

The Marvel Machine Spins Its Web: *Black Widow* Review

By Aurelio De Leon, Jr.

After a year of waiting for its release, *Black Widow* is finally out in theaters and available on Disney Plus. Some of the big questions swirling in my mind were: was it too late for this movie, did it need to be made, and finally will it matter in the grand scheme of the fourth phase of the Marvel franchise? With the slew of Marvel shows and films now leaning in the direction of mystic arts, magic, time travel, and the multiverse, it's hard to see where this movie can fit in. On top of that, with it taking place between the events of Civil War and Infinity War and of course Black Widow being dead, it could be difficult to tell if this film would hold any weight. My only assumption before going into this movie was that it would somehow have to tie into *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, the only show in this grounded spy action genre, and after seeing it without saying too much I will say that it does in fact have some connective tissue moving forward. While that may be enough for some people, I still had some of those questions that needed answering. Would the film have any stakes knowing what we know? Would it be a worthy farewell to an integral character that was mostly in the background? And most importantly, is the film good?

Regarding the initial question, I can't quite jump into it without first getting into the great cast and characters that propel the movie forward and even manage to support Scarlett Johansson as her character didn't really have motivation...in her own movie. I thought Florence Pugh as Yelena Belova was excellent and the most welcome addition to the MCU, bringing a menacing but playful nature to her spy assassin character and sister to Natasha Romanoff. Pugh expertly balances being a heartless killer with a deep-rooted innocence that clings on from a childhood longing to be a part of a family, and in that short time she manages to get me invested in her and even her relationship with Natasha. Additionally, David Harbour and Rachel Weisz as Alexei Shostakov and Melina Vostokoff respectively, play well off of each other and the rest of the cast as they navigate this estranged family dynamic. Alexei's alter ego as the Russian Captain America, Red Guardian, gives Harbour more to work with as a pretty good comic relief, constantly comparing himself to Cap, although they don't give the character much time to shine story wise or action wise. On the other hand, Weisz's Melina is underutilized and falls by the wayside even more with not much character motivation as a scientist of the villain of this film, but overall, the Black Widow family works well together and have a good chaotic energy worth some exploration. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for Natasha's character who tends to feel like a passenger in her own stand-alone film, even against the villain who has more enthusiasm than her.

Speaking of the villain played by Ray Winstone, Dreykov is effective enough and easy to hate but is also a pretty cliché mustache-twirling villain with standard world dominating motivations. That being said, I think that the means by which he wants to rule is legitimately threatening to the world and could have huge ramifications for this universe. Taskmaster, however, was a disappointment for me, the character was severely underutilized and seemingly inconsequential

as of now and may or may not even possess Taskmaster's innate ability to copy combat styles and learn from them. As for *Black Widow*, audiences might be wondering what there is to gain from a character who is already dead, and sadly I think the film isn't too successful in giving her character good motivation and only brief meaningful interactions that barely provide strong closure for Natasha. I was invested enough in her life before the Avengers with her makeshift family relationships that I cared whether she would be able to tie up some of those loose ends before her inevitable death, but in total I wanted more from her than the meandering *Black Widow* that we got. Considering all of that, I believe I can answer two of my questions. Were there stakes? Mildly, yes there were, not for Natasha obviously but for her sister and her impact moving forward. Was it a meaningful way to wrap up Natasha's story? Kind of; it provides her a small amount of closure but ultimately doesn't seem to showcase anything unique or prominent enough for this movie to be made, other than to set up Florence Pugh's more likeable character. As for my last question, regarding whether the movie was good or not...keep reading to find out!

The short answer is it's another average movie. It's serviceable enough and when stacking it against the MCU, it's not their best by a long shot (then again what can beat *Infinity War* for me) but it definitely belongs in the middle to lower tier. As a film, *Black Widow* tries hard to stand on its own; some action scenes and fight choreography were grueling, but it was pretty standard as a whole. It was competently shot to accentuate the gritty fighting style for a spy action film like this, but the action always left more to be desired; not to mention Widow seemed overly invincible throughout this with possibly the strongest plot armor of all time (I-know-you-won't-die-because-you-already-died-in-another-movie prequel armor). The costume design was very strong and felt lived in, although some of the setpieces felt forgettable and even Jason Bourne-esque. The dialogue was simple but effective in hitting necessary emotional beats especially for a band of characters that don't share their feelings too often, a little goes a long way and the same can be said about the performances. With the exception of a song cover near the beginning, I don't have any complaints about the score; it pumps you up when the scene calls for it but it has enough subtlety for the emotional moments too. Again, if you're already a huge fan, you're gonna see this movie but if you're hesitant, I would say this film is a skip. It knows what it is, knows exactly how to execute it, and does so as a mediocre set up film without much flare or risk. As always stick around for those end credits for a small crossover and potentially what lies in store for the *Black Widow* mantle.