

# Ledger Takes On Starring Role 'Knight's Tale' Clichéd But Engaging Movie

Twenty-two-year-old Heath Ledger moves toward movie stardom with the leading role in "A Knight's Tale."

By Ashley Atkinson  
Arts & Entertainment Editor

LOS ANGELES - Despite a role opposite Mel Gibson in last summer's "The Patriot," Heath Ledger doesn't have to disguise himself to avoid throngs of fans just yet.

But in his new film, "A Knight's Tale," Ledger is the star. His name comes first in the credits, and his face is on the poster that adorns magazines and billboards nationwide. And after the film's May 11 release, fans are likely to come running.

The 22-year-old Ledger isn't letting the prospect of idolhood get to him yet. "I really don't sit around worrying about that," he said. "I don't think it's worth the time and effort getting concerned about that. If it happens, it happens, and it's not in my control."

"A Knight's Tale" tells the story of a poor peasant squire (Ledger) who rises above his status to impersonate a knight in 15th-century England's jousting circuit. The film, shot in Prague with an

ensemble cast, required Ledger to dance, ride horses and wear armor.

Although the success of "A Knight's Tale" is riding on Ledger, he's not at all nervous.

"Ultimately, it's \$50 million, but it's not my money," he said. "So shit, I don't have the pressure of losing it."

And the amount of money invested in a film, Ledger said, doesn't affect the way he does his job. "Basically I'm turning up and I'm acting, and my job doesn't differ from a \$3.5 million movie," he said. "Between action and cut, you know, no amount of money can change what I do."

The film's ensemble cast also helped take the pressure off. "I never felt like the movie was riding on my shoulders," Ledger said. "I certainly never felt my head should be on the poster like that."

Despite his newly poster-worthy face, Ledger still has a laid-back approach to his career. "It's just about me taking each day and dealing with it as it happens -



Following up his role in last summer's "The Patriot," Heath Ledger plays a peasant-turned-hero in "A Knight's Tale."

and not feeling I have to plan the rest of my life."

And even with the impending pressure of following up his first starring role, Ledger doesn't want to look too far ahead.

"I don't like to sit down and say 'Now it's time I should look for this, I should go for this character. This is what I need now in my career,'" he said. "Because if you look at it that way, it narrows your vision."

Ledger said he has no worries about his future. But he already has strategies for dealing with impending stardom in place, including dealing with overzealous paparazzi.

"Most of the time you don't even know they're there," he said. "It's very strange and invading, but I don't let it bother me. I really try to find the humor in it all."

The glare of publicity doesn't bother him either, even considering his high-profile relationship with actress Heather Graham.

"I don't read anything that gets written about us," he said. "It doesn't complicate anything personally, the way we feel about each other."

Nor does he believe everything that he does read about himself - good or bad, he said.

Producer Todd Black and

writer/director Brian Helgeland picked Ledger for the role before "The Patriot" had even come out - a risky move, considering that Ledger would carry the film in its starring role. But both were impressed with Ledger's ability.

"He's not one of these young actors that has to go through 4,000 machinations to get to the role," Black said. "He's very confident about what he's doing. He's not so studied about it; he's not mannered about it."

His unstudied approach to acting also helped him have fun with Helgeland's unorthodox screenplay, one that relies on a '70s rock soundtrack to drive the film.

"The beauty of (the soundtrack) is it just gave us license and room to play without being restricted by the facts," he said. "It's just a movie. It's a fairy tale."

And even though Ledger's been in the business for five years, he still considers himself of an age to believe in fairy tales. "I'm still a kid," he said. "I'm still a 6-year-old kid. I always will be."

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"A Knight's Tale" starts out like any other movie set in the Middle Ages. But you realize something's amiss when the peasants, gathered for a jousting tournament, start thumping their ale mugs along to Queen's "We Will Rock You."

And that's what sets "A Knight's Tale" apart - it's a medieval tale that blatantly trades historical accuracy for adventure, contemporary comedy and a slammin' '70s soundtrack.

The film stars Heath Ledger ("The Patriot") as William Thatcher, a peasant who doesn't have the noble pedigree required to joust. Will takes on a dead knight's identity and sets out for the title.

While some moviegoers will be jarred at hearing "Takin' Care of Business" and "Low Rider" in a 15th-century setting, others will love the sense of irreverence it creates.

Either way, "A Knight's Tale" is an interesting move for writer/director Brian Helgeland, who won an Oscar for "L.A. Confidential" in 1998. No one could really say that it's a step up.

"A Knight's Tale" has a simple, time-tested plot and a script full of ridiculous

proclamations like "I've waited my whole life for this moment!"

The characters are all old standbys as well, with newcomer Shannyn Sossamon as Will's feisty noble love interest. The cat-eyed Sossamon overacts, but does well for someone with no film credits to her name.

The ensemble cast of Will's entourage (Paul Bettany, Laura Fraser, Mark Addy and Alan Tudyk) is comic and clever as a bunch of clashing old-English personalities.

And the numerous jousting scenes are impressive, with each lance-splintering blow felt with dramatic effect. But other aspects of the movie seem a little more out of place - a funky dance sequence set to David Bowie elicits an "I can't believe they really put this in the movie" reaction.

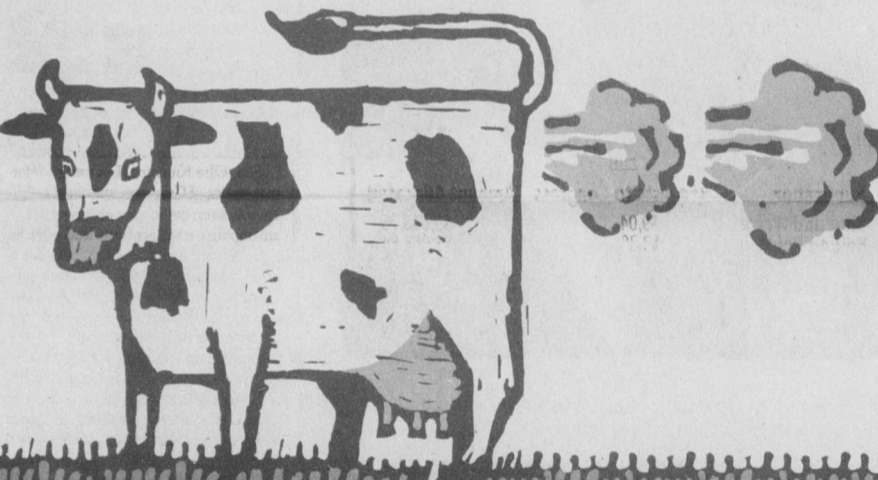
And although the movie runs through every cliché about love and heroism and good versus evil in the book, it's still a stirring story for those who wear their hearts on their sleeves.

It won't change anyone's life or even win any Oscars - but it wasn't intended to. If you're looking for a fun film to entertain you for a couple of hours without gross-out tactics or an irritating cast of teen superstars, "A Knight's Tale" is your ticket.

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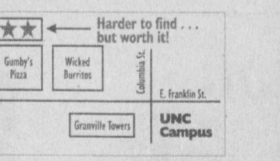
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