

Black Widow: The surrounding controversies are more interesting and revealing than the film

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Black Widow is the 24th film based on characters in Marvel Comics. It follows Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson) and her “family” members foiling a Russian general’s plot to dominate the globe. Written by American screenwriter Eric Pearson and directed by Australian Cate Shortland, the film also features Florence Pugh, Rachel Weisz, David Harbour and Ray Winstone.

Released July 9 simultaneously in 4,100 theaters in the US and for streaming on Disney+, *Black Widow* has already taken in a good deal of money, some \$320 million worldwide. The film’s budget is estimated to be \$200 million.

Shortland’s film was shot in 2019 and originally scheduled to be released by Disney Studios on May 1, 2020. The outbreak of the pandemic disrupted that plan. In mid-March 2020, *Variety* explained that Disney had already delayed the opening of a number of its movies, but had held off postponing *Black Widow* “in the hopes that it wouldn’t have to scrap another big film. But the move was inevitable since movie theaters in multiple states, including New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Washington, have been ordered to close.”

Black Widow’s release was first shifted to November 2020. In September 2020, Disney delayed the release again, this time until May 7, 2021. In March 2021, the film’s opening was pushed back a third time, until three weeks ago.

Black Widow opens in 1995. A pair of Russian undercover agents, Alexei Shostakov (Harbour) and Melina Vostokoff (Weisz), live in Ohio with their two daughters, Natasha (Johansson) and Yelena (Pugh), pretending to be a normal suburban family. Their mission complete and about to be apprehended, the couple take off for Cuba with their “children.” Their chief, General Dreykov (Winstone), has the young girls enrolled in the “Red Room,” a program that takes girls and makes them over into super-assassins known as “Black Widows.”

Two decades later, Natasha, having defected from the Russians and become one of the Avengers, an American-based organization of “enhanced and gifted individuals,” is on the run from the US government. She is contacted by her younger sister Yelena, who has been operating as one of the Black Widows.

An antidote frees Yelena and she sends Natasha additional vials of the antidote, hoping that the latter will free Dreykov’s other Widows from their mental and physical slavery.

Eventually, the entire fake former family reassembles outside St. Petersburg. They determine to find and destroy Dreykov and his Red Room headquarters, located in the clouds. Dreykov’s menacing enforcer, Taskmaster (Olga Kurylenko), is only one of the obstacles in their way.

Black Widow is more or less what one would expect. There are numerous fights, many explosions and various people and things flying through space, interspersed by sequences of dialogue, some of it comical, that offer the characters and audience members the opportunity to rest up and prepare for the next round of combat and explosions.

The filmmakers have sought to introduce certain psychologically realistic elements in among the special effects and computer-generated imagery. Natasha and the wisecracking Yelena have a certain sisterly bond, and rivalry, although they are not actually related. And Alexei and Melina do their best, when conditions are suitable, to act as parents to their counterfeit offspring.

Pugh, Weisz and Harbour are highly effective performers, and Johansson, although a little stiffer, is certainly appealing enough. The four have some amusing moments together, bantering and bickering. Of course, their overall situation—a former family of Russian spies now taking on a master-villain who wants to run the world—is not the slightest bit plausible and almost nothing here makes much sense, but one has to take one’s amusement where one can find it during a superhero film. *Black Widow* is not as tedious and self-serious an entry as some of them. But that is setting the bar low.

The anti-Russian theme is front and center, although Alexei, a former Soviet “super soldier,” is treated with a certain condescending amiability. The feminist orientation can also hardly be missed. *Black Widow* works itself out, in the end, as a full-scale assault on and destruction of the evil “patriarchy.” When Dreykov’s youthful female murderers are finally liberated from their thralldom, one asks Natasha what she and her comrades should do. Natasha replies sagely, “You get to

make your own choices now.” On the whole, however, it is not clear why women fighting other women (and men) or women blowing things up represents a step forward.

How does a movie like this win praise from 80 percent of the critics? What we wrote in 2016 about *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony and Joe Russo), the film whose events immediately precede those in *Black Widow* within the Marvel Cinematic Universe time-frame, holds true here almost word for word: “The action sequences, and there are many of them, are often difficult to follow. The relationships are simplistic and clichéd. There are a few amusing lines in the nearly two and a half hour film. There is also the nearly inevitable, vaguely anti-Russian angle. Overall, it is impossible to care about anyone and anything in this work. ...

“In any event, the issues and dilemmas facing the characters, the gestures in the direction of ‘psychology,’ are mere scaffolding for a large-scale money-making operation. What passes for film criticism is so prostituted in the US at this point that hardly anyone can state the obvious: that this is a bloated, pointless and dull film, which simply kills (truly murders!) a few hours in the viewer’s life.”

The release of *Black Widow* has provoked two controversies. The first simply involves the pungent comments of veteran actor Stephen Dorff (*Blood and Wine*, *Blade*, *Cecil B. Demented*). A “despairing” Dorff first told the *Independent* in Britain that the 2021 Academy Awards “were the most embarrassing thing I’ve ever seen ... My business is becoming a big game show. You have actors that don’t have a clue what they’re doing. You have filmmakers that don’t have a clue what they’re doing.”

Dorff went on to say that he was still searching out good material “because I don’t want to be in *Black Widow*.” About that film, which he had not yet seen, he commented, “It looks like garbage to me. It looks like a bad video game. I’m embarrassed for those people. I’m embarrassed for Scarlett! I’m sure she got paid five, seven million bucks, but I’m embarrassed for her. I don’t want to be in those movies. I really don’t. I’ll find that kid director that’s gonna be the next [Stanley] Kubrick and I’ll act for him instead.”

Stating these obvious facts, which everyone knows to be true but which cannot be referred to in polite company, brought a torrent of criticism down on Dorff’s head. Unfortunately, he later apologized, as is the Hollywood actor’s wont under such circumstances.

The other issue, more intriguing than the film’s drama, emerged earlier this month when Johansson filed a lawsuit against Disney, charging the giant company with violating her contract when it released *Black Widow* on Disney+ as well as in theaters. According to *Time*, the actress asserts in court documents that her deal “guaranteed an exclusive theatrical release and that her salary for the film was largely tied to box office performance. By debuting the movie on streaming at the same time, Johansson believes Disney cost her an estimated

\$50 million.”

In a statement dripping with hypocrisy, a spokesman for the company that seems to own half the entertainment industry told the *Wall Street Journal* that Johansson’s suit had no merit and that it was “especially sad and distressing in its callous disregard for the horrific and prolonged global effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.”

The contentious issue has arisen as a result of the decision by various Hollywood studios, under conditions (or taking advantage) of the pandemic, to release films on streaming platforms, rather than or in addition to opening them in theaters.

Time comments, “While we may not shed a tear for the multi-millionaires losing out on a major payday, actors with less power and leverage, as well as professionals in other roles in the film industry, will be impacted by these deals too. ... Most studios either have launched a streaming outlet in the last couple years—Disney has Disney+, Warner Bros., HBO Max—or cut a deal with an already-existing service to release some movies to streaming, as MGM recently did with Amazon. With theaters closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, many studios decided to release the big-budget films that would traditionally top the box office to these online formats.”

John Berlinski, an attorney representing Johansson, told the *Journal* that “This will surely not be the last case where Hollywood talent stands up to Disney and makes it clear that, whatever the company may pretend, it has a legal obligation to honor its contracts.”

In December 2020, Warner Bros. announced that it would release all 17 of its films planned for this year on HBO Max and in theaters simultaneously. British director Christopher Nolan (*Tenet*) denounced the action, telling *Entertainment Tonight* that there was “such controversy around it, because they didn’t tell anyone.” In 2021, Nolan went on, Warner has “got some of the top filmmakers in the world, they’ve got some of the biggest stars in the world who worked for years in some cases on these projects very close to their hearts that are meant to be big-screen experiences. They’re meant to be out there for the widest possible audiences. ... And now they’re being used as a loss-leader for the streaming service—for the fledgling streaming service—without any consultation. ... A real bait and switch.”



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