

Marvel superheroes take on sitcoms

(TNS) — The Avengers have traveled to the corners of the universe. But two members face their most daunting challenge yet when they find themselves grounded in sitcomland.

In the series “WandaVision,” Wanda Maximoff aka Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) and Vision (Paul Bettany) are attempting to blend into neighborhoods previously inhabited by the Petries, the Bradys and the Pritchetts, while enduring nosy neighbors, awkward dinner parties and ever-changing fashion trends.

Is this a superheroes’ paradise or purgatory?

It’ll take some time for audiences to discover the truth. After the first two episodes drop Jan. 15, Disney+ will make new ones available on a weekly basis.

Marvel Studios is betting that its fans will go along for the ride. It’s part of what’s referred to as Phase Four of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the first phase to include television shows. Future TV series will revolve around Jeremy Renner’s Hawkeye and Samuel L. Jackson’s Nick Fury. Other small-screen projects will introduce Tatiana Maslany’s She-Hulk and Oscar Isaac’s Moon Knight.

“Disney+ gives us the opportunity to expand creatively what we do,” said Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios, who went on to defend the decision to unspool “WandaVision” over several months, a strategy that has served “The Mandalorian” well.

“Sometimes series on streaming services drop all at once, but I think Disney was very smart to do it week by week,” he said. “The conversation that takes place between episodes is very important, and, quite frankly, a lot of fun.”

A SITCOM REALITY

The fan chat over the new series will certainly include predicting which classic shows will be honored. The first episode owes



Marvel Studios/TNS

Marvel’s “WandaVision” stars Paul Bettany as Vision, left, and Elizabeth Olsen as Wanda Maximoff, aka Scarlet Witch.

so much to “The Dick Van Dyke Show” that director Matt Shakman and head writer Jac Schaeffer consulted with that show’s title star before filming began. During their lunch, 95-year-old legend Van Dyke offered some advice that would guide the entire production.

“He said, ‘If it couldn’t happen in real life it can’t happen on the show,’” Shakman said. “If you’re drawing from something that’s resonating with everyone’s experience at home, you can do crazy things. You can tumble over ottomans. You can be goofy. You can be anything.”

For early episodes, Olsen drew on Mary Tyler Moore and Elizabeth Montgomery of “Bewitched” for her lead performance. “I think I accidentally threw in some Lucy in the ’70s just because there was so much physical comedy,” she said.

Throughout the filming, much of which took place in front of live

studio audiences, the actors had to remind themselves that their task wasn’t to accurately depict past decades, but rather the sunny versions of them.

“We had to remember that we’re not depicting an honest reality of the ’60s or the ’70s,” Olsen said. “We are depicting the sitcom reality, which has its own set of rules.”

The genre may be new to these Marvel characters, but many participants had a personal connection to pull from.

Shakman was a cast member on “Good Morning, Mrs. Bliss,” a show that evolved into “Saved by the Bell.” Feige’s grandfather Robert Short was an Emmy-winning executive who helped shepherd “Dick Van Dyke” and “Car 54, Where Are You?” And you may remember Olsen’s sisters, Mary-Kate and Ashley.

“That background didn’t even

occur to me until I think we were standing in the writers room with pictures of ‘Full House’ on the wall,” Feige said. “And I went, ‘Oh ... right.’”

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

Aside from the laughs in “WandaVision” — there are plenty of them — occasional signs indicate that something is amiss. A mysterious voice calling for Wanda. Residents behaving like Stepford wives. Military men lurking on the outskirts of town. Those ominous overtones may remind you of another TV classic, “The Twilight Zone.”

“That show had an enormous impact on me personally,” said Schaeffer. “You think you’re in one sort of thing and then suddenly it’s slipped on its head. I think there are a lot of current prestige series that are doing this very exciting thing where you watch a couple episodes and you think the show is one thing and then by Episode 4 or 5, it flips the script.”

The waters will get even muddier when characters from past Marvel movies pop up. Randall Park’s exasperated parole officer from “Ant-Man and the Wasp” as well as Kat Dennings’ intern in “Thor” were both on the call sheet.

But Vision and Scarlet will remain at the heart of the series.

“I think that Wanda and Vision were fan favorites because their love story has been so very tragic but also really kind of warm and intimate,” Schaeffer said.

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