

## TV Review: Real-Life Costumed Street Fighters Highlighted in ‘Superheroes’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 8, 2011 - 10:36am

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CHICAGO – There have been a pair of fascinating feature films recently in which the lead character chose to combat evil by dressing like a caped crusader and fighting crime. It didn’t really work out too well for the leads in “Kick-Ass” or “Super” (which just-so-happens to come out on Blu-ray and tomorrow) but you may be surprised to learn that stories like these are not purely works of fiction. There actually are men and women going for what one calls “*the real-life superhero experience*” and their stories are chronicled in HBO’s documentary “Superheroes,” airing tonight, August 8th, 2011.



TV Rating: **4.0/5.0**

With the onslaught of superhero cinematic fiction this season — “Thor,” “X-Men: First Class,” “Green Lantern,” “Captain America: The First Avenger” — and three of the most anticipated such films EVER already building buzz to next summer — “The Avenger,” “The Amazing Spider-Man,” and “The Dark Knight Rises” — is it any wonder that people have chosen to emulate their icons? Modern superheroes are not that dissimilar from ancient Gods and I’m positive a few people on Earth thought they could harness some of the power of Zeus. So why not think you could be Batman? Especially when there seems to be an ever-increasing amount of injustice in the world?



Superheroes  
Photo credit: HBO

HBO’s “Superheroes” profiles some undeniably fascinating people, spotlighting individual or group superhero action on both coasts. The film opens with a slightly-goofy, rather-rotund wannabe superhero showing off his “*Super-extreme Death Metal Fighting System*” and it’s easy to assume that the documentary is going to play not unlike a mockumentary — more of a goof on its subjects than a serious undertaking.



Superheroes  
Photo credit: HBO

Then it gets real. I think. I'm not 100% sure how seriously to take "The New York Initiative," a quartet of superheroes in the Big Apple who have grown so exhausted by rampant crime and police corruption that they're taking action. They wear masks to hide their identity. They meet to discuss tactics. And they obviously consider themselves as important as the police force.

But are the Initiative playing it up for the camera? Anyone who wears a costume and claims to fight for the meek and the damaged clearly longs for a bit of attention themselves and I wondered how much of what is chronicled in "Superheroes" was amplified by the film crew. Either way, no one is more attention-seeking than the truly-bizarre Master Legend in Orlando, Florida. The portly head of "Team Justice" (which features the lazily-named crimefighter "Super Hero") hits on girls on the street while simultaneously talking up his reported actual powers.

There are times when the film is clearly making fun of these people, especially during the talk about Master Legend's psychic powers. It's funny, but it creates a tonal inconsistency in the piece, especially when the next "segment" is about a man trying to find a sexual predator evading the police. And he's an admittedly lonely man without many friends and a one-man "League."

Should we laugh at these people? Are they mentally ill? There are some experts who talk about the "hobby" of real-life superheroes and that's ultimately the most-fascinating aspect of the documentary. There seems to be a commonality to these people in that most are outcasts. Being isolated turns some people into real-life villains, why wouldn't it turn some into real-life heroes? And should we take seriously a movement that has clearly stopped at least some crime? Are these people doing more good than harm if they're making any difference at all?

"Superheroes" raises more than enough interesting questions to take a look but I was hoping just a few of them would be answered (although a segment about the back stories of some of these people who have seen true brutality in their lives and chosen the opposite is fascinating). It's a very interesting documentary, especially in light of our international obsession with men in tights, but I still don't feel like I know about what makes a man like The Vigilante Spider tick beyond his possible insanity. Maybe there is no solid answer for a world where Zeus has been replaced by Captain America.

*"Superheroes" premieres on HBO on August 8th, 2011 at 8pm CST and replays throughout the month.*



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