

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Movie Review column for *Dvino Magazine*, a monthly production of *The Laredo Morning Times*.

January 2022

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2021: Year in review

By T. Rob Brown

Looking back on the disastrous 2020 for cinema, 2021 might seem like a dream. Ignoring the contrast in those years, it certainly wasn't a cake walk.

We watched as some cinemas reopened amid the pandemic, some remained closed permanently or extensively through most of 2021. Other cinemas closed yet again after the reopening. Some simply just shut down for good. We even saw examples of this locally in Laredo.

Just as we thought 2021 finished taking everything it could, we heard the news break on New Year's Eve about Betty White. Our hearts sank one final time before flipping our calendars over to 2022.

Shy of her milestone 100th birthday, White's planned birthday bash became the talk of Hollywood and streaming services before her passing. She reportedly suffered a stroke six days prior to her eventual death.

I'd like to dedicate a moment of silence in memory of "The Golden Girls," "Hot in Cleveland" and "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" star. For cinema fans, you might remember her from the 2009 rom-com "The Proposal," where she played Grandma Annie. During production, she crafted a friendship with stars Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds.

“The world looks different now,” Reynolds posted on social media with an image of White in memorial. “She was great at defying expectation. She managed to grow very old and somehow, not old enough. We’ll miss you, Betty.”

Reynolds and White exchanged social media posts through the years. He joked about her as his “ex-girlfriend.”

“I’ve heard Ryan can’t get over his thing for me,” White told People magazine while promoting her planned 100th birthday celebration, which would have been Jan. 17, “but Robert Redford is ‘The One.’”

Despite those low notes, 2021 did offer some cinema highs. Two of those even included Reynolds—“Free Guy” and “Red Notice.”

One film this past year proved the pandemic wasn’t strong enough to keep moviegoers out of cinemas: “Spider-Man: No Way Home.” Spidey and Marvel Cinematic Universe fans showed their enthusiasm by pushing this Dec. 17 release to the top movie of the year in ticket sales.

Not only the top financial gainer of the year, it reached No. 6 in top lifetime grosses, as of Jan. 10. It also reached No. 6 for top lifetime grosses for MPAA Rating PG-13, according to Box Office Mojo.

Bringing in a phenomenal \$1.5 billion internationally so far, the Jon Watts-directed film ended the “Home trilogy.” With a budget of \$200 million, it proved highly profitable for Sony Pictures and Marvel Studios. This type of Blockbuster scenario is something we haven’t seen since before the pandemic.

While the U.S. (domestic) numbers tend to be the largest for most MCU films, it’s impressive just how much other countries factor into these major figures. Domestically, the film earned \$668,356 so far. Behind the U.S., the U.K. chimed in at \$94,493—not surprising since two of the top-billed actors in the film, Tom Holland and Benedict Cumberbatch, are pretty much national treasures for the U.K. The third country on the international sales was Mexico at \$65,905, according to Box Office Mojo. I guess that shows that Mexican citizens are bigger fans of the wallcrawler than the citizens of most countries.

I’ll do my best here to avoid spoilers in case you haven’t seen the film yet. We once again return to the world of Peter Parker (Holland) as he deals with the aftermath of 2017’s “Spider-Man: Far From Home.” In the prior film, Spider-Man’s secret identity was revealed by Mysterio (Jake Gyllenhaal) as reported by J. Jonah Jameson (J.K. Simmons); this, of course, is one of the primary plot points moving into the most recent film. Things get crazy and Peter seeks out the help of Doctor Strange (Cumberbatch) but things get even crazier.

What Watts does with this film is not only create a conclusion for his “Home trilogy” but also reaches some resolution for multiple prior Spider-Man films released by Sony. The film certainly isn’t perfect but it includes some amazing action sequences, some fun surprises and a heck of a lot of nostalgia for Spidey fans. Overall, it was more than just a worthy successor in the franchise.

“Spider-Man: No Way Home,” Rated PG-13, runs 2 hours and 28 minutes. It received an 8.8/10 on the International Movie Database, 93% certified fresh on Rotten Tomatoes and an impressive 98% audience score. On a personal note, I give the film two thumbs up—definitely the best MCU film of the year.

That's saying something when you realize the MCU offered four films, in addition to five Disney+ series, this past year. It was a banner year for Marvel Studios.

"Black Widow" led off the MCU films this year on July 9. We reviewed it in a previous Monthly Movies article. I give it two thumbs up.

Sept. 3 introduced us to "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings" and newcomer Simu Liu (Shang-Chi) along with Awkwafina (Katy) and appearances by Benedict Wong (Wong). Destin Daniel Cretton directs this martial-arts epic set in the Marvel style.

Combining wonderful scenery and action sequences, the film ranges from the U.S. to China to a mythical plane of existence. This film left me wanting to see a lot more from Shang-Chi in the future. I'm the type of martial arts film fan who watches them in the original Mandarin or Cantonese with the subtitles on—I can't stand bad dubs. The only times I watch dubs are when it's Jackie Chan or Jet Li, who often voice their own English dubs. Thankfully, dubbing isn't a concern here since it's filmed with both English and Chinese languages and subtitled where necessary for U.S. audiences. All I can say is that it's about time we got a great Asian-led Marvel franchise in cinema.

"Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings" is rated PG-13 and runs 2 hours and 12 minutes. It received a 7.5/10 from IMDb, 91% certified fresh on Rotten Tomatoes and an impressive 98% audience score. I also give this two thumbs up.

Then on Nov. 5, Marvel introduced us to "The Eternals." Despite its many interesting facets, this was my least favorite Marvel project of the year. Honestly, I was more excited about the final post-credits scene than anything else in the film.

This Chloe Zhao-directed film promised to be the most diverse film yet for Marvel and it did succeed in that aspect. Overall, the casting choices seemed spot on. Honestly, I thought the performance by Angelina Jolie (Thena) was a bit lackluster. I felt myself not really associating with any of the characters too well. The character I was most interested in was played by Kit Harrington (Dane Whitman), as I hoped to see the Black Knight wield the Ebony Blade.

I also think the director missed out on a "Game of Thrones" reference opportunity as the two former Stark brothers (Harrington and Richard Madden (Ikaris)) faced toward one another in a scene. The same type of missed opportunity when Robert Downey Jr. (Iron Man) shared scenes with Cumberbatch (Doctor Strange) and no one ever made a Sherlock Holmes reference—not even a simple "elementary" or "the game is afoot."

Kumail Nanjiana (Kingo) and his sidekick were two of the highlights of the film. Nanjiana's skills as a comedian and actor helped lighten the mood from time-to-time in what was otherwise a fairly serious and drawn-out film for Marvel.

The other major star power, aside from Jolie, came from Salma Hayek (Ajak). This was exciting to see the first Latina in the MCU—they removed "Agents of SHIELD" from canon so we can't count Yo-Yo Elena Rodriguez in the MCU canon, unfortunately. For those of you who've seen "The Eternals," you understand my disappointment at the end of Ajak's story.

"The Eternals," rated PG-13, runs 2 hours and 37 minutes. It received a 6.8/10 on IMDb, 47% rotten on the Tomatometer and a 78% audience score. I give it a half-thumb up.

After all those Marvel entries, it might seem like Disney Studios would be done for the whole year—but nothing stops the House of Mouse.

“Jungle Cruise” hit cinemas and streaming on July 30. We reviewed this one also in a previous Monthly Movies article. I give it one and a half thumbs up.

On Nov. 24, just in time for the family holiday season, Disney delivered “Encanto.” This animated film focuses on the fantastical magic family Madrigal. In typical Disney style, it’s filled with musical numbers, magic and important life morals.

The family Madrigal must learn from its history and the true meaning of family if they’re going to survive. Jared Bush and Byron Howard direct this film which focuses on Maribel Madrigal (voiced by Stephanie Beatriz). My favorite musical number in the film is “We don’t talk about Bruno.” Bruno is played by John Leguizamo.

Honestly, I thought this was the best animated film of the year. I give it two thumbs up. “Encanto,” rated PG, runs 1 hour and 39 minutes. It received a 7.3/10 on IMDb, 91% certified fresh on Rotten Tomatoes and a 93% audience score.

Another big entry for Disney included the Reynolds-led “Free Guy,” released by 20th Century Studios on Aug. 13. For me, this was the best comedy film of the year. It received a 7.2/10 on IMDb, 80% certified fresh on the Tomatometer and a strong 94% audience score. I give it two thumbs up.

Sony Pictures released “Venom: Let There Be Carnage” on Oct. 1. Tom Hardy returned as Eddie Brock/Venom for the second film in the franchise. This time, he had a little help from the legendary Woody Harrelson as Cletus Kasady/Carnage. Naomie Harris portrayed Shriek.

Director Andy Serkis (Gollum from “The Lord of the Rings” and “The Hobbit” trilogies) adapted the story from the comics run of Maximum Carnage and took it in quite a different direction. While I certainly don’t disagree with the casting of Harrelson as Carnage, it seems the character was made less harsh for movie audiences—probably to get the PG-13 rating—and lost much of the sinister nature from the comics. Carnage is literally one of Spider-Man’s deadliest foes—and Spidey has one of the largest rogue galleries outside of Batman. I can’t see a Carnage movie doing the character justice without an R rating. He is evil incarnate.

The film runs 1 hour and 26 minutes. It received a 6/10 on IMDb, 58% rotten on the Tomatometer and 84% audience score. I give it one thumb up.

For me, one of the worst blockbuster films of the year was “F9: The Fast Saga.” Oh sure, it entertained and one-upped each of the previous Furious films. This film felt like Arthur “Fonzie” Fonzarelli jumping the shark all over again.

The film came out on June 25. Vin Diesel (Dominic Toretto) returns with Michelle Rodriguez (Letty) in the Justin Lin-directed outing. John Cena (Jakob) joins the franchise as Dom’s long-lost brother. I can only assume this story arc somehow resulted from the online feud between huge action stars Diesel and Johnson. Hopefully that feud is just for publicity.

“F9,” PG-13, runs 2 hours and 25 minutes. It received a 5.2/10 on IMDb, 59% rotten on the Tomatometer and an 82% audience score. I give it a half thumb up. This could have been a contender for action movie of the year but instead, it undershot the competition.

Speaking of Cena, back on Aug. 6, director James Gunn brought us his own vision of “The Suicide Squad” from DC Comics. This film is twisted yet fun on many levels.

Margot Robbie returns again as Harley Quinn—a role she performs so well. Proving herself time and time again as a talented actor, Robbie tests the range of DC’s psychotic harlequin with another great performance.

She is joined by Cena (Peacemaker), Idris Elba (Bloodsport), Viola Davis (Amanda Waller) and the voice of Sylvester Stallone (King Shark). Each actor’s performance in this film exceeded expectations where drama, comedy and a bizarre vision merged into one unique film.

“The Suicide Squad,” rated R, runs 2 hours and 12 minutes. It received a 7.2/10 on IMDb, 90% certified fresh on the Tomatometer and an 82% audience score. I give it two thumbs up.

One of the last movies I personally watched for 2021 was “Ghostbusters: Afterlife,” which released back on Nov. 19. Due to the holidays, I didn’t catch it until after Christmas. I wasn’t quite sure what to expect from this film. I’ve loved the original film since I was a kid.

Jason Reitman follows in his father Ivan’s footsteps directing this installment in the Ghostbusters franchise. Finn Wolfhard of “Stranger Things” fame plays Trevor and Paul Rudd (Mr. Grooberson) joins the franchise. Personally, I loved the homage and nostalgia in this film.

It starts off a bit slow but does some storytelling that takes a while to pay off—but when it does, you get the feels. This felt like a worthy successor to the franchise even if it’s a bit redundant in some aspects.

Rated PG-13, the comedic fantasy runs 2 hours and 4 minutes. It received a 7.4/10 on IMDb, 62% on the Tomatometer and a high 95% audience score. I give it one and a half thumbs up.

The final movie of 2021 that I’d like to talk about is “Dune,” which released on Oct. 22. What a magnificent piece of visual storytelling. If the sequel is just as good, this could be one of the best pieces of sci-fi cinema in a long time.

Based on Frank Herbert’s iconic series of novels, which began in 1964, this is the third attempt to make a successful “Dune” story visually. The first film came out in 1984, met with mixed reviews. For those who read the books, it worked well. For those who hadn’t, it was a confusing mess. In the early 2000s, a DVD director’s cut helped solve some of the confusion but it never made it to Blu-ray or 4K, which both feature the theatrical cut.

In 2000, the SyFy Channel released a “Frank Herbert’s Dune” miniseries, which expanded on the story and made it clearer. It did well enough to get a sequel miniseries in 2003 for “Children of Dune.”

But none of these hold a candle to the imagery and storytelling in the newest “Dune” film starring Timothee Chalamet (Paul Atreides), Zendaya (Chani), Oscar Isaac (Duke Leto Atreides), Jason Momoa (Duncan Idaho), Stellan Skarsgard (Baron Vladimir Harkonnen), Josh Brolin (Gurney Halleck),

Dave Bautista (Beast Rabban Harkonnen) and directed by Denis Villeneuve. Warner Bros. Pictures hit a home run with this one. I can't wait for the second installment.

Rated PG-13, the film runs 2 hours and 35 minutes. It received an 8.1/10 on IMDb, 83% certified fresh on the Tomatometer and a solid 90% audience score. I give it two thumbs up.

"The show must go on."