

Movie review: Zhao's touch resonates in Marvel's 'Eternals'

By Katie Walsh
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From its inception, "Eternals" was bound to be the black sheep of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Introducing a whole new gaggle of cosmic superheroes to the big screen is Oscar-winning director Chloe Zhao, who has been acclaimed for her lo-fi, almost documentary-style dramas like "The Rider" and "Nomadland." How she might adapt her approach to the fantastical (and factory-like) bombast of the MCU has puzzled fans and speculators, and indeed, "Eternals" is a strange film, both within context and on its own. But in the lookalike, soundalike and corporately synergistic MCU, perhaps that's not such a bad thing. "Weird" means it's at least interesting, and perhaps worth all the fervent online discourse it has generated.

The problem with most early discourse is that it often elides the film itself, participants endlessly batting around well-chewed nug-

gets pulled from early trailers and reviews devoid of context, so let's get into what "Eternals" actually is.

"Eternals" is a dense, heavy fantasy text that asks the audience to suspend their irony addiction for a couple of hours, which is perhaps too tall an order. It opens with a long scroll about the "Celestials" (giant cosmic creatures), the "Deviants" (bad monsters) and the "Eternals" (sent to Earth by the Celestials to defend humans from Deviants). The crew of 10 humanoid Eternals sent (presumably) from a planet named Olympia include the leader, Ajak (Salma Hayek), weapons mistress Thena (Angelina Jolie), laser eyes Ikaris (Richard Madden), matter-changer Sersi (Gemma Chan), engineering expert Phastos (Brian Tyree Henry), mind controller Druiq (Barry Keoghan), super puncher Gilgamesh (Don Lee), illusions caster Sprite (Lisa McHugh), speedy Makkari (Lauren Ridloff) and finger guns Kingo (Kumail Nanjiani).

Their mission results in a cool

7,000-year stay, during which they must sit on their hands and not interfere in any non-Deviant-related business. The Eternals have to stand helplessly by as humans colonize, genocide and atomize each other (yes, there is a brief moment at Hiroshima in 1945 while Phastos laments ever giving humans a plow). The ethical conflicts between the group ultimately drive them apart, and they carve out individual existences for themselves.

"Eternals" is suffused with a certain sense of (non-intentional) surreality. Massive movie stars are tasked with delivering reams of goofy cosmic fantasy exposition with a straight face. Hayek wears a jaunty headdress; Henry is constantly gesticulating as his hands conjure spindly golden designs in the air. Nanjiani and Jolie are strangely muted. There are moments of humor and silliness that peak through but the tone always zips right back to earnestness.

The fundamental question at hand for the Eternals is also what



Sophie Mutevelian/Marvel Studios
Richard Madden, left, and Gemma Chan in the film "Eternals."

makes this a fundamentally Chloe Zhao film: Is a flawed, and often selfish, human race worth saving? This quandary is undertaken by Sersi, who has been living in London, working as a museum scientist. When the Eternals find themselves in crisis, with Earth and all of humanity in the balance, Sersi has to weigh her mission as an Eternal against her undeniable fondness for humans, as well as the happiness and fulfillment she herself might achieve with human life. Her anguish is palpable.

Though the stakes in "Eternals" are far more epic in scope, these philosophical questions about humanity are in step with the rest of Zhao's filmography. One can almost imagine Fern from "Nomadland" as an Eternal herself, drifting among the population but never quite within it, trying to decide if life among these people is worth the effort required.

Some may argue that Zhao's voice has been subsumed into the Marvel/Disney machine. But the more interesting take is to observe how she's smuggled her own perspective into this big superhero movie (and it's not just the magic hour shots, though there are plenty). As cosmic creatures debate whether or not to save the world, longing for the simpler days, it becomes quite clear that "Eternals" is a film about climate grief, and whether our little blue marble in the great big universe is worth fighting for.

Ultimately, with her human-scale superheroes possessed of human-scale emotions, Zhao makes the argument that humanity, despite all its flaws and foibles, is worth saving, so we should try and save ourselves. Whether that's a radical message or merely lip service from the corporate Disney machine, it rings resonantly nevertheless.

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