

'Black Widow' struggles to decide whether to be a spy movie or a superhero flick

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<< out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 134 minutes

This film will be released at theaters July 9. It will also be available through Disney+ with Premier Access.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, it has now been more than two years since a movie based on a Marvel superhero has been released. For comic book fans, it has been a long wait, but a new title has finally arrived that officially kicks off a new phase in the comic book studio's plans. "Black Widow" is a prequel based on the popular Russian spy who played a supporting role in many titles over the past decade. As expected, the action on display is fun to watch, but the story seems to be indecisive, attempting to combine elements of a more realistic spy movie with superhero elements thrown in.

At times, it struggles to find the proper balance.

Following the events of 2016's "Captain America: Civil War," Natasha Romanoff aka Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), goes on the run, keeping a low profile. In the meantime, another

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Russian Black Widow agent named Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh), discovers a disturbing conspiracy. Dreykov (Ray Winstone), the man running the program, has developed technology that enables him to control the minds of his agents. We soon realize that Romanoff and Belova have a personal history.

As children, they were assigned to work with Alexi Shostakov aka Red Guardian (David Harbour), and Melina Vostokoff (Rachel Weisz), pretending to be an American family during a spy operation. Hunted down, the two agents attempt to reform their surrogate brood, so that they can locate and stop the sinister Dreykov before his team wipes them out.

Initially, the tone is quieter and more subdued, with only an inkling of fantastic abilities on the part of the characters. A flashback involving a young Romanov hints at the dangers involved in spy work and the dangers of being discovered by enemies. It's an interesting conceit, but the movie soon heads in a very different and more conventional direction with the narrative. It isn't long before Romanoff finds herself squaring off against a silent and threatening figure with armor and a shield.

There is still some mystery to the proceedings and the fight choreography between the protagonist and assailant is exciting and well-staged. However, the movie can't help but start upping the ante and the battles become more exaggerated, including an elaborate confrontation in the strangely quiet streets of Budapest.

The family dynamic does offer some opportunity for humor and character development. The egotistical Red Guardian Shostakov provides solid comic relief as a self-aggrandizing superhero who is continually undermined. Belova is given plenty of amusingly blunt comments, too. Still, given that this is a standalone film devoted to Romanoff, one would expect more of the focus to be on her.

While there is the occasional tidbit about the lead and her history with the elite assassin unit, the movie ultimately becomes distracted with its new characters, in particular, fellow Black Widow Belova. It's evident that she is expected to take over the mantle should there be any follow-up films. At times, the writing is blunt and obvious in its attempts to bring this supporting character to the forefront.

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Of course, despite its attempts to avoid fantastic elements, the movie can't help but attempt a finale right out of a comic book flick. The final showdown employs some silly plot devices, and over-the-top explosions. It also shows the protagonist undertaking superhuman physical tasks. It's all entertaining enough, but the elements don't all fit together and the end result isn't as unique or memorable an experience as it wants to be.

The movie is certainly decent and provides a few good action scenes, as well as a couple of entertaining witticisms. However, it doesn't feel like either the dynamic spy flick or superhero feature that this character truly deserves. "Black Widow" can't quite choose what kind of movie it ultimately wants to be, playing it safe and leaving viewers a bit let down in the process.

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