The class includes writing a script to be performed by the

class at the conclusion. First class meets on Feb. 26.

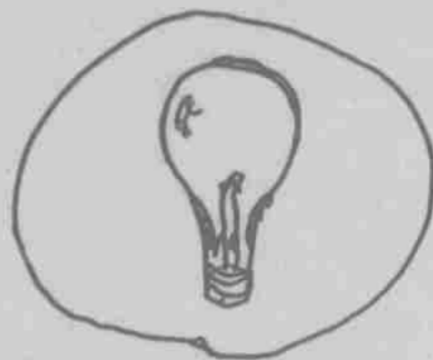
- Intro to Theatre, Advanced and Script Writing classes are 10-week courses instructed by Lenette Nelson Schwinn, children's theatre director at the Playhouse, with a fee of \$45.

- Creative Drama I classes are Thursdays 4 to 5 p.m. for 5- to 6-year-olds. The 8-week course includes theater games using masks, costumes and properties at a fee of \$40. Instructor is Lindsay Reading Korth. First class meets on Feb. 26.

- Stage Makeup classes are Saturdays at 9:30 to 10:45 a.m. The 6-week course is designed for the beginner and is a hands-on study of basic stage makeup application. Materials are included in the \$30 course fee. Instructor is Donna Himmelberger, artistic associate at the Playhouse. First class meets Feb. 28.

A \$5 discount is given to all 1986-87 TAFY season members. To register or for additional information on classes please contact the Playhouse, 489-9608. All class sizes are limited.

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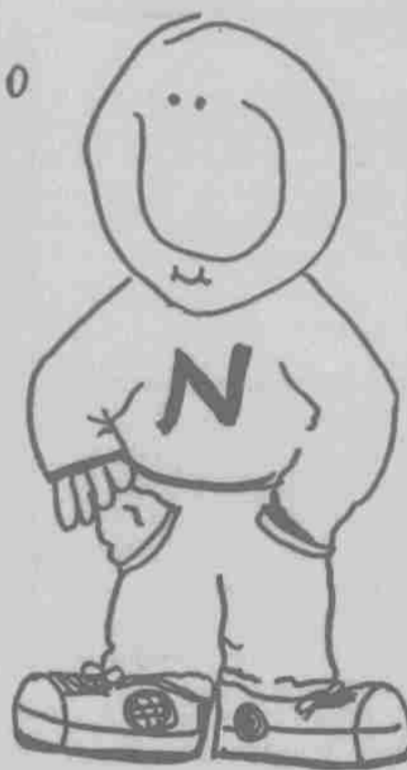


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- OR by mail, write: UPC FREE UNIVERSITY, 200 NE Union, UNL, Lincoln, NE 68588-0465 (all mail in registrations \$2 per class, check or money order only)

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