

Margot Robbie's playful antihero leads funny new take on 'The Suicide Squad'

By Chris Hewitt
Star Tribune

The title "The Suicide Squad" feels like a diss of the first movie in the series, simply called "Suicide Squad," and I am here for it.

The 2016 movie was garish and unpleasant (thanks, Jared Leto!) but the new one with the article "The" is playful and funny. "The Suicide Squad" resembles a gorier, more profane "Guardians of the Galaxy," which is no surprise since it was written and directed by James Gunn, pivoting from Marvel to DC. He's so attentive to every detail in the new movie that even the intertitles that identify the settings are inventive and amusing.

It opens by debuting a fresh team of superheroic goons, including Michael Rooker as the meanest guy to wear orange

Crocs since Mario Batali got canceled. He introduces himself to us by slaughtering a songbird. One thing, though: As the posters warn, "Don't get attached" to the newcomers.

As in the original, sadistic federal agent Viola Davis has recruited them from Belle Reve Prison, and if you think that name sounds like something out of a Tennessee Williams play, it is — it's the mansion Blanche must leave in "A Streetcar Named Desire." Blanche was always headed for tragedy and so are Rooker and the other newbies, forced to embark on a mission that means nearly certain death.

That's where the movie gets its title, and "The Suicide Squad" quickly shifts to bigger-name goons, including Margot Robbie as Harley Quinn, John Cena as muscle-bound Peacemaker, Idris Elba as temperamental Blood-

sport and Sylvester Stallone as the voice of an extremely dumb shark that can walk on land and (barely) talk.

They're sent to a fictitious South American island to stop an evil genius from gaining control of a device that, like all devices in movies with evil geniuses, will somehow let him control the world. But you won't care much about the plot — Gunn certainly doesn't — because the cartoony mayhem that surrounds it is the real point.

Robbie, who also starred in spinoff "Birds of Prey," captures that spirit perfectly. Her Harley Quinn is buoyant but damaged, blithe but deadly. Robbie conveys that even Quinn isn't sure what she's going to do next — her line readings often change direction in the middle of a sentence — because she's a creature of pure instinct. That's best demonstrat-



Warner Bros. Pictures
David Dastmalchian (back left), King Shark (back center) and Daniela Melchior (back right), with John Cena (front left) and Idris Elba (front right) in "The Suicide Squad."

ed in a scene where an enormous building collapses around Quinn and she still pauses on her way out to find something delightful in the rain of rubble.

Eventually, "The Suicide Squad" becomes a Godzilla-esque movie, with our antiheroes battling a giant creature that is stomping all over skyscrapers. It shifts a few times, since it's also a caper movie and a get-the-gang-back-together movie. But "The Suicide Squad" navigates those left turns deftly because of

Gunn's confidence that, no matter what adventure his characters face, he's really making a dark comedy.

He's also setting up other, future projects in this universe — a "Peacemaker" series debuts on HBO Max in January — but "The Suicide Squad" stands on its own in a way superhero movies often don't. I feel confident audiences will be satisfied about where it ends, even if it does leave us hoping to see more of this team. "A Suicide Squad," anyone?

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