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WITH THE KIDS

Heroic efforts

Caped crusaders keep watch -- and are being watched -- at the TV and radio museum

By Brenda Rees
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Kids of all ages — including inner children everywhere — latch on to superheroes faster than a speeding bullet. No matter the decade, stories of caped crusaders, masked avengers and heroic do-gooders provide more than just popular diversion — they can soothe the psyche.

"These cultural icons are far more important than we think they are," explains Ellen Seiter, professor of critical studies at the USC School of Cinema-Television, who has extensively studied superheroes on television.

Indeed, classic tales of heroes — from biblical times to Greek myths, from comic books to western matinees — are an integral part of childhood imagination and "a desire to figure out and find order in an often unordered world," says Seiter.

No wonder, then, a new exhibition at the Museum of Television & Radio — "Look! Up at the Screen! It's Superheroes on Television" — is more than an exercise in nostalgia.

Sure, there is plenty of feel-good fodder for baby boomers in the museum's retrospective of larger-than-life champions of truth, justice and the American way.

Included are free screenings of "The Adventures of Superman," "The New, Original Wonder Woman" and "The Green Hornet," as well as animated fare from Underdog, Mighty Mouse and the Tick.

The exhibition features serious superheroes such as the late 1970s prime-time melodrama "The Incredible Hulk" to the campiness of "ElectraWoman and DynaGirl." But also scheduled are some less prominent heroes such as the dapper British agent series "The Champions," Buck Henry's "Captain Nice" and a 1999 Ben Stiller project, "Heat Vision & Jack," starring Jack Black and Owen Wilson as a brainy astronaut and his philosophical talking motorcycle.

The Superfun for Families series, geared to young children, offers revolving packages of Scooby-Doo, Goosebumps and Earthworm Jim, among others.

But will today's kids, reared in an age of big-budget films and eye-popping special effects, get thrills from shows that offer low-budget sets, props and costumes?

"Absolutely," says John Semper, animation writer and producer who worked on the early "SuperFriends" series as well as the recent animated Spider-Man TV show. "Look at Scooby-Doo. It was probably the crudest-drawn animated show of its time, but people today still love it to death." He notes that the speech-slurring dog had the big "it" — charisma.

Youngsters might find them hokey, but "these shows may be brand new to some kids," Semper says. "Kids zero in on story and personality. That's what matters to them. If it works, it works."

Overall, superhero stories work because they offer empowerment, Seiter says. "The fun of the superhero is that in everyday life, he appears passive, he accepts ridicule, he can be teased and he seems to be a coward," she says. "But once that super costume is put on, he realizes that he is indeed a special individual. He can make a difference."

The roots of modern-day superheroes are in early comic books, and many of their creators — such as Superman's Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in the 1930s, and later Stan Lee and Jack Kirby — were Jewish. "They wrote about discrimination in times of great anti-Semitism," Seiter says. "They used superheroes to get their message across."

These early creators fashioned a mythos that practically every superhero from Superman to Buffy the Vampire Slayer follows: a secret identity, superpowers and/or fancy gadgets, a deep moral sense and, many times, a tragic back story.

The age-old formula holds true even for the 1966-68 "Batman" series. Despite all its silliness and Pop Art kitsch, the show told basic stories of good versus evil.

"We were making overstated morality plays for children that adults could watch and enjoy," says Adam West, who starred as the jet-setting playboy-cum-masked detective. "We played it terribly serious, and that's half the fun of it."

Like many classic superheroes, Batman has a loyal following among today's youngsters. "The show was one of the worst audience-tested shows in the history of television, because no one had ever seen anything like it before," West says. "People from three generations still respond to the warmth and humor."

Not to mention the villains. One of Batman's greatest nemeses was Catwoman, whose melted licorice costume dripped with sexuality and power.

Says the original Catwoman, Julie Newmar: "The Catwoman-Batman combination worked because she desired him and he desired her," she says. "But at the heart, they were just incompatible."

The museum will screen an exemplar Batman-Catwoman episode, "The Purr-fect Crime," in which Batman and Robin battle the feline bad girl at her lair at the Gato & Chat Fur Co. warehouse.

"[Catwoman] never wanted to destroy Batman; she played him how a cat plays with a mouse. She just wanted to ruin his day," Newmar says. "She was naughty for naughtiness' sake. That's what made her such a delicious villain."

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Superheroes

What: "Look! Up at the Screen! It's Superheroes on Television" exhibition

Where: Museum of Television & Radio, 465 N. Beverly Drive, Beverly Hills

When: Screenings, 3 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays. Superfun for Families program screenings, 1 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays. Ends Oct. 10.

Price: Adults, \$10; seniors and students, \$8; children younger than 14, \$5. Superfun for Families screenings free.

Contact: (310) 786-1000 or <http://www.mtr.org>

Screening schedule

Superheroes series, through July 8: "The Adventures of Superman" (1953), "The Incredible Hulk" (1979), "Batman."

July 9-29: "The Avengers" (1965), "The Green Hornet" (1966), "The Champions" (1968).

July 30-Aug. 19: "The New, Original Wonder Woman" (1975), "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (1997).

Aug. 20-Sept. 9: "Underdog" (1966), "The Mighty Heroes" (1967), "Mighty Mouse" (1967), "Supercar" (1961), "The Powerpuff Girls" (1999), "ElectraWoman and DynaGirl" (1976). Sept. 10-Oct. 10: "Space Ghost Coast to Coast" (1997), "The Tick" (2001), "X-Presidents" (1998), "Ambiguously Gay Duo" (1999), "Captain Nice" (1967), "Heat Vision & Jack" (1999).

Superfun for Families program, through July 3: "Hong Kong Phooey" and "Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?"

July 7-11 and Aug. 18-22: "Dexter's Laboratory: Ego Trip."

July 14-18 and Aug. 25-29: Powerpuff Mania series.

July 21-25: "Earthworm Jim," "Goosebumps."

July 28-Aug. 1: "Fantastic Four," "SuperFriends." **Aug. 4-8:** Justice League's "Secret Origins."