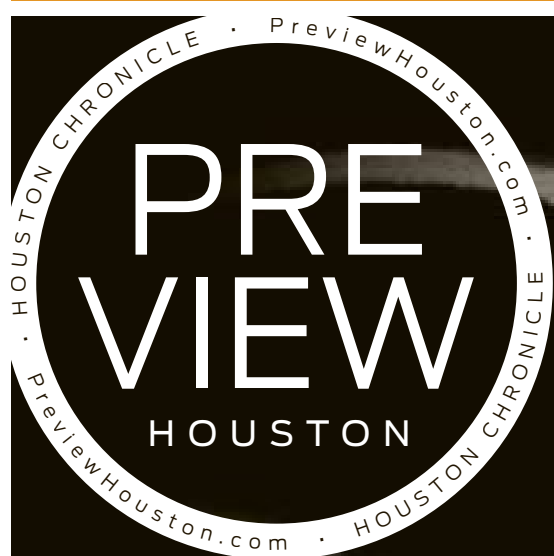


MAY 25 — 31, 2018

THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE'S WEEKLY ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE



ALISON COOK DINES
AT CHRIS SHEPHERD'S
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HERE COMES THE SPIDER-MAN

Marvel star Tom Holland headlines Comicpalooza lineup, but he's not alone | 8

COMICPALOOZA

GEEK PARADISE

BY ANDREW DANSBY

From its humble beginnings in a movie theater 11 years ago, Comicpalooza quickly grew like David Banner into the Incredible Hulk.

The annual event now draws tens of thousands of fans of comics, art, TV, film and all manner of comic convention culture. Since 2010, the event has set up shop at the George R. Brown Convention Center, and even then, its footprint grew from one portion of the event space to the entirety of it. Trying to summarize all that will be happening there is pointless, as there's simply too much. But here are six big draws to Comicpalooza 2018.

1. MARVEL STARS

We are now a decade into Marvel's cinematic takeover, starting with "Iron Man," and fewer years into the company's invasion of television. There have been some misfires along the way, but the storied comic brand has done a pretty incredible job retaining buzz with its properties. And they remain a pillar of comic conventions due to the onslaught of material: "Daredevil," "Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.," "Jessica Jones" and "Agent Carter" on the small screen and the various "Avengers" pieces in theaters. Charlie Cox and Krysten Ritter, two of the top



FANS CAN DRESS UP LIKE THEIR FAVORITE

CHARACTERS DURING THE THREE-DAY EVENT.

Yi-Chin Lee / Houston Chronicle

guest draws at Comicpalooza, are stars of "Daredevil" and "Jessica Jones," respectively, and another, Tom Holland, just had a fine year in the Spider-Man suit with last summer's charming "Spider-Man: Homecoming" and the new smash "Avengers: Infinity War." A "Spider-Man: Homecoming"

sequel is in development, tentatively scheduled for 2019, with Holland back as Peter Parker. Which is all to say Marvel's sway shows no sign of waning.

2. OTHER CULTURE CLIQUES

A lot of the event's other

guests come in clusters that appeal to fans with favorite franchises. Erik Estrada and Larry Wilcox from '70s cop show "CHiPs" will appear. Five cast members from TV's "Lost" will be on hand: Michael Emerson, Henry Ian Cusick, Francois Chau, M.C. Gainey and Nestor Carbonell. Fans of various

COMICPALOOZA

When: 9 a.m.-8 p.m. Friday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday

Where: George R. Brown Convention Center, 1001 Avenida de las Americas

Details: Adult day passes \$38-\$55 or three-day pass for \$78; children's day passes \$10 or three-day pass for \$15, comicpalooza.com

"Star Trek" enterprises have a lot of guests to choose from, including Levar Burton ("Star Trek: The Next Generation"), Jeri Ryan ("Star Trek: Voyager") and also ...

3. BRENT SPINER

Spiner is the best-known Houston native among the guests at this year's event. The actor, who played Lieutenant Commander Data on "Star Trek: The Next Generation," grew up in Bellaire and studied theater at the University of Houston. He was friends with Trey Wilson and Randy Quaid, two other actors who grew up here around the same time. After working in theater in New York, Spiner struck gold as Data. He appeared on the show for 15 seasons starting in 1987. He's been a regular in film and TV since, and has also made some recordings of old jazz standards.

4. RUTH E. CARTER

Most of the top-draw talent at Comicpalooza are actors from TV and film. Also drawing traffic are the visual artists. Ruth E. Carter sort of falls in between those two worlds. Carter got her start in film 30 years ago as a costumer for Spike Lee on his first film, "School Daze." Since then, she's done costumes for a number of his films, as well as period pieces ranging from "Selma" to "Amistad." In fact, she's the first African-American costume designer to be nominated for an Academy Award for her work on Lee's 1992 film "Malcolm X." This year has been a particularly noteworthy one for Carter, 58. She was the costume designer for the smash film "Black Panther." Her work took her to various places in Africa, where she found inspiration for the fictional Wakanda, which required various garments for different tribes to create a modern look from ages-old design motifs. She appears at Comicpalooza Sunday.

5. COMIC BOOKS

And posters. And original pieces of art. And lightsabers. And "Doctor Who" scarves. Like any convention worth its salt, Comicpalooza has hundreds of thousands of items to get between you and your money. To cite any single item would be, to paraphrase Garven Dreis, just impacting on the surface. Just about everybody shows up with a different idea of a treasure.

6. COSPLAY

I saw a terrifying mother/daughter set of Weeping Angels from "Doctor Who," and a Newt Scamander from "Fantastic Beasts" who didn't break character on the grounds, last year. If you have a Wookiee costume or such, this and Halloween are



Sony Pictures Entertainment

Tom Holland as Spider-Man.

really your two windows to suit up without raising eyebrows.

7. PANELS

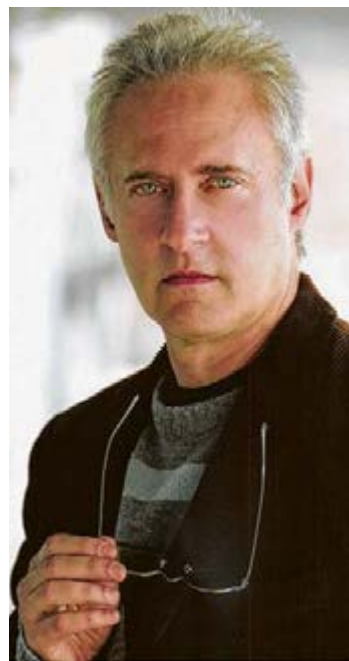
No point in listing them all, but there should be something for everybody. Some of them are fairly self-explanatory and should seem of great interest: "Practical Armor Making," "Women of the X-Men" and "Sympathy for the Devil: Antagonists We Love to Hate." There are many NASA-centric panels, befitting our proximity to Johnson Space Center. But when scanning the list of panels, always be sure to go beyond the title and read the details because "Hasselhoff Adult School of Sword" is not at all what I imagined it to be.

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Netflix

Charlie Cox is convincing as Matt Murdock/Daredevil in the "Daredevil" Netflix series.



Westland Productions

Brent Spiner starred in "Star Trek: The Next Generation."



Myles Aronowitz / Netflix

Krysten Ritter plays the titular role in "Marvel's Jessica Jones."



Courtesy photo

Costume designer Ruth E. Carter worked on "Black Panther."

COMICPALOOZA

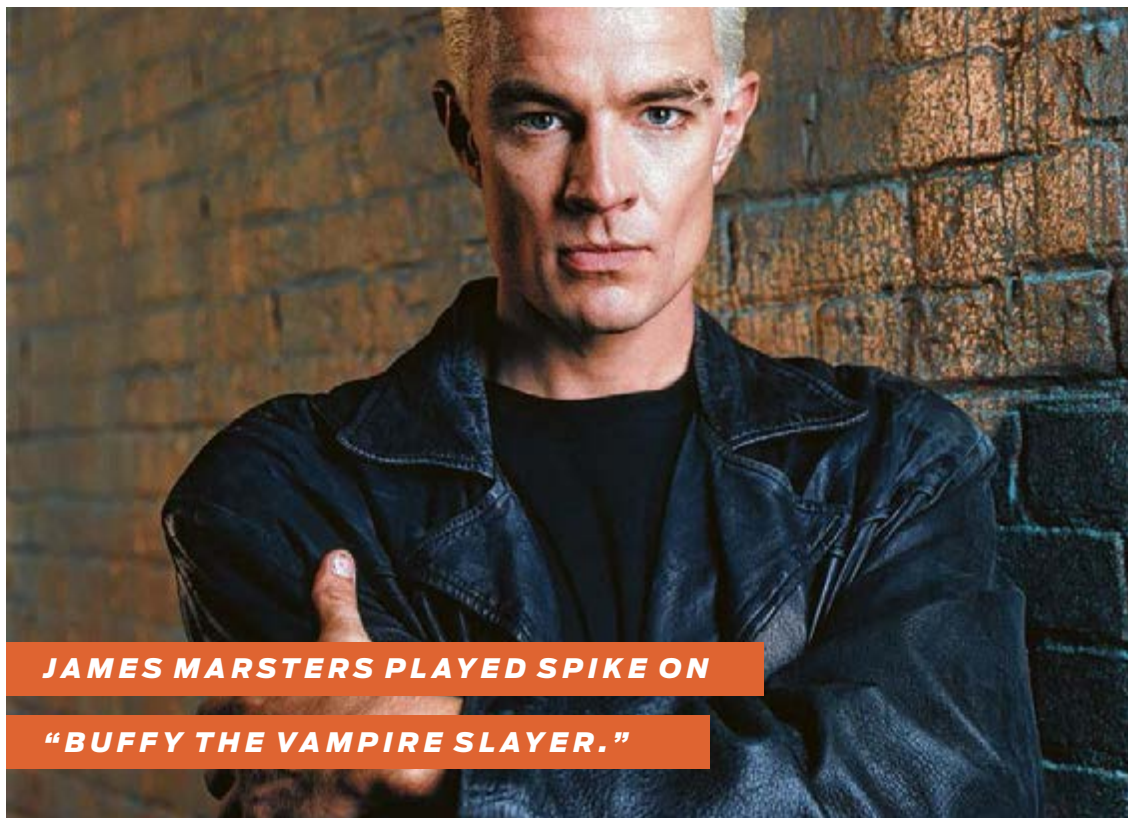
A FANBOY AT HEART

BY ANDREW DANSBY

Spike wasn't supposed to become a thing. When James Marsters took the role on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" in 1997, he was told his character, a vampire, would promptly be slayed. But then something happened. The California native took on a British accent, and his brown hair was crisped and brightened with peroxide. And in addition to being fed the blood of victims, Spike was fed some of the show's best lines, like an early one that involved the crucifixion, Woodstock and an acid trip. And so a fan favorite was ... not born exactly, because vampires are sired.

Marsters, 55, got his start in Chicago doing theater before landing some of his first TV roles in the early '90s. His life changed with "Buffy." All the show's key characters enjoyed long, arcing evolutions, but Spike's perhaps has the sharpest angle from concept to conclusion. Post-"Buffy" he stuck with TV, doing some episodes as Spike on "Angel," as well as a long tenure on "Smallville." He's done more film and TV work — including his current run on Marvel's Hulu series "Runaways" — written comic books, narrated audio books and played in bands.

This weekend, he'll appear at all three days of Comicpalooza, an environment in which Marsters thrives because his enthusiasm for



The WB

such events mirrors that of the fans.

Q: I've seen actors sigh and roll their eyes through convention appearances. You seem to genuinely enjoy them.

A: (Laughs.) Well yeah, I was a fan, too. When I was 13 years old, I was going to "Star Trek" conventions dressed as Spock. So I guess I was one of the people William

Shatner was ranting about on "Saturday Night Live." So being a fanboy, I tend to think fans are pretty cool. I find they're intelligent with a good sense of humor, and they don't take themselves too seriously. That's a combination I like very much. You can hang out with intelligent people, but if they're arrogant, you don't enjoy their company very much. A smart person who can laugh at them-

selves, that's a good find. And I find a lot of those people hanging around at a convention.

Q: "Buffy" turned 20 last year. But I feel like there was a fervor building a few years earlier. Did you detect a renewed interest in the show?

A: Yeah, yeah, there has been this growing interest in "Buffy," I think starting about five years ago.

JAMES MARSTERS AT COMICPALOOZA

When: 5 p.m. Friday for a panel, available for autographs Friday-Sunday

Where: George R. Brown Convention Center, 1001 Avenidas de la Americas

Details: \$10-\$109; comicpalooza.com

A lot of young people were starting to discover it for themselves. So at this point, even those new fans are coming at it at a pretty high level now. Sometimes at these conventions, there are more fans than I have time to meet in a day. But the interest is a good thing. "Buffy" was a good, subversive show when it was first on the air. Watch it now: It's still subversive, this show about a woman who can kick ass if she needs to. So I love meeting 12-, 13-, 14-year-old young women dressed as Buffy or Faith or Willow and seeing that the show is helping more young females to realize their power.

I met someone going to a convention once, an original member of the "Star Wars" cast, an old gent. And I was a fan. But he said he didn't like ("Buffy"). He didn't believe a girl that size could hit that hard and defend herself. I told him, Sarah (Michelle Gellar) was doing her own stunts and working with triple black belt stunt dou-

bles every day without breaking a sweat. He said it wasn't the same. But I'm telling you, she held her own. Finally, I said, "How about Bruce Lee? That's the deadliest guy I can think of. He was what? Five foot five?" That was the end of the conversation with this hero of mine. He was a nice guy, but there's some generational thinking around those issues. But sorry, pound for pound, Buffy is plenty deadly.

Q: What do you think has helped it endure? One of my theories is despite the hair and clothes, which kind of ring a '90s bell, there's this theme of endurance in the show that's relatable to just about anyone.

A: I agree, though I think, on a slightly large level, the show is about how do you make it from childhood to adulthood. How you get through your adolescent years when you wake up to the fact that the world is not perfect at all. When you learn parents aren't all-knowing. Teachers don't always understand the subject matter. Navigating the complexities and pain of the world without giving up. A lot of people don't make it through. They give up or come out the other side less than they could be. "Buffy" tells you not to give up. That's an incredible theme. "Hamlet" has that theme. He takes up arms and it creates a sea of trouble. It costs him his life, but he does try to make a difference. "Catcher in the Rye" is in the same period of life, and it's a horror show. Holden doesn't make it through adolescence in a healthy way. There's a dark next chapter to that story that isn't written. But "Buffy" shows a more positive side of that. People not giving up, even though it hurts them. They don't give up



The WB
Sarah Michelle Gellar is Buffy Summers and James Marsters is Spike in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

on themselves, and more importantly, they don't give up on the world.

And that's not just for teenagers, if you're 35, 45, 65, you have the same struggles. Sometimes it's hard for me to get out of bed in the morning. I don't want to try today. So I think we all do well to hear that message. The writing is also charming and deft, and the show is a delight to watch. I thought the same thing watching "Wonder Woman." It's not this dark, strident judgment against men. It doesn't put men down for women to be powerful. And it was a celebration of a powerful woman that was delightful and fun. I prefer my good stories wrapped up that way.

Q: You didn't know your character was going to span seasons, right? Wasn't Spike supposed to get killed off

early.

A: Joss (creator Whedon) was clear in the beginning that I was not going to live. That I was Angel food, that he was going to kill me. So they built Spike up to look cool so when Angel killed him off, Angel would look cooler. I thought I'd be lucky to get five episodes in the first season. I got 10. Then in Season 3, I got one episode, which was nice to get. But it wasn't going to go further than that. But what happened is they lost the Cordelia character, and they needed a character who was able to tell Buffy she was being stupid and we're all about to die. Joss decided to try Spike in that role. They found Anya, so they didn't need Spike for that role. And I thought, again, they'd kill me off.

Spike is a rather strange fit in the show. Joss isn't interested in portraying evil as cool, and I

respect him for that. So Spike was this two-dimensional evil villain, but people were responding to him. And I think Joss was uncomfortable with that. Maybe it was endangering the theme of his show. If I'd been Joss, I worry I'd have killed off Spike immediately. But Joss has an incredible mind, and he was able to weave this journey for Spike.

Q: My kid Hazel, age 11, asks if you have a favorite episode.

A: Well first of all, tell Hazel, "Hello, and that's a great question." I have so many favorite episodes, but I think "The Body" is one of my favorites because it's stripped of all the humor and special effects. It's really just about a daughter losing her mom. It was a proof of concept that the show had strong enough characters to do that and just be a straight drama that hour. "Ta-

bula Rasa" was a really fun episode. But I think my favorite overall was the musical. We risked the most as actors. Most of us weren't singing professionally before that. It's one thing to sing in the shower and think you sound good. It's another to charge money for it. And to be good enough to charge money for it, you really have to work. And the actors on the show were clear: We're not professional singers. We begged Joss not to do this. Sarah actually told him she'd rather juggle chain saws. "Just fire them up," she said. "If I cut off my hand, it'll be better for my career than to sing." But we stopped whining at some point and got to work and did our best, even though we were pretty sure we were going to fail. We decided to go out swinging, which is what the characters on "Buffy" do all the time. And it didn't suck! So what a plus!

Q: Other than meeting fans, what do you like most about these conventions?

A: Just that if any human in the city comes they'll have a fabulous time. And if you take a second to look around, you'll notice there'll be thousands of people around and no one is captivated by their cellphone. No texting or worrying about Facebook. Just people talking and getting to know each other. There'll be people with a sword in one hand and a beer in the other, and no one will get hurt. No arguments. Just love. If you ever wanted to be Superman, this is the place. Everyone there is beautiful, and it's where they want to be doing what they want to do. That sounds like heaven, doesn't it?

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COMICPALOOZA

GOOD TIMES, BAD TIMES WITH JIMMIE WALKER

BY ANDREW DANSBY

Among the armor-clad super heroes in the ranks of Comicpalooza this weekend are also totems of nostalgia and joke-makers who are just trying to make a living. That's the realm of Jimmie Walker, who remains best-known for playing J.J. on the 1970s sitcom "Good Times" and delivering time and again the punchline "DY-NO-MITE," even though he'd been doing radio and stand-up long before that show. Walker pre-"Good Times" was a guy looking for a laugh on stand-up stages. He comes to Comicpalooza as a decades-spanning comedian and a guy with an everlasting TV punchline.

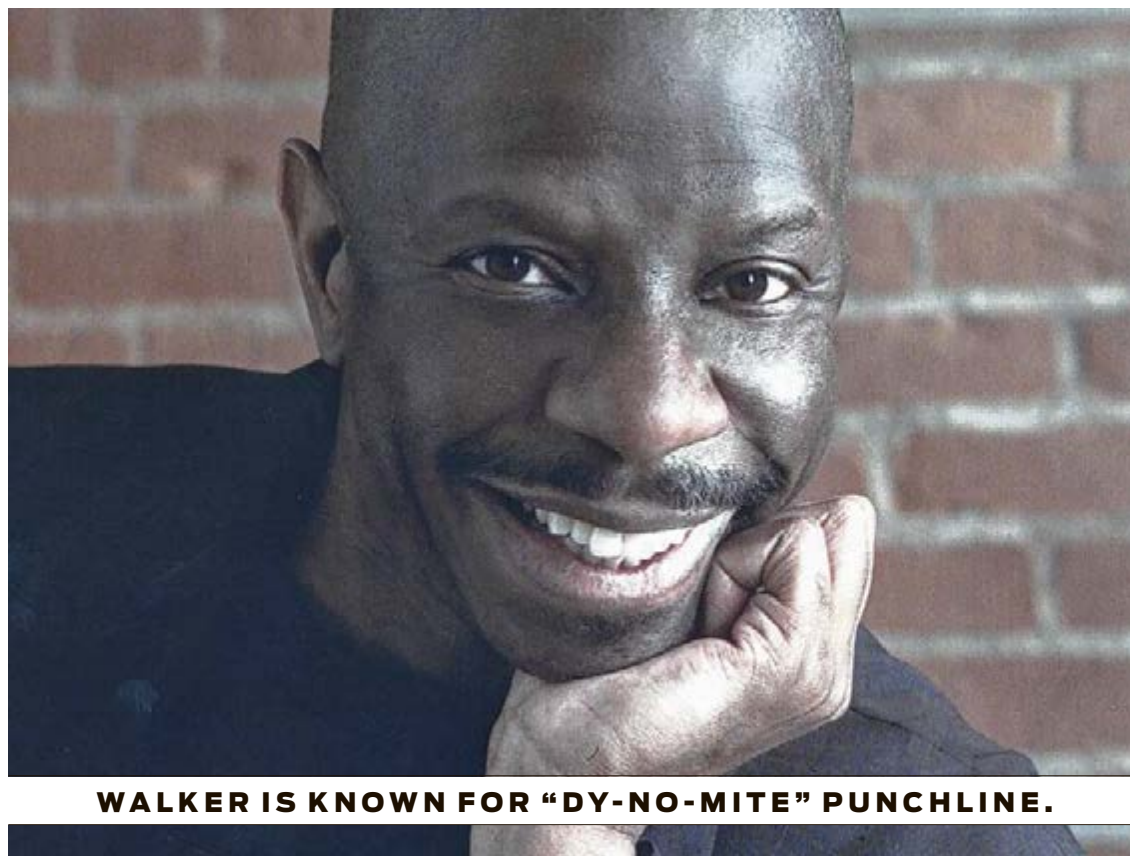
Q: So I'm sure everybody starts with "Good Times" and

...

A: They do. And that TV show was fine. But it was among the least things I've done. (Laughs.) It was maybe the 10th or 12th most important thing in my so-called career. But nobody talks about where I started, which was comedy. Or the people who got started with me, like Letterman. That's what I did. That's my thing.

Q: People associate you with one show and one line. But don't you do about 250 stand-up shows per year?

A: Yes, and there's a lot of



WALKER IS KNOWN FOR "DY-NO-MITE" PUNCHLINE.

Courtesy photo

good stand-up out there. I'm not saying all stand-ups suck. But there's something like 3,500 stand-ups. And maybe 2,500 of them are good. But 10-15 get work. There's a ton of comedy available to people. But we only hear some of it. Black comics

have reached a new chitlin circuit. It's not good. It's not good for comedy.

Q: But that's why you do comedy. It becomes hopeful. You make a bad thing better.

A: No, it's hopeless. (Laughs.)

You want me to tell you that different comedy is all OK. No, my book ("Dyn-O-Mite!," 2012) is about the American divide. And comedy is the leader of it. You see it today. You saw it with Michelle Wolf (at the White House Correspondents' Dinner). You see it

JIMMIE 'J.J.' WALKER

When: 8 p.m. Friday, 7 and 10 p.m. Saturday

Where: Joke Joint Comedy Showcase, 11460 Fuqua

Details: \$20-\$25; jokejointcomedyshowcase.com; also appearing at Comicpalooza in the George R. Brown Convention Center this weekend

with people going after Trump. Show me one good piece of press about Trump.

Q: I can't.

A: Right. We're divided, and it can't be fixed. We're an angry society based on angry people who are divided on every level. Racially, gender, sexuality.

Q: You do seem to enjoy the comic convention environment, which is a pretty equalizing space.

A: You know, a thing like Comicpalooza, it's a big deal. And there are people who don't show up on shows who are still a big deal to people. Erik and Larry from "CHiPs" and David Faustino (from "Married ... With Children"). His show is still huge in syndication. People love those people. That's something.

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