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The Trial Of The Incredible Hulk

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The Trial of The Incredible Hulk: A Landmark Marvel Television Movie

Long before the Marvel Cinematic Universe dominated the silver screen, there was a different kind of superhero storytelling on television. In the late 1980s, the character of Bruce Banner—and his green-skinned alter ego—returned to the small screen in a series of made-for-TV movies that captivated a generation. Among these, **The Trial of The Incredible Hulk** stands out as a unique blend of legal drama, superhero action, and thoughtful character exploration. Released in 1989, this film not only continued the story of David Banner (as the character was renamed for the series) but also introduced a classic Marvel villain in a grounded, gritty setting. For fans of the genre, this movie remains a fascinating artifact of how superhero narratives were adapted before the era of blockbuster budgets.

In this article, we will delve deep into the plot, cast, production, themes, and lasting legacy of *The Trial of The Incredible Hulk*. Whether you are a longtime admirer of Bill Bixby's portrayal or a newer Marvel enthusiast curious about the franchise's roots, this comprehensive exploration will provide valuable insights. We will also examine how the film handles the Hulk's core conflict of identity and justice, all while fitting into the broader tapestry of Marvel television history.

Plot Overview: Justice, Rage, and a Superhuman Dilemma

The story begins with David Banner (Bill Bixby) still wandering the country, searching for a cure to his condition. Haunted by his transformations into the Hulk, Banner is a modern-day fugitive. He arrives in a large city and is nearly apprehended by police. In an attempt to escape, he sneaks onto a subway train, but his presence is discovered. A confrontation ensues, and in the ensuing struggle, Banner transforms into the Hulk (Lou Ferrigno). The Hulk inadvertently injures several people, and while the Hulk flees, the incident is now a matter of public record.

Banner is soon arrested and charged with multiple counts of assault and disturbing the peace. To complicate matters, the savvy and ruthless district attorney, John Joseph Talbot (played by John Rhys-Davies), sees this as a career-making case. Talbot is determined to prove that Banner is, in fact, the Hulk—a meta-human threat to society. Banner must now navigate a legal system that cannot possibly understand his affliction. The trial becomes a central metaphor for society's fear of the unknown.

Fortunately, Banner finds an unlikely ally: a blind defense attorney named Matthew Murdock. Yes, that Matthew Murdock—better known as Daredevil, the Man Without Fear. In a brilliant crossover, the film brings together two characters who are both defined by their secret identities and their sense of justice. Murdock, portrayed by Rex Smith, is a young, idealistic lawyer who senses that Banner is not a common criminal. Through his heightened senses (though the audience is not yet explicitly told he is Daredevil), Murdock believes in Banner's innocence.

As the trial progresses, Banner struggles to control his rage. The courtroom becomes a pressure cooker.

Meanwhile, a crime syndicate led by Wilson Fisk (the Kingpin) operates in the shadows, and Murdock has his own reasons for wanting to take down Fisk. The film weaves together the trial, the Hulk's outbursts, and Murdock's nighttime crusade as Daredevil. In a climactic confrontation, the Hulk is unleashed in a dockside battle against the Kingpin's thugs, and Murdock helps clear Banner's name—though Banner must once again flee into the night.

Cast and Characters: Bringing Icons to Life

Bill Bixby as David Banner

Bill Bixby delivers one of his most nuanced performances as a man trapped between his humanity and his monstrous alter ego. Bixby's Banner is weary, intelligent, and deeply empathetic. He makes the audience feel the weight of every transformation. In the courtroom scenes, Bixby shows Banner's vulnerability and desperation, making the eventual Hulk outbursts feel tragic rather than purely violent.

Lou Ferrigno as The Hulk

Without Lou Ferrigno, the Hulk would have been far less iconic. Despite being largely nonverbal (he speaks only a few words in the entire film), Ferrigno conveys immense emotion through body language and sheer physical presence. In *The Trial of The Incredible Hulk*, his Hulk is both a force of nature and a misunderstood creature, which aligns perfectly with the legal themes of innocence and guilt.

Rex Smith as Matthew Murdock / Daredevil

Rex Smith steps into the role of Matt Murdock, bringing charm and conviction. While his portrayal lacks the bravado of later interpretations, Smith grounds the character in realism. His Daredevil costume (a black bodysuit with a red mask) is primitive compared to modern standards, but the character's origin is hinted at effectively. The chemistry between Smith and Bixby is compelling, as two men hiding their true selves find common cause.

John Rhys-Davies as D.A. John Joseph Talbot

John Rhys-Davies, later famous as Gimli in *Lord of the Rings*, plays the villainous prosecutor with relish. Talbot is not a supervillain—he is an ambitious man who sees an opportunity. Rhys-Davies makes him credible and even funny at times, but never less than threatening. His interactions with Banner are a highlight of the film.

Production and Context: A Crossover Experiment

The film was produced by New World Television and aired on NBC on May 7, 1989. It was the second of three television movies that revived the character after the original 1978–1982 series. The first was *The Return of the Incredible Hulk* (1988), and the third was *The Death of the Incredible Hulk*(1990). The creative decision to include Daredevil was a bold experiment in Marvel crossovers. At a time when the rights to various characters were scattered, this television movie represented a rare shared universe moment.

Director Bill Bixby (yes, the star also directed) took a grounded approach. The script, by Gerald Di Pego, treats the Hulk not as a superhero but as a medical and legal anomaly. The courtroom setting allows for debates about responsibility, identity, and the nature of evil. The film's budget was modest, but the performances and direction give it a weight that surpasses its limited special effects. The Hulk's transformations—achieved through makeup, lighting, and Ferrigno's physique—still hold a certain charm.

Legal Themes and the Hulk's Moral Struggle

One of the film's enduring strengths is its exploration of justice. Banner is not a criminal by choice. His transformations are involuntary, a result of gamma radiation exposure. The trial raises questions that resonate even today: Can a person be held responsible for actions committed while in a state of altered consciousness? If a person has a medical condition that causes uncontrollable outbursts, should the law punish them or provide

treatment? The movie never gives easy answers, but it validates Banner's suffering.

The inclusion of Matthew Murdock deepens this thematic richness. Murdock, as a blind lawyer, has a unique perspective on justice. He sees beyond appearances. His decision to take Banner's case is based on instinct and his own experience as a vigilante. The duo of Banner and Murdock represents two sides of the same coin: both are outcasts who fight injustice, but one does so through the legal system and the other through brute strength.

In a memorable scene, Murdock tells Banner, "The law is not always just. But it is all we have." This line encapsulates the film's tension between the ideal of justice and the reality of flawed systems. The Hulk's final rampage against the Kingpin's operation is not just a spectacle; it is a lament that sometimes the law fails, and something wilder must break through.

Comparison with the Original Series and Comics

Fans of the classic *Incredible Hulk* TV series will note several consistencies. David Banner still wanders from town to town, helping people while trying to remain hidden. The sympathetic portrayal of the Hulk remains central. However, *The Trial* differs by placing Banner in a static location (a city) for a prolonged period, which forces him to confront his identity more directly than in the episodic series.

From a comic book perspective, the film borrows heavily from Lee and Kirby's original vision but adapts it for television. The Kingpin is portrayed as a human crime lord, not an oversized brute, which makes him a more realistic adversary. Daredevil's characterization is more in line with Stan Lee's initial concept—a vigilante with a strong moral code. However, the film omits his iconic red outfit in favor of a darker, more tactical look. While some purists criticized this change, the costume served the grittier tone of the movie.

Reception and Legacy

Upon its initial broadcast, *The Trial of The Incredible Hulk* drew solid ratings, though critical reception was mixed. Some reviewers praised the dramatic tension and the crossover idea, while others found the special effects lacking and the Hulk's screen time too short. Over time, however, the film has gained a cult following. It is admired for its ambitious storytelling and for taking the Hulk seriously as a tragic figure.

In the decades since, the film's legacy has only grown. It is often cited as one of the first live-action Marvel crossovers, predating the *MCU* by nearly two decades. It also paved the way for later television crossovers like *Batman: The Animated Series* and *Smallville*. For many fans who grew up in the 1980s, this movie remains a fond memory of a time when superheroes were more human and vulnerable.

Today, you can find the film on DVD and streaming platforms, often packaged as part of the *Incredible Hulk* movie collection. It is a must-watch for anyone interested in the evolution of Marvel storytelling. The themes of the trial—innocence, control, and societal fear—are as relevant now as they were then.

Why This Movie Matters for Modern Audiences

In an age of CGI spectacles and sprawling cinematic universes, *The Trial of The Incredible Hulk* offers a return to character-driven storytelling. It reminds us that the Hulk is not just a weapon or a comic relief figure—he is a metaphor for the rage we all struggle to contain. The movie also demonstrates that superhero stories can thrive within other genres, like legal dramas and thrillers. It challenges the notion that a "superhero movie" must be about explosions and one-liners.

For content creators and fans alike, the film serves as a case study in how to adapt a property with limited resources but strong narrative focus. Every scene advances either the plot or character development. The

dialogue is sharp, and the moral dilemmas are genuine.

Conclusion

The Trial of The Incredible Hulk is a hidden gem in the vast landscape of Marvel entertainment. It successfully merges two distinct superhero myths into a cohesive and emotionally resonant story. Through Bill Bixby's poignant performance, Rex Smith's earnest Daredevil, and a thoughtful script, the film explores themes of identity, justice, and redemption—all while delivering the satisfying Hulk smash moments that fans craved. Its legacy endures as a testament to the power of television storytelling and as a milestone in crossover history. Whether you are revisiting it or discovering it for the first time, this movie proves that even the least likely defendants can find a champion—and that sometimes, the most powerful advocate is the one who understands both the law and the beast within.

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