

2003
Television



■ **COMIC GENIUS**
Left to right: Ashley Scott as Huntress; Dina Meyer as wheelchair-bound Oracle (presumably tied to the bonnet for balance in this shot); and Rachel Skarsten as Dinah Lance

BirdsofPrey

America's new *Batman*-based TV show is simultaneously camp, violent and better than *Buffy*

Would you still sleep with a strikingly beautiful woman if she scuttled round town in a wheelchair? Because this is the indirect question, proposed by *Smallville* producer Brian Robbins and *X-Men* screenwriter Laeta Kalogridis, that has held our American brothers-in-armchairs hostage since the *Batman* spin-off, *Birds Of Prey*, premiered on US TV in October.

Spawned under the notion that we still can't get enough of all things super-heroic (*Smallville* and *Arena* cover girl Kristin Kreuk, anyone?), *Birds Of Prey* nods to every *Buffy*-esque female vigilante show there is. But it works because the uniformly stunning cast seem blissfully unaware of its self-referential kitsch.

Based on the original DC Comic and set in New Gotham City, the Caped Crusader has fled town following the death of his wife, Catwoman, and the crippling of

Batgirl, both at the hands of the Joker. But seven years later, Batgirl re-emerges as the aforementioned wheelchair-bound dubiety, internet warrior Oracle [Dina Meyer], hellbent on getting some back.

Joining her to form this striking lipstick-and-leather crime-fighting trio are Batman and Catwoman's estranged daughter Helena Kyle [Ashley Scott] – aka Huntress – and 17-year-old touch-telepath Dinah Lance [Rachel Skarsten]. The highlight so far has been the discovery that Kyle's shrink, Dr Harleen Quinzel [Farris Bueller's Mia Sara], is actually employed by the Joker. Which is as camp as hiring Mark Hamill to provide the Joker's voice. What ensues, however, is an extra-curricular smackdown of interplanetary mutants, centred, somewhat inevitably given the genre, around the girls' high school.

Not that *Birds Of Prey* is brainless

schmaltz. Its strength lies in its ability to infuse cardboard Adam West-style dialogue with the violent images of Frank Miller's comic shop rocker, *The Dark Knight Returns*. And despite an updated Commissioner Gordon-type called Detective Jesse Reese (he's young, black and wears designer suits), whether or not Master Bruce will poke his head around the girls' clocktower lair still remains to be seen. "I hope our fans won't be like, 'How can you have a *Batman*-derived show without *Batman*?" admits Meyer. "Give it a chance, I'd say to them." Which we're more than prepared to do. Anything, in fact, but having to watch two men with an unsettling fondness for each other hike up 90-degree-perfect walls in their pants.

The show is currently the centre of a bidding war between the major UK terrestrial channels.

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Livestock Pigs
"Dogs look up to you, cats look down on you, but only a pig truly views you as an equal," said Winston Churchill. And if an animal is good enough for Winnie, it's good enough for *Arena*. As well as being the staple ingredient for the bacon sandwich, there is anecdotal evidence for these big boys being used as effective guard pets and – by partially sighted farmers – "guide pigs". Recent advances in genetic manipulation – piglets have been cloned minus the gene that prevents the human body accepting grafted pig tissues – propel our porcine friends to the top of the animal league. Cows, sheep and bulls, who previously thrived under BSE stoicism, sheep cloning and trendy anti-bullfighting campaigns, must try harder.

WORDS: BEN G WILSON