

Make-up Games

By Reg P. Wydeven
July 26, 2008

Last week the 'Batman Begins' blockbuster sequel 'The Dark Knight' was a box office smash. In it, Heath Ledger portrays a sadistic Joker who tries to overtake Gotham. While the Joker's mysterious background isn't explored in this film, his origins were revealed in the 1980s 'Batman.'

Jack Nicholson's Joker received his signature clown smile after being dropped in a vat of acid. He takes his revenge on society by tainting cosmetics so that anyone who applies the makeup also gets a Joker grin. Unfortunately, sometimes life imitates art.

Jerome Chevallier, former head of regulatory affairs for the U.S. Branch of L'Oreal USA, recently sued his old employer, making some serious allegations about the company's practices at the same time. In the suit, Chevallier claims he was harassed and ultimately fired for complaining to his superiors about these illegal practices. He is seeking compensatory and punitive damages and to be reinstated at L'Oreal.

According to Chevallier, L'Oreal sold Maybelline products in South America that contained the carcinogenic chemical dibutyl phthalate, "a material banned in those countries for its carcinogenicity and risks to reproduction." The lawsuit also claims that L'Oreal also sold products in Europe that contained a refrigerant and unlawful levels of a preservative known as Kathon CG, sold deodorant containing Triclosan, a banned anti-microbial agent, and falsely advertised its PureOlogy brand as "100 percent vegan," even though the products contained animal-derived ingredients.

Finally, Chevallier asserts that the cosmetics giant's management deleted the formulae for products containing Kathon CG from company computers because the chemical, often used in shampoo, has been linked to dermatitis when used at high levels.

None of these products were being sold in the U.S. even though the chemicals in question are not banned here. According to the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, the European Union Cosmetic Directive is more active in regulating chemicals in cosmetics than our Food and Drug Administration.

In response to the suit, L'Oreal USA released a statement saying the company "unequivocally denies these allegations" and "intends to vigorously defend itself in this lawsuit." The company sure hopes the jury thinks Chevallier is a Joker.