

CULTURE

'Black Panther: Wakanda Forever' Is a Touching Tribute to Chadwick Boseman: Review

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This image released by Marvel Studios shows Letitia Wright in a scene from "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever." (Marvel Studios via AP)

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Ryan Coogler knocked it out of the park and accomplished a near-impossible task with Black Panther: Wakanda Forever. It is a worthy sequel film that stands firmly on its own, so much so that it doesn't really feel like it's part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Since Black Panther dropped in 2018, anticipation around the follow-up had been steadily mounting. Questions and speculation about the second film's plot made for easy conversation immediately after the first's release. Then, there were the hypotheticals that turned into rumors about potential castings; Kendrick Lamar taking up a Killmonger-like role comes to mind.

Black Panther was widely hailed as a success and accumulated piles of accolades, picking up three Oscars and even getting nominated for Best Picture. It remains one of the highest-grossing films in history after earning \$1.3 billion, and it would also become one of Chadwick Boseman's most lauded performances in the starring role of T'Challa.

Fast forward to 2020, and not only did the COVID-19 pandemic have the world turned on its head, but tragic, non-fictional death was all too prevalent. For a long while, a sense of ominousness oozed. That feeling would be realized when Boseman was taken too soon by cancer late that summer. Fans mourned his passing, and the tributes were endless. Then, after some time, the obvious question about how the Black Panther franchise would move forward without T'Challa surfaced. Often.

Couldn't they just recast him and be done with it? To be honest, with Coogler so deeply involved in the project and how he has described his relationship with Boseman and his family, the obvious answer was no. It seemed only right that the film pay tribute to Boseman given just how impactful his portrayal of T'Challa was on the world. Still, how could Coogler and Joe Robert Cole, co-writers of both films, deliver a project that could live up to the expectations of the first without its main star — the one responsible for much of its success?

The simple answer is: watch the film.

WARNING: SPOILERS BELOW

In September, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige revealed to Empire magazine that recasting T'Challa had been off the table because it was "much too soon." So with that, the film opens with an ode to Boseman and his Black Panther role simultaneously. It truly felt like a funeral that was prepared for public viewing after family and close friends were able to mourn him privately. The emotional weaving in and out of the MCU and real life as viewers mourned T'Challa and Boseman faded — for a while — eventually.

Then, when we reenter the world of Wakanda, one of the biggest immediate takeaways from the film is how female-centric it is. The women in this film are absolutely badass and really carried the project on their backs. The Dora Milaje warriors made a fierce return and as usual and did what they had to do during the epic fight scenes. Angela Bassett, in particular, who plays Queen Ramonda, was tapped to take on a bigger role in this project, and it would not at all be a surprise if she finally lands an Academy Award for her performance.

Letitia Wright, who played T'Challa's sister Shuri and is clearly the leading lady in the sequel, more than delivered, given what it took to get to this point. She suffered a fractured shoulder, concussion, and other injuries while shooting a motorcycle scene on set in Boston in August 2021.

Wright leads an eventual battle between the Wakandans and an underwater civilization called the Talokan. On the surface, it could seem like a simple bout between two super-advanced civilizations but Coogler is telling a deeper story here.

The Talokan, whose way of life seemed to be inspired by the ancient Mayans and other early Mesoamerican civilizations, clash with the Wakandans over the highly-coveted resource, vibranium, which both kingdoms possess. Namor, king of Talokan, warns Wakanda about the outside world attempting to infiltrate for the precious mineral which led to the conflict.

Coogler unapologetically addresses social issues and seems to thrive in that space. Much like the original Black Panther film explored the complicated relationship between Black Americans and Africans, Wakanda Forever explores the relationships between Black and Brown people.

Aside from Eternals, Black Panther: Wakanda Forever is easily one of the best Marvel projects to stand on its own and even feels like it exists apart from the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Coogler, Cole, and Feige did not come to play and landed on solid ground with the close of Phase 4.

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