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A MARVELous New Hero

Welcome back to the Shark Sentinel, and if you read my “WandaVision” article last year, to my Marvel rants! Marvel has been rather busy these past few months. After a lack of content throughout 2020, it seems the Marvel gods (and no, I don’t mean Thor and Loki) pitied us and wanted to rectify our Marvel-less (but less than marvelous) situation. This summer was filled with new Marvel releases, such as “Loki”, “What If...?” and “Black Widow”. With the premiere of “Black Widow”, Marvel started their most ambitious period of film debuts to date, releasing four new movies within a six month block: “Black Widow” on July 9th, “Shang-Chi” on September 3rd, “The Eternals” on November 5th, and the highly anticipated “Spider-Man: No Way Home” on December 17th (no lie, I didn’t Google a single one of those dates because I already have them memorized, oops). The second of these movies to release took back theaters, reinvigorated the present-day Marvel timeline, and has had an immense social impact: “Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings”. SPOILERS AHEAD! If you’re stopping now because you haven’t watched “Shang-Chi” yet, go watch it, and then come back, please!

At the start of the movie, we are introduced to ‘Shaun’ (an Americanized version of the protagonist’s Chinese name) working as a valet and (not-so-)smoothly operating a BMW iX3 with his closest confidant and fellow skilled-driver, Katy. It was GEARing up (you’re welcome for the pun) to be more like a Fast & Furious movie here... it was even about *family*. We soon find out that Shang-Chi’s family dynamic is slightly unhealthy and one of his parents has already tried to kill him, so he fits in perfectly as an Avenger. His sister, XiaLing, is an instant icon, starting an underground empire and fighting ring as a teenager (what a boss). All of the characters who were intended to be skillful fighters had captivating fight sequences specific to their characters and unlike the action scenes of past Marvel movies. The mix of martial arts stunts and CGI weapons made the action new and thrilling. However, “Shang-Chi” brought more than just A-grade action sequences to the plate.

The movie provided some of the best comedic scenes in the MCU yet. This was thanks in no small part to the reemergence of actor Ben Kingsley as Trevor, or ‘the Mandarin’, and his new best friend Morris (YAY MORRIS, I hope he becomes an Avenger, too). Awkwafina perfectly portrays Shang-Chi’s best friend, Katy, allowing for some great laughs. She immediately became a personal hero of mine by singing “Hotel California” at a highly-trained super ninja. On another note, the movie’s cinematography was breath-taking, colorful and imaginative (shoutout to director Destin Daniel Cretton). We were taken into a whole new world with dreamlike, or rather legend-like, creatures.

The movie was strongly influenced by Chinese culture, incorporating symbols directly from Chinese legends. For example, the powerful strength of the dragon, both literally and symbolically depicted in the climax (sorry, not sorry, if this was a spoiler for you... you were already warned!). In fact, “Shang-Chi” is Marvel’s first superhero film starring an Asian leading hero. The film faced scrutiny even prior to release for being a mere “experiment” by Marvel, or a publicity attempt to present diversity with an Asian hero. But the cast spoke up, and explained both with their words and through the pure power of the film, itself, that they are so much more.

On September 3rd (the film’s release day), “Shang-Chi” actor, Simu Liu, posted, “The sun rose today to a world where Asian superheroes exist as the leads of their own story.” The movie’s soundtrack “showcases the next generation of Asian artists from around the world”, according to Marvel Studios. This past Halloween, kids were able to purchase the superhero costume of a hero that reflects their own heritage. Representation matters, especially in the media we consume, and especially in our superheroes. We all grow up admiring superheroes, but not everyone can see themselves in them. This summer’s “Black Widow” was an important superhero film for young girls everywhere. It was a tale about our strength, and our power to make our own choices. “Black Panther” was a cultural phenomenon, immersed in African roots presented in Wakanda and Black history told through Killmonger’s arc. And as is in “Shang-Chi”, the soundtrack of “Black Panther” reflects the cultural origins of the characters.

Marvel has a long list of upcoming projects already announced with a diverse panel of heroes at the center. Chinese, Pakistani, Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+, disabled, and women heroes are set to shine in Marvel’s Phase 4,

marking a new era of superheroes. Simu Liu recently wrote in an online takeover, “One thing that I hope comes out of this project is a realization that every community deserves to be represented in the superhero space. Superheroes represent the best in humanity, in strength of character and morality. They inspire hope and endless possibility. Once you see yourself reflected in that, you believe anything is possible.”

“Shang-Chi” was no “failed experiment”, but rather an explosion of mesmerizing scenes and a needed revitalization of theatres; it was a jaw-dropping start to Marvel’s Phase 4, present-day timeline. “Shang-Chi” smashed the Labor Day box-office record with an epic \$90 million domestically over the four days. While, yes, there have been higher numbers recorded for Marvel movies, the theatre-only release of “Shang-Chi” in this returning-of-theaters era was a decision made with uncertainty. However, after these numbers were recorded, Sony moved the release date of “Venom: Let There Be Carnage” up to October 1st, proving that the theatrical success of “Shang-Chi” marked a true return of cinema.

This movie came a long way. Simu Liu tweeted way back in July of 2014, “Hey @Marvel, great job with Cpt America and Thor. Now how about an Asian American hero?”, and again on December 3rd, 2018, “OK @Marvel, are we gonna talk or what #ShangChi”. Now, seven years from the original tweet, “Shang-Chi” is out. The film is arguably one of Marvel’s best origin-story movies yet. It sets the stage for the next phase of Marvel, incorporating previous characters like Wong (can’t believe I almost forgot to mention Wong in all of his glory), and introducing our newest Avenger. As stated in the film, “You are a product of all who came before you, the legacy of your family.” “Shang-Chi” was a beautifully-executed story of heritage and legacy, but it was also proof that the Marvel legacy will live on with a new hero. I, personally, cannot wait to see how this legacy continues. Oh, and I really hope “Shang-Chi 2” starts with everyone singing “Hotel California” at a karaoke bar again, please and thank you.