

EXPLORING THE  
MUST-READ  
CLASSICS  
OF COMICDOM

# THE ADVENTURES OF LUTHER ARKWRIGHT

## BRYAN TALBOT 1978-1989

A masterfully detailed monochrome saga about a multiversal messiah figure. By Daniel Etherington

**B**efore it was published as a collected edition by Dark Horse in 1997, *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* (TAOLA) slowly took form between 1978 and 1989. It's no wonder it took a while since this is an extraordinarily dense, all-encompassing comic. Literally, in fact, as its story plays out on numerous 'parallels' of the multiverse, each with a different variant of human history. Much of the action takes place in England, on parallel 00.72.87 – a place where there was no Restoration in 1660, and instead the Cromwell line remained at the head of the Commonwealth.

In the story's 1980s present day setting, the Lord Protector is Nathaniel Cromwell, a self-righteous, vicious pervert who heads up a Puritan police state where the Royalists are revolutionaries. Nationalism is a strong theme – within the revolutionary forces are groups such as the IRA ('Irish Royalist Army') and the 'Royalist Liberation Front'. Their names are, of course, steeped in irony, reflecting the

leftist groups of the era that gave rise to Bryan Talbot's masterpiece.

Talbot had started out working in the underground comix scene, a pop culture expression of 1960s counterculture, and the *Luther Arkwright* saga has a deliciously subversive tone that evolved from this background. With the comic, which, between 1987 and 1989, was published completely as nine issues, Talbot went on a creative rampage through not just pulp and pop culture, but art history, classic British SF and fantasy, history, philosophy, religion and its close relative, mythology. It's a comic that will make your jaw drop and leave you feeling spent. Fans of the medium acclaim it as among Talbot's finest work, but by rights, it should have also achieved the mainstream recognition of Moore's *Watchmen*. Indeed, it could be said that what *Watchmen* did for the medium by way of American comics, TAOLA does for the medium by way of British history. Furthermore, the title neatly spans the gap between Michael Moorcock and the British SF he



ABOVE: Sir Bryan of Talbot himself. He's one of our faves here at *Comic Heroes*.

BELOW: Assassination averted! Love the fur coat, there.

spearheaded via *New Worlds* magazine (and his own multiverse fiction) and the 1980s flowering of the comic book.

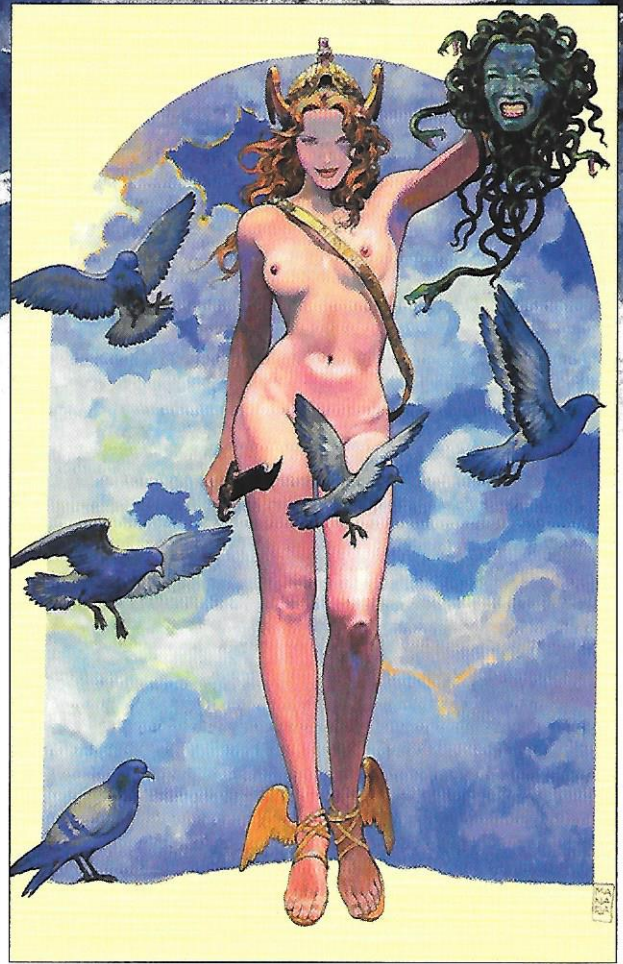
Arkwright himself is a character who's part James Bond, part Doc Savage, part Doctor Manhattan and part, well, Jesus. With a bad haircut. As the story begins, he appears to be a kind of secret agent, who's involved in an incident that, in parallel 00.38.56, results in the accidental burning down of the Crystal Palace and the Bayeux Tapestry. Whoops. In many ways, TAOLA is the prototype for much of what Talbot would do in later work, weaving together diverse influences and elements into a rich fabric. For example, in one frame he juxtaposes a sword beheading from the tapestry with a reworking of Eddie Adams's iconic 1968 photograph of a young Vietcong being shot in head. That's just one of the many nods. He's clearly strongly influenced by Hogarth and, as he would years later in *Grandville*, he even recreates a famous Manet image (see if you can spot it!).

After the Crystal Palace incident, the saga slowly unfolds, and we learn more about both Arkwright and an enemy that's threatening the entire galaxy, if not the multiverse. This enemy is the Disruptors, whose shock troops are glimpsed as they go about finding an ancient doomsday weapon called Firefrost. This, we learn, was "created to be the ultimate deterrent" by an ancient civilisation and has the power "to disrupt the atomic structure of the cosmic blueprint".

Arkwright is a unique being who can move between the parallel universes, and works with the forces of the technologically advanced, stable







converting it into comics. Unfortunately, when the first part was compiled into a book, a printing error put the word 'End' on the last page. His leading man, Mastorna, had died in the first part, but Fellini planned to chronicle his journeys after death in the next two parts. However, in these circumstances, the superstitious Fellini, in poor health and near death himself, decided to stop his story there. So, tantalisingly, one of the world's most famous unfilmed movies was also left unfinished as a comic.

Manara has worked with another visionary director, the Chilean-born maverick Alejandro Jodorowsky, notably on a bawdy historical saga on the Borgia family of poisoners. The fourth and final album has just been published in impressive full colour. Manara admits, "I've hardly ever met Jodorowsky, maybe only twice in six years! His scripts are as detailed as Fellini's but he leaves me a lot of artistic freedom." Manara has also illustrated *Le Feu Aux Entrailles (Fire In The Entrails)*, the French edition of a 1982 novel written by provocative Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar.

Manara has been equally active in the field of literature, both classic and contemporary. From the past, he has transformed Jonathan Swift's giant Gulliver into a woman as Gullvera, adapted the 1896 novel *Aphrodite* by French writer Pierre Louÿs, and interpreted such ancient texts as *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius and love-

making manual *The Kama Sutra*. One of the most notable living authors he has worked with is Neil Gaiman, initially in 1990 on a short piece for the anthology *Breakthrough*, dealing with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then in 2004 in *The Sandman: Endless Nights*, in which he was a perfect choice to visualise that most alluring member of The Endless, Desire.

#### MANARA MARVEL

There have been attempts to turn Manara's drawings into animation. In 2006 he designed the characters for the Argentinian television series *City Hunters*. Combining animation with CGI, this 'branded entertainment' of nine- to 11-minute episodes was co-produced by Unilver to promote its male grooming products in Latin America.


Another much more interesting animation opportunity is keeping Manara busy at the moment. "I'm now working on a big 3D-HD animation project, the life story of Adriano Celentano, a well-known Italian singer and performer, in 26 half-hour episodes produced by the Murdoch satellite station Sky, the only real competitor for Berlusconi's channels in Italy." Among those involved in *Il Ragazzo Della Via Gluck (The Boy from Gluck Street)* is novelist and screenwriter Vincenzo Cerami, who was also an assistant director to Pasolini in the '60s. Cerami and Manara have previously worked together on a graphic novel thriller,

ABOVE LEFT: Lucrezia Borgia herself, rendered in the inimitable Manara style. Nice monkey.

ABOVE RIGHT: Persea, presumably a female version of Perseus, having just slain Medusa the Gorgon.

*Pandora's Eyes* in 2007, which is coming out, at last, in English.

And what future solo projects does Manara have in mind? "As soon as possible, I'd finally like to devote myself to a project I care about a lot: the biography of the painter Caravaggio, told through the eyes of one of his models, Fillide." Before he has to leave, I ask him how he found his experience at Marvel. "Despite having to fully immerse myself to produce the *X-Women* project, I'm not a passionate reader of American comic books, so I had no precise idea about the market. The concept of superheroes has never really interested me. I have always preferred European comics." Still, having illustrated some superheroines, were there any others he might be interested in drawing? Can we start imagining his voluptuous visualisations of Elektra, Sheena, or maybe Modesty Blaise? "I don't know, perhaps Modesty Blaise because she already has a sexy side to her personality. I'm not averse to challenges, so who knows, one day I might find myself working on a story about Wonder Woman, why not?"

Now that's a revamp of the Amazon princess many would dearly love to see! DC Comics, are you listening? 

■ Paul Gravett can't start the New Year without a trip to the Angoulême International Comics Festival. This year's annual pilgrimage will be his 26th, maybe a record? Full report next issue.






## "A CREATIVE RAMPAGE THROUGH NOT JUST PULP AND POP CULTURE, BUT ART HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY"

parallel 00.00.00 ('Zero Zero'), with their supercomputer WOTAN, to try and halt the Disruptors' plans. Among the other Zero Zero agents is Rose Wylde, who has an empathic/telepathic connection with all multiversal versions of herself. Rose is (or rather, are) one of Luther's lovers; another is Octobriana, a formidable mono-browed Russian warrior, a character created in an early '70s hoax by Czech Peter Sadecký.

The Disruptors have been manipulating humanity, but the multi-dimensional war is coming to a head on 00.72.87, where the Royalist forces are massing behind the pregnant Princess Anne; Prussian and Russian powers are circling like vultures; Cromwell is becoming increasingly addled by venereal disease; and Hiram Kowolsky, foreign correspondent and war artist of the New Amsterdam Herald in the United Colonies of America, is relaying

TOP: Luther Arkwright wanders through some of Bryan Talbot's gorgeous art. His style has evolved over the years, but there's no denying the detail and atmosphere on offer.

news of the Royalist cause to fellow revolutionaries abroad.

While Talbot's style has evolved since *TAOLA*, which, at times, is cluttered and reliant on tranches of text, and some elements of the comic are dated (that haircut for starters), it remains a hugely rewarding read. It's adult, epic, experimental, refreshingly British and endlessly fascinating. Oh, and if you read it for the first time and enjoy it, you can find out more about what happens in 00.72.87 in 1999's colour sequel, *Heart of Empire*. 

## WHAT YOU THOUGHT...

Bryan Talbot's output never ceases to amaze and this is one of his finest works. A complex and highly original tale, illustrated in exquisite detail. Absolutely superb.

**Craig Mitchell**

So dense, so layered, so ahead of its time. Pre-internet (remember that?) I spent weeks traipsing around dusty back issue boxes, looking for the episodes printed by the slew of publishers the title had and reading them piecemeal. Best read in one sitting, a true novel. Beats its sequel hands down. Still the best thing that Talbot has done. More than *Watchmen* or *Dark Knight*, this comic demonstrates the true potential of the medium.

**Luke Williams**

Defining Steampunk before most people even knew what Steampunk was, *Luther Arkwright* is the disturbing, broiling gyre where the mainstream and the underground meet in British comics. Breathtaking in its scope, stunning in its detail and ruthless in its message, *Arkwright* is the closest thing to a unique vision that is possible to get.

**Michael Molcher**

Every comics fan has his or her formative influences, the masterworks that showed what could be done with the form and blew open the doors of perception. *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* – along with Mills and O'Neill's *Nemesis the Warlock* – was one of mine, a mind-bending and deeply atmospheric work that still stands alone. Remarkably, its sequel, the lushly detailed *Heart of Empire* – which we'll look at in a future *Comic Heroes* – is every bit its equal, although it remains criminally under-appreciated.

**Jes Bickham**

Talbot would go on to do things like the delicate, beautiful and harrowing *Tale of One Bad Rat* and the fascinating psycho-geography of *Alice In Sunderland*, but *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* is still pretty damn brilliant. It's a very English type of science fiction, firmly in the tradition of Moorcock, but Talbot's amazing art gives the story its own particular flavour. I read it when it first came out and it's still one of my favourite ever comics.

**Hugh Everett**

I have to say, I found this very hard going. Perhaps the comics of today have changed the way I look at and read comics, but reading *Luther Arkwright* for the first time, I found it really dense and heavy going. I can't deny that it looks like a million dollars – Talbot's one of those immediately distinctive artists, a world away from all the interchangeable superhero stuff we get these days – but be prepared to put some real effort in with this.

**Josh Smith**

Everything Bryan Talbot does is brilliant, but, to me, he's yet to better this. A complete classic.

**Annie Britt**

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**NEXT ISSUE:** Alex Ross and Mark Waid's *Kingdom Come!*