

'Black Panther: Wakanda Forever' feels overstuffed, but still has heart

Written by Glenn Kay

Friday, 11 November 2022 17:12

Rating: 3 out of 4

Running Time: 161 minutes

This feature from Marvel Studios and Disney will be playing exclusively in theaters on Nov. 11.

Many sequels face production challenges, most notably living up to the original film and adding new elements to avoid feeling like a retread. "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" has an even bigger challenge to contend with. Sadly, the charismatic star of the original film, Chadwick Boseman, passed away less than two years after its release. Instead of recasting the role, the studio has used this tragic event to inspire the story's narrative.

Like several other titles in the Marvel universe, the film feels overstuffed. However, there is plenty of heart on display as well as thrills to make up for any deficiencies.

The film opens with audiences learning that Wakanda King T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) aka Black Panther, has died after an undisclosed illness. While mother Ramonda (Angela Bassett) grieves, sister Shuri (Letitia Wright) harbors anger after her sibling's unexpected death.

As word spreads, other nations seem ready to take advantage of the situation and secure the country's greatest and most powerful resource, Vibranium. When a U.S. vessel containing a machine that can identify the substance is attacked, tensions arise between Wakanda and world leaders. With assistance from special forces head Okoye (Danai Gurira), Shuri decides to investigate the incident. The trail leads the pair to brilliant Cambridge student Riri Williams (Dominique Thorne), as well as new foe Namor (Tenoch Huerta) aka Sub-Mariner and with his undersea army, who want to see the surface world destroyed.

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As mentioned previously, the movie has a lot to contend with over its running time. This includes handing the reins over and focusing on a different lead, updating viewers on numerous supporting characters, as well as introducing and providing backstories for new additions.

One bit of good news is that Letitia Wright is excellent as Shuri and, despite being a considerably young protagonist, manages to successfully carry the film on her shoulders. In addition to being sharp-witted, the filmmakers also take time to deal with her feelings of loss and fury, depicting it as both a motivating force and a potentially negative trait.

In fact, in general the movie should be complemented for trying to add more layers to familiar characters that are all experiencing loss in different ways.

The movie also looks spectacular (it was screened in IMAX for this reviewer). There is a nice visual contrast between the African nation of Wakanda and Namor's undersea world, resulting in some pretty photography as the two different kingdoms are put into potential conflict. While likely augmented with computer effects, the underwater photography in the ocean depths is particularly striking.

And when the action set-pieces do occur, they are well-edited and exciting to watch. Memorable moments include a tense confrontation on a bridge and an elaborate raid that results in several casualties.

Yet, like in other recent Marvel adaptations, there are a few minor hiccups. In addition to all the characters described, there are subplots involving Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), as well as CIA agent Everett K. Ross (Martin Freeman) and his relationship with recurring figure Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus). While delivered efficiently, all of the subplots and exposition slow the pacing.

Additionally, although foe Namor poses a threat, he doesn't always look intimidating while flying around with bird wings on his ankles (I'm sure it works better in the comics). And while Riri Williams has a part to play in the story and is being primed for bigger things in the future, she is similar to Shuri in too many respects and quickly fades into the background. The climax also fails to resolve a lot of the conflict that has been set up (although this is intentional in order to set up more movies).

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Despite these oddities and the overabundance of supporting characters, “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever” is still a good-looking and impressive comic book spectacle. Yes, Marvel superhero fatigue is beginning to set in, but the unique approach taken to this story is intriguing. Overall, it is one of the stronger chapters from this phase and will keep this reviewer’s attention throughout.

And one final note to Marvel enthusiasts. There is a warm-hearted extra scene at the close of the first section of credits, but unlike other franchise titles there are no additional add-ons at the close of the feature.

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