

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Venomous action films: 'Black Widow' to 'Snake Eyes'

By T. Rob Brown

The summer blockbusters are upon us and true believers, the MCU is back!

Yes ... yes, I know ... We got the Marvel Cinematic Universe back on the small screen earlier this year with "WandaVision," "Falcon and the Winter Soldier" and the more recent "Loki"—all on Disney+. All great shows in their own rights, I might add. But the MCU returns to cinemas with Scarlett Johansson's starring role in/as "Black Widow."

After numerous pandemic-related delays, we finally got to see one of the founding members of the Avengers in her first leading role: Natasha Romanoff. Johansson, of course, reprises her role as the expert Russian spy who defected to join SHIELD. This is Marvel's second female-led film, following "Captain Marvel" (2019). The original release for "Black Widow" was set for May 2020 but after two announced delays, it released July 9, 2021.

For the trivia buffs, it's the third MCU film with a female character's name in the title: add "Ant-Man and the Wasp" (2018) to that list. And if you want to talk about all official MCU titles, it's the fifth—sort of—with a female name in the title: add "WandaVision" and I suppose "Loki" technically works too for that one. No, I'm not taking a stab at the perfectly-cast Tom Hiddleston—watch "Loki" and you'll understand what I'm talking about here. Unfortunately, we don't get to count "Agent Carter" as an official MCU title at present.

But we're here to talk about "Black Widow."

This is HER story.

From a prologue that introduces her as a pre-teen to brief glimpses of her induction into the infamous Red Room program where all of Russia's Black Widows were trained, we take a trip from Ohio to Russia where she revisits the ghosts of her past. We even get to discover details surrounding her defection to SHIELD. This story answers a lot of questions about her past, which most of us wondered while watching previous MCU films.

For example: in "Avengers" (2012), Black Widow and Hawkeye (Clint Barton, played by Jeremy Renner) make references to something that happened to them in Budapest, Hungary. At first, this seems like just some vague reference to subtly reveal character backstory. Now, we find out more about that reference. There's a lot more to it than we initially realized.

Black Widow's history is detailed, interesting, filled with conflicts and complications in all the right ways. Her past wrongs—which she refers to as red in her ledger—give this character depth and purpose. As she revisits her past life, it intertwines with Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh), Alexei Shostakov a.k.a. Red Guardian (David Harbour) and Melina Vostokoff (Rachel Weisz). Johansson's vast MCU experience and leadership is quite apparent as she leads this group of stars.

The core four cast members share such great chemistry together while their characters show such horrible dysfunction, which leads to comedic action elements and character banter. Would I call this film a comedy? No way. It's filled with action, remorse, past haunts and the need to do what's right. It's an action-thriller.

If you are looking for the famous MCU comedy, Harbour steals the show in that respect—his Red Guardian had me laughing at his antics, boasts, and failures. If you haven't read the comics, Red Guardian is sort of the Russian version of Captain America—he's a super soldier.

Melina takes on the role of the Shapeshifter, a filmmaking term that refers to characters who we're not quite sure if they will help or hinder the central viewpoint character's goals—I won't spoil it for you.

This film's biggest surprise for me wasn't the cool plot twists or turns but in its newest star to the MCU: Pugh. It seems quite obvious to me that Marvel Studios and President Kevin Feige are planning a lot more for Pugh in the future of the MCU. Note: Be sure to stick around for the stinger—that short clip that runs during or after the credits of a film—not to be confused with Black Widow's wrist stingers.

If you haven't read any of the Marvel Comics, Belova is one of the many women who took up the Black Widow mantle. Just as many took up the mantles of Thor, Captain America, Captain Marvel, various Spider-folk, Hulks, etc., we've had several Black Widows. Romanoff is the most famous Black Widow, of course.

Personally, I'm glad that Johansson was selected for Romanoff. Now that her contract ended with Marvel Studios, though, it's good to know the MCU's future is not quite as dismal as it might have seemed before. I have faith that Feige knows what he's doing and has a plan in store for the fans going forward. I look forward to seeing Belova's future in the MCU.

The only part of this film that was disappointing for me was part of the way Taskmaster was handled. I'm a fan of Tony Masters as Taskmaster in the comics but Marvel Studios went a completely different route for the character in the MCU. Seeing how this new character iteration connects to the whole plot of the film does make sense, though, and I can see why the change was made. Marvel does like to keep us on our toes and we'd grow bored with it if every film was exactly like the comics. Anything is possible in the MCU.

While the characters face plenty of controversy on the screen, we didn't expect there to be conflict off the screen. Not between the actors but between Johansson and Disney. According to a July 30 article from "Variety," Johansson filed a lawsuit Thursday, July 29, in Los Angeles Superior Court—not against Marvel Studios itself but against its owner, Disney. Her claim is that simultaneously showing the film on Disney+ and in cinemas caused her "to lose out on considerable bonuses."

After "The Wall Street Journal" broke the story, CNBC's Sarah Whitten reported on July 29 that "The Marvel star claims her agreement with the company guaranteed an exclusive theatrical release for her solo film, and her salary was based, in large part, on the box office performance."

Disney issued a response that Thursday: "There is no merit whatsoever to this filing." The statement also mentions Disney paying Johansson \$20 million to that date, claiming she will earn additional compensation beyond that.

In other reports, the film earned a little more than \$150 million during its first few weeks in cinemas. Previous Marvel films averaged more than \$100 million in ticket sales during their opening weekends and nearly \$1 billion during their full worldwide theatrical runs. "Black Widow" brought in another \$60 million from Disney+ sales during its opening weekend; this figure does not include its other digital sales.

Several minor fan sites and often opinionated sources reported on July 30 that Feige was "angry" and "ashamed" of Disney's handling of the lawsuit. Prior to Disney's simultaneous release decision, Feige fought for an exclusive cinema release but was overruled by Disney.

"Variety" also reported that Women in Film, Los Angeles, ReFrame, and Time's Up issued a joint statement. They called Disney's characterization of Johansson a "gendered character attack." Their official joint statement proceeds to call Disney's response inappropriate for a contractual business rights dispute and "contributes to an environment in which women and girls are perceived as less able than men to protect their own interests without facing ad hominem criticism."

Personally, I hope this matter can be resolved in an equitable manner so we might get Johansson to return in possible flashbacks as cameos going forward. It all remains to be seen but I have a feeling her time in the MCU is complete.

Another fun little piece of trivia: two songs featured in the film were both parodied by "Weird Al" Yankovic: Don McLean's "American Pie" (1971) and Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" (original version 1991) which were "The Saga Begins" (1999) and "Smells Like Nirvana" (1992), respectively. The version of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" in the film is performed by Malia J and produced by Think Up Anger. Malia J also sang covers for Netflix's "Bloodlines" and "The Handmaid's Tale" from Seal's "Crazy" (1991) and Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" (1966).

With a tagline of “She’s done running from her past,” the spy-thriller, Rated PG-13, received a 6.9/10 on the International Movie Database, 81% on Rotten Tomatoes’ Tomatometer, and a high 92% audience score. It runs 2 hours and 13 minutes.

This summer’s action blockbusters, so far, seem to include some venomous titles. From Black Widow’s sting to Snake Eyes’ katana blades to the actual snakes of Disney’s “The Jungle Cruise” (July 29, 2021), and on Sept. 24, we get “Venom: Let There Be Carnage”—you might want to watch your step at our local cinemas.

“Snake Eyes” (2021), not to be confused with the 1998 Nicholas Cage film of the same name, is a G.I. Joe Origins story. Much like the early days of the MCU, this film seems to be setting up a brand new G.I. Joe filmverse. While G.I. Joe is owned by Hasbro, it shares a long history with Marvel—which published the military comic book series, starting in 1982, while Hasbro created the action figures for Marvel Legends since its 2006 buyout of Toybiz.

Henry Golding, who you might remember from his co-leading roles in the romantic comedy “Crazy Rich Asians” (2018) with Constance Wu and Awkwafina and romantic drama “Last Christmas” (2019) with Emilia Clarke (“Game of Thrones”), takes the title role of Snake Eyes. Known later as the master ninja for the G.I. Joe anti-terrorist military outfit, Snake Eyes was always one of my favorite Joes as a kid.

The young child in me was happy to see the intertwined origin story of Snake Eyes and Storm Shadow—who is later known as terrorist organization Cobra’s master ninja. Andrew Koji plays Storm Shadow, a.k.a. Tommy Arashikage.

True to MCU form, G.I. Joe seems to have brought Scarlett (Samara Weaving) in to “get the band together” so to speak. I suspect we’ll see more of her in future Joe films as she recruits others for the team. Meanwhile, Baroness (Ursula Corbero) seems to be performing the same role but for Cobra.

This film is filled with martial arts, spinning and slashing blades, ninja stunts and tricks, and morals—what Joe film would be complete without some of those? Just like the old ‘80s cartoons: “Knowing’s half the battle. G.I. Joe!” I’m just thankful they didn’t throw that in our faces at point-blank range like in the cartoons.

Another note from the film: Akiko (Haruka Abe), Kenta (Takehiro Hira), Hard Master (Iko Uwais) and Blind Master (Peter Mensah) were all interesting characters but most of them—especially Hard Master and Blind Master—could have used some more screen time to better establish their characters. True, though, it is called “Snake Eyes” and rightly-so: he was the central viewpoint character.

The martial arts film, Rated PG-13, received a 5.7/10 on IMDb.com, 38% on the Tomatometer, yet a 74% audience score—quite a gap between critics and fans on this one. It runs 2 hours and 1 minute.

Lastly, as I write this, I just watched Disney’s “The Jungle Cruise” today. To prepare, I watched “The African Queen” (1951) with Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn the night before. Bogart won an Academy Award for Best Actor for that film.

Obviously, the modern film is more exciting and upbeat and filled with humor than the classic film but it’s easy to see their similarities. Disney, a company known for creating little truly original

material—think about its animated feature films, only a small number are not based on a pre-existing fairy tale or property—decided to draw a river full of water from its own Jungle Cruise theme park rides and from the Indiana Jones films it also owns following its 2012 purchase of Lucasfilm Ltd. The House of Mouse also borrowed from storylines and situations featured in “The African Queen.” Some might call it paying homage to a true classic, though.

While many fans will attend to see Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson (Skipper Frank Wolff) in another of his action-role performances—though more comedic than some of his other roles, Emily Blunt (Lily Houghton) really steals the show as a female Indiana Jones-style character. She’s the one you end up caring more about and rooting for.

I found the plot and characters interesting and charismatic. There was a nice plot twist that’s fairly well hidden. No spoilers here. Overall, I really enjoyed the film and had a good time—it’s quite the adventure story.

The fantasy action-adventure film, Rated PG-13, received a 6.9/10 on IMDb.com, 62% on the Tomatometer, and a high 94% audience score—another split between the critics and fans. It runs 2 hours and 7 minutes.

“The show must go on.”

NOTE: T. Rob Brown was a freelance writer on the officially licensed Marvel Heroic Roleplaying Game’s “Civil War” and “Young Avengers-Runaways” books (2012) for Margaret Weis Productions.