

Week One of "Convergence" was mixed. On one hand the writers were clearly struggling under the demands of the event and artists often felt rushed. On the other hand Renee Montoya was the Question again, Starfire felt feelings once more, and we even got all the way back to classic blue-fingerstripes Nightwing. I don't think I make a secret of my love for Nightwing, but there are a few characters that do match him on my list of favorites and, odd as it may sound, Azrael is one of them. The pet project of legendary DC writer Denny O'Neil and a co-creation of Marvel's Joe Quesada, Jean-Paul Valley is one of the most hated elements of the 90s comics landscape, but I positively adore him. Unfortunately for me, Jean-Paul received a fairly ambiguous death over ten years ago, making it incredibly unlikely that I would ever see a new Jean-Paul Valley story ever again, especially compared with his relative lack of popularity and the respect for O'Neil's impressive hundred issue solo series. So when AzBats showed up on the front of a Convergence issue, I was understandably thrilled. Fast forward three or four months to me opening it and suddenly I see Tobias Whale, archnemesis of one of my other favorite heroes, Black Lightning, so Larry Hama had set my expectations pretty high. So, how'd he do. Well, Hama played the hand "Convergence" dealt pretty well, focusing this issue on life under the dome and leaving most of the interdimensional battling for next issue. This, to me, seems to me to be one of, if not the, crucial question of the event: can the story juggle the intrigue of life under the dome with the more heavily hyped contests between cities. Of course, Batman has no powers for the dome to remove, making his stories decidedly different from his suddenly powerless peers and Hama takes advantage of this fact to tell a particularly appropriate story. Essentially this is a crime story, a mystery. Batman's reaction to being trapped under the dome in an unfamiliar city with a weakened back is pretty spot on: he starts dismantling organized crime in Metropolis as Bruce Wayne. It's a little hard to believe that Bruce would sully his name by going without in without a disguise and it's hard to discern what he's been up to for the last year, but the set up essentially rings true. Unfortunately this isn't just a Batman story, it's also an Azrael story, and that's where things start to fall apart. It's clear that Hama read Knightquest in preparation for this story, but if he finished the KnightTrilogy it seems like he didn't read much further. In the aftermath of KnightsEnd, Jean-Paul was a broken man. Living among Gotham's homeless, getting his head around what happened to him, Jean-Paul would only pull himself together when Batman arrived to apologize for wronging him and offer him the resources to uncover the secrets behind the cult that turned him into a killer. Jean-Paul returned to his dorky, long-haired look and struggled with the question of how to be a hero without succumbing to violence. In short, none of that is to be found here. Jean-Paul reads much as he did in his Azbats persona, except even less reverent of Bruce Wayne's power as Batman. Neither Jean-Paul's reluctance to fight nor Azbats' desperate need to prove himself are in evidence and the character that was designed as a deconstructive parody of 90s anti-heroes is played completely straight. Of course, I considered that my love for the character was interfering with my objectivity, but it's clear that Hama was interested in telling his own story. While it's difficult to piece together, Convergence has done a pretty good job of sticking to history this month. The dome cut Metropolis off right after the death of Alex DeWitt, the return of Parallax in "Zero Hour", and the loss of Aquaman's hand, which pretty clearly places this story one year after the comics that were dated between September and November 1994. Azrael was seen living on the streets in the midst of a mental breakdown twice during that period. Stranger still, he's wearing his first armor from Knightquest, despite leaving all his weapons at Wayne Manor. Even Tobias Whale was driven out of Metropolis and laid low until Black Lightning vol. 2 #9. So clearly Hama prioritized his story over continuity, which is good, but I don't know if this is a stronger story for

it. Even if we didn't want to get into Jean-Paul's numerous psychological issues, there's no sense of guilt over handing him the cowl in Bruce, nor does he seem to find any reverence in donning it again despite still being on reserve for the events of "Prodigal". Instead Batman shouts watered-down versions of more compelling stories' understandings of his no-kill policy and seems shocked when the mentally unstable twenty-year old who tried to murder him a year before doesn't stop to reconsider his life. It doesn't help that Jean-Paul is only occasionally more brutal than Batman is normally, hardly reaching the levels of Cable, the Punisher, or any of the other anti-heroes he was designed to mock. On one hand I appreciate that Hama's not exaggerating just to make the point, but the resulting battle of philosophies feels undercooked. Still, I give him credit for demonstrating that AzBats' philosophy has some merit, preventing this story from becoming a Bat-filibuster, a trap more than one otherwise talented writer has fallen into. So the structure is strong and the plot is decent but weaker than it should have been. That leaves execution, and this is not the tie-breaker that Hama would have wanted. Facing down Batman, Tobias Whale tells Batman that "You have to hit people like you mean it!" Batman decks him, choosing for a one-liner, "I'm tired of your repartee... So why don't you just shut up!" I can't be the only one who finds that lacking bite. In fact, that's definitely the way I'd describe Hama's dialogue. It's not terrible but it feels distant, ungrounded. Whether it takes the form of Whale's henchmen repeatedly reminding you of their names in unconvincing fashions or the impressive vocabulary possessed by most of the cast, especially Batman, the writing feels slightly out of phase. That said, Hama's story does have some nice lines and a couple more that miss the mark so slightly that you can easily forgive some odd phrasing. I can't be sure if it's as meaningful as it sounds yet but Valley's response to the objection that people will suffer is a great example of what Hama is reaching for, an intense Jean-Paul simply answering, "They always suffer." Though "Convergence" has tended to feature artists or artwork that aren't ready, Shadow of the Bat actually boasts some pretty impressive visuals. Philip Tan collaborates with Jason Paz, Rob Hunter, and Elmer Santos to bring his unique vision of Metropolis' shadowy fringes to life and the results are impressive. The book is decidedly leaning towards an idealized realism and it succeeds more than the vast majority of comics that take that bold path. I will say that Tan's compositions tend to be a little bit claustrophobic, but they're pretty slick. Everything looks impressively life-like, despite the numerous abstractions Tan employs. Images like AzBats reflecting in the eye of a man looking at Jean-Paul or Whale's gang appearing in the flash of a pool cue against a ball keep the early portion of the issue visually interesting as Hama sets up his confrontation between Whale and the Batmen. And it's obviously not just Tan. The inking and colors are a huge part of conveying the depth and texture of the story. On a couple of occasions, like an early page featuring an image of Parallax, the art is almost Bermejo-like in its realism and drama. I mean, it's pretty incredible when you can make out individual hairs in a character's eyebrows and the panel is still clear and legible. Just when you think you might be getting tired of the art team's tricks, our protagonists switch into their costumes and we get a more traditional Batman tale. Divisive as it is, there's no denying that the AzBats suit is memorable and it's probably a good part of the reason this issue got made, not to mention why the continuity is so fuzzy. Thankfully Tan draws the costume like he was born to do so. Using modern techniques and wisely selecting Jean-Paul's first and most conservative armor, Tan turns what was, at best, a great costume constrained by the era of its creation and, at worst, an example of why we call the 90s the Dark Age of Comics, into a beautiful design that I expect will win over more than one skeptic. Drawing attention away from the spikes and pouches, Tan puts attention firmly on the familiar color scheme and intense, Black Panther-esque cowl. The

traditional bat-suit doesn't get as much attention, but it also looks gorgeous. I don't know that I've ever seen Batman look so ready to fade into the shadows at any moment. Tan and co. cover a lot of ground in this issue, meeting a lot of very different demands, however there are weak links. First and most noticeably, the style of the book is highly variable. I don't know if it's just the difference in inkers, but certain pages look significantly flatter than others, with little apparent rhyme or reason to when the switch will occur. I also have to say that Tobias Whale's albinism is kind of downplayed by the fact that Bruce and Jean-Paul frequently look like vampires, down to the stunning good looks and blood-stained fancy clothes. Speaking of Bruce's good looks, every action has an equal and opposite reaction, because more than one of our villains borders on monstrous. With Tobias Whale that's problematic but expected, however there are enough other characters who also resemble the Penguin that it begins to become a noticeable trend. A Thought: At times it feels like Hama's consciously writing Batman as an incredibly out-of-touch rich guy imposing his rules on those around him. That's not an unheard of version of Batman, but it's the hope that writers will find a way to frame Bruce's nocturnal activities differently, not lean into that interpretation. Still, this lens presents another way to read this story that's also quite interesting. The post Convergence: Shadow Of The Bat #1 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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