

300

FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN

[Production Photos Courtesy of Warner Bros. Studios]



Who can resist a good comic book? The major studios sure can't. Comic book heroes have become such a staple that studio release schedules have begun to look like a face-off between the Avengers and the Justice League.

Some of that trend has to do with their pre-existing fan bases, which let studios hedge their financial risk — or so they hope — and some has to do with recent improvements in visual effects, which allow those stories and heroes to be rendered for the screen more convincingly than was possible even 15 years ago.

Yet, for all the comic book heroes brought to the screen, adaptations of graphic novels are actually quite rare. Mostly, there's just been a lot of talk about them, much of it focused on the graphic novels of Frank Miller. Miller almost single-handedly reinvented Batman with *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*, but while Batman stories have influenced the movie franchise, his stories were judged too dark for mass-audience tentpoles.

The Battle of Thermopylae

The first of Miller's graphic novels to make it to the screen was *Sin City*, an almost slavish re-creation of his darker-than-dark storylines and images.

Now another one of Miller's stories is coming to the screen, his retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae, *300* (scheduled for release from Warner Bros. March 9th). But, as screenwriters Zachary Snyder and Kurt Johnstad found out, a graphic novel can be as difficult to adapt as any highbrow literary novel. To capture the spirit of Miller's book, they had to scramble the conventions of the sword-and-sandals genre and break one of the most basic rules of screenwriting as well.

Tell the Spartans

The Battle of Thermopylae was a confrontation in 480 B.C. between an invading Persian army under Xerxes and a smaller Greek force. Under the command of King Leonidas of Sparta, the Greek army bottled up the vast Persian horde in a narrow mountain pass until a Greek traitor, Ephialtes, betrayed the Greeks by showing the Persians a path through the mountains. Once it was clear that the Persians had flanked them, a rear guard of 700 Thespians, 400 Thebans, and 300 Spartans remained

the Spartans, passerby, that here, by Spartan law, we lie."

As a boy, Miller discovered the story in, of all places, a movie theater. He told Snyder of seeing the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans* with his father. Young Frank got a sense of foreboding even as the movie was playing out.

"He turned to his father," recounts Snyder, "and said, 'Are the Spartans going to die?' And his father said, 'I'm afraid so, son.' That concept of a hero dying was the thing that shaped his aesthetic about what a hero was. So his Marv (one hero of *Sin City*), Batman, Leonidas, essentially become the same character for him."

Though it jumps back and forth in time, Miller's 1998 graphic novel follows Leonidas from the lead-up to war through his death on the battlefield. When the Persians send a messenger demanding he and Sparta submit to Xerxes, Leonidas chooses to provoke a war rather than accept subjugation.

Leonidas, though, is not an absolute ruler; he is bound by Spartan law, and the law says that the army may not march during a religious festival. The city's oracles, bribed by Xerxes, refuse to grant him an exception. So only his personal guard of 300 accompanies

quip about fighting in the shade, as is the traitor Ephialtes, portrayed as a hunchback born of Spartan parents who dreams of being a Spartan warrior, only to be rejected and turn against them.

As for the hero Leonidas, Miller paints him as a just, fair man who is also the toughest, hardest Spartan of them all. It's no surprise, then, that Miller had this charge for the screenwriters, as Snyder recalls: "That [Leonidas] not become a cheesy Hollywood hero that lives in the end and whatever the cliché would be. He wanted him to be this dark, larger-than-life King."

Brothers in Arms

Snyder and Johnstad are getting their first produced feature credit with *300*, but they're hardly newcomers to the business.

"We've known each other for about 15 years," says Johnstad. "Zack in his other life is a very successful commercial director. I've been his First AD for going on 13 years now. We're inseparable, travel the world, like brothers—very, very close." Not only did they have literally thousands of days on sets together, they had written together before, penning a draft of *S.W.A.T.* that was abandoned when the

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—ZACK SNYDER

behind to cover the retreat of the rest of the Greek army. They were slaughtered to the last man, but their sacrifice helped turn the war in favor of the Greeks.

Ancient accounts of the battle have the flavor of an action movie, right down to the one-liners. Warned that there would be so many Persian arrows that they'd blot out the sun, one Spartan was said to quip "So much the better, we shall fight in the shade"; today that's the motto of a division of the Greek army. The poet Simonides wrote an epigraph for the fallen defenders of Thermopylae that is one of the most famous bits of poetry ever written. Frank Miller's translation: "Go tell

him to Thermopylae, where they resist the Persians with gory resolve.

The early part of the book lays out the Spartans' martial culture. As Johnstad explains, "Except for maybe special forces operators now, nobody understands what it was to be a Spartan, the sacrifice and the discipline. They had no potters, they had no artists, they had no poets, those were all the Athenians. The Spartans, all they did was train. They were warriors and they lived by a warrior code." Staying true to that hardness would prove a particularly thorny problem for Snyder and Johnstad down the line.

The famous lines are there, including that

producers decided to go for a PG-13 rating.

Snyder was a longtime Miller fan but first encountered *300* on a visit to producer Gianni Nunnari, who had the graphic novel on his coffee table. Snyder decided he wanted to turn the story into a movie. So he began pitching it.

"The studios were like 'sword and sandals, comic books, we don't really get that. It doesn't really make sense,'" Snyder says.

Part of the problem, he knew, was the whole sword-and-sandals genre, though refreshed by the likes of David Franzoni with *Gladiator* and David Benioff with *Troy*, still had a specific connotation, at least for studio executives.



Lena Headey as Queen Gorgo



Says Snyder, “I think, in the language anyway, there’s a desire to sort of express epic imagery, and therefore epic landscapes and/or events, whether they be battles or love or thematic tones. Freedom and things of that nature. All those are in Frank’s book, but they’re there in a slightly unconventional way.” Snyder wanted his film to capture the tone of Miller’s work: gruesome, violent, larger-than-life and hyper-stylized. But it didn’t help that he didn’t have a script yet. “I was saying the graphic novel is the script. No one really was into that idea either.” There were some nibbles about development deals but no bites.

Then Snyder got a call about directing a remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. Three months later, he was in Canada on the set. “In the interim,” says Johnstad, “the producer, Mark Canton, hired Michael Gordon who was, at that time, Mark Canton’s assistant, and said, ‘Just transcribe the graphic novel, make this into a script.’” Gordon receives shared credit on the script, but Johnstad says they didn’t use his work and that he made a point of not reading Gordon’s draft until the WGA arbitration process.

Snyder, however, read it when he returned from his shoot. “They said, ‘We have a script,’ but I said, ‘I don’t care. I think part of the problem is you guys are approaching this movie like a movie. What Kurt and I want to do is get the graphic novel rendered like a script and be as true as we possibly can to the graphic novel.’”

Game Boys

Snyder told the producers that he and Johnstad would write the script. From the outset, both were committed to keeping Miller’s tone and style.

“His style is very Spartan-esque, in all of his comics and graphic novels, but more importantly, he has a very relentless quality. It’s stoic, it’s unrelenting, and that’s what I wanted to be very clear in the scenes I was in charge of.”

They wrote by divvying up the scenes, rarely even sitting down in the same room to write. That turned their writing into something of a game of one-upsmanship. Snyder says, “Kurt would give cool prose to me, which would get me all jazzed up to get back at him with cool prose.”

Johnstad says, “So then I’d write the next scene and I’d throw the gauntlet down. We’d constantly be pushing ourselves.”

A main challenge they soon encountered was that the static images and panels of a graphic novel may look like movie storyboards, but are, in fact, quite difficult to turn into a screen story.

“At first blush, you think it’s easy because you’ve got a picture,” says Snyder. “But if you’re adapting a normal novel, the linear progression of time is described for you more often than not. You can pretty much figure out how that’s breaking down in terms of what’s going to happen next.”

“In a graphic novel, and especially the way Frank’s drawn the graphic novel, he’s taken a snapshot of a moment and doesn’t give a fuck about what’s happened right before it and right after it. So if you’re trying to make a linear progression of time, which is part and parcel of how films exist, the issue is: What did happen the moment before this 