

'The Dork Knight' Channels Batman With a Wink and a Nod

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By Abby Luby

We are obsessed with super heroes. We love Superman, Batman, Catwoman, Spiderman, because they epitomize extraordinary power and strength needed to battle and eradicate the evil villains of the world.

Decades ago, when the masked, caped crusaders jumped from the comic book page to the movie screen, we still couldn't get enough. They have become our fantasy role models who we conjure when the chips are down – when our parents disapprove, the boss is unfair or the lover checks out. That's when we call on our "hero alter ego" to step in, infuse us with resilience and yank us through tough times.

It was Batman who gripped the psyche of actor and comedian Jason O'Connell, who became smitten with the action figure as a child and then obsessed in high school when he saw Tim Burton's 1989 film with Michael Keaton as Batman and Jack Nicholson as the Joker. Years later, O'Connell, who writes stand-up and sketch comedy, tackled his Batman mania and wrote his one man show "The Dork Knight," showing at the [Phillipstown Depot Theatre](#) starting August 2. The show is directed by Terrence O'Brien, the Founding Artistic Director of the [Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival](#).

One of the most difficult feats for a one-man show is to hold the attention of your audience throughout. But O'Connell's autobiographical play keeps you glued to his life's tumultuous journey driven by his Batman fixation. An adept storyteller, O'Connell seamlessly weaves in his own story with his unmistakable impersonations of the many actors who have played Batman, from Danny DeVito's Penguin to Christian Bale in the recently released Christopher Nolan blockbuster, "[The Dark Knight Rises](#)." With hilarious wit and comedic spin, O'Connell masters different personas with a rhythmic flow that builds to a captivating momentum.

His is a funny and poignant story: a youngster spends hours in front of the bathroom mirror, reincarnating Batman; huddled in the family



Actor and comedian Jason O'Connell is portraying Batman in the one-man show "The Dork Knight."
Photo William Edward Marsh

basement as he covertly re-enacts Bruce Wayne's pronouncement to his girlfriend that he REALLY IS Batman, only to get a reality check from his mother who beckons him upstairs. His coming of age, personal struggles, his conflicted, roller coaster love life, brings a spectacle of multiple characters who emerge from inside his head and out on stage to converse with each other, argue, advise, play lovelorn. When O'Connell agonizes over breaking up with his girlfriend, "Christian Bale" goads him to do the right thing. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger is summoned to recap what he sees as his exemplary acting career and life from Terminator to Governor. By the end of the play a parade of characters verbally duke it out until O'Connell reigns them in.

But it's the portrayal of Heath Ledger's Joker in "The Dark Knight" where O'Connell excels – an impersonation so astute, that it's as harrowing as was Ledger's own portrayal. O'Connell says Ledger's work had a strong impact on his play.

"I originally envisioned doing a 45-minute whirlwind parade of character impersonations and scene reenactments from the five Batman movies that had been out at the time, but after seeing Heath Ledger's work, something clicked inside me that said I should make this a personal piece about the highs and lows of my [own] relationship with the Batman movies."

Prior to seeing the Ledger performance, divulging his personal life was new territory for O'Connell who says he had previously avoided biographical details in material for his stand-up performances.

"I used to try to appeal to the broadest possible audience. Now I realize that the most specific, personal and private observations are the ones that strike the most universal chords. The result is, too, that I've created a piece that is as serious as it is comedic."

Sensitively addressed is the recent tragedy in Aurora, Colorado, where the premiere showing of "The Dark Knight Rises" turned into a blood bath as people were ruthlessly gunned down in a rampage by an armed psychopath. O'Connell notes that it was not only terribly sad but extremely ironic because the Batman character was one of the few action heroes who never used a gun and who was vehemently opposed to the use of firearms.

O'Connell says "The Dork Knight" will always be a work in progress. As each Batman movie was released, the play was updated with new characters. Originally the title of the play was "Batman – Turn off the Dork" which O'Connell says reflected his need to shake off an obsession with what he called "childish things." He ultimately changed it to "The Dork Knight."

"The title refers to the fact that I am learning to embrace the nerd within and accept the fact that I am a completely hopeless Batman geek!"

"The Dork Knight" is part of the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's "In Process" performance series. O'Connell, a seasoned Shakespearean actor, is playing major roles in this current HVSF season and has been in the troupe for five years.

"The Dork Knight"

August 2nd, 16th, and 30th at 7:30 pm

August 18th and 24th at 8:00 pm

Philipstown Depot Theatre

10 Garrison Landing, Garrison, NY.

(845)-424-3900.

<http://philipstowndepottheatre.org/>