Batman has sent Spidey packing as king of Hollywood's box-office superheroes. "The Dark Knight" took in a record $155.34 million in its first weekend, topping the previous best of $151.1 million for "Spider-Man 3" in May 2007 and pacing Hollywood to its biggest weekend ever, according to studio estimates Sunday. Did it live up to the hype? Just how good was the deceased Heath Ledger in his role as The Joker? The Mitch Man answers all of these questions in his review of the year's most anticipated film.

While it is high praise indeed to say that Chris Nolan's brilliant "The Dark Knight" is the best movie ever based off from a comic book, I don't think those words adequately tell you how good it really is.

This film also stands up as a great gangster thriller, one that would not necessarily hang its head when being compared to such classics as "The Departed", "Casino", or "Goodfellas". No, I don't think it is as good as any of them, but I would put it on a level right below them, next to "Donnie Brasco", "Scarface", or "Cop Land".

These comparisons are possible because Nolan paid more attention to the story and the characters as human beings, rather than getting caught up with the gizmos, the super heroes, and the action. Those aspects are present, of course,

but they are there to accent the story, not to be the only reason to go see the film.

It is impossible to talk about "The Dark Knight" without touching upon the untimely death of Heath Ledger shortly after he completed filming his role as the Joker. That is a shame, because the work should really be allowed to stand on its own, rather than going into the category of Legend with all of the extreme fawning of fanboys everywhere.

I am not saying that to disparage Ledger or his performance in any way, just a complaint about the hype that makes impartial appraisal of his character nearly impossible.

As it is; Ledger's Joker should go down as an iconic performance for the ages even without his passing. His presentation of a homicidal sociopath who desires chaos for chaos' sake is a 180 degree change from Jack Nicholson's joy-buzzer clown from Tim Burton's 1989 movie. No back story is given for the joker (another excellent decision), although the stories the Joker tells to his hostages about the reasons for his scarred face behind the makeup are creepy enough. You don't know the real reasons, as his story changes...but no matter what, they are excessively disturbing to hear, and you can tell the Joker likes to tell them just to scare the hell out of someone whose face he intends to cut up himself.

Anarchy is what the Joker is attempting to achieve, along with proving his point that people will universally descend down to his level if given the right circumstances. Ledger's maniacal actions, reptilian licking of his lips, stilted vocal deliveries, and unfeeling eyes added amazing complexity to the character, and I would be shocked if he did not receive a posthumous best supporting actor Oscar nomination. Will he win it? That's impossible to say right now, as we don't know who else will be nominated. But had this came out a year ago, and had Ledger been in competition with Javier Bardem's Anton Chigurh, I would have to say that I think Heath's performance was better than Bardem's work in "No Country for Old Men".

When a superhero movie becomes all about the villain, the movie ultimately suffers. That is not the case in "The Dark Knight" as Christian Bale is still around to breath life into Bruce Wayne. That is not a simple accomplishment. As written in the comic books, Wayne is a hard character to truly bring to three dimensional life on the screen. He is obsessive about his quest to punish criminals, and everyone knows why; because his rich and sainted parents were gunned down before his eyes when he was a child. These events ultimately give you a character with few facets yet to explore.

Dolan and Bale take it in a new direction. Wayne's obsession with being "the Batman" has cost him his relationship with Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal, a tremendous acting improvement from Katie Holmes), who is now involved with District Attorney Harvey Dent, the charismatic and honorable "man of the people" who can get the good citizens of Gotham behind him as he battles the mob. Dent tells Wayne that the problem with heroes like Batman is that "they end up dying as heroes, or finding themselves turning into exactly what it is that they are fighting." Wayne is torn as to where to draw the line. He certainly violates many laws in his crime-fighting...so where exactly is the point that he won't cross? This question continues to haunt Wayne, especially as the Joker's terrorism starts claiming more and more lives.

This movie poses questions and scenarios that are almost never seen in this genre, ones normally reserved for the type of crime movies I mentioned earlier. Nolan also has no problems shaking up convention. There are twists and plot complexities that are surprising to see in a summer blockbuster. What value is a life? Whose life is worth more? How can you make these kinds of choices? What would you sacrifice for others? How much can you trust your fellow man? These are not the normal topics of the spandex and cape set.

Through it all, you have the Joker, Dent, and Batman standing at opposing corners of a triangle. The Joker claims that Batman "completes him" as his polar opposite, but that's not really true, as it takes the combination of Batman and Dent to present a front that is totally opposite of the Joker.

The film also pushes the limits of its PG-13 rating, and could even force you to avert your eyes at a couple of points due to the gore. And as much as I abhor the unnecessary use of gore in films, here it is not done in a gratuitous fashion, rather as something that accentuates the horror of the circumstances and of the individual incarnation of evil represented by the Joker.

Although so much praise has been heaped upon Ledger, he is not the only person deserving accolades. As mentioned, Christian Bale is an incredibly talented actor, and the series is in fine hands as long as he stays involved. This is not to denigrate the work of Michael Keaton or Val Kilmer, but there is really no comparison between their performances and the work of Bale.

The rest of the supporting cast is superb. Gyllenhaal makes Dawes completely believable this time, and is able to handle with aplomb the emotional turmoil she must feel being pulled between two men that she loves and admires. Aaron Eckhart is able to avoid the normal traps of playing someone too good to be true, and embodies his character of Dent with not just wisdom and authority, but also the touches of ego and vanity needed by real life people who aspire to lead.

Gary Oldman and Michael Caine also return as police lieutenant Jim Gordon and Wayne's sardonic butler Alfred. Both men excel in their roles, so much so that I could not picture any other actors playing the parts. It is hard to shine when you are listed fifth or sixth on a big budget comic book movie, but Oldman and Caine are professional enough to not try too hard, letting the moments come to them and relishing them.

Key small roles are also well done by Eric Roberts as a mob leader, Nestor Carbonell as the Mayor of Gotham City, and Anthony Michael Hall as a Geraldo type television reporter. The only person that really got slighted this time was Morgan Freeman as technical guru Lucius Fox, but unfortunately someone has to pay the price of so many other things going on.

Is it perfect? Of course not. At two and a half hours, it is a bit bloated, and tends to bog down a bit when it's getting too preachy or too full of it's gimmicks. The entire episode of Wayne going to Hong Kong could have been edited out without impacting the story too much (and for you fanbois who are about to correct me, let me say that the important technology brought about in that scene could have been introduced elsewhere).

But during the last hour, the movie definitely kicked it up enough to garner the last half star I'm about to give it.

It is a superhero movie that doesn't have anyone with superpowers...choosing instead to show how real men and women react in extraordinary conditions. And it is one I intend to see again and again over the next several years, as I think it will age very well.

My Rating - Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)