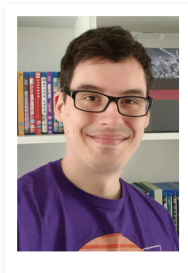




Thunderbolts*



***Thunderbolts** is the thirty-sixth film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Directed by Jake Schreier, it brings together a rag-tag team of antiheroes, including Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh), Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan), Red Guardian (David Harbour) and John Walker**

(Wyatt Russell), who must pull together to face an existential threat.

Marvel Studios has had varying fortunes in recent years, with highs like *Spider-Man: No Way Home* and *Deadpool & Wolverine* contrasting against lows like *Thor: Love and Thunder* and *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*. Thankfully for the beleaguered studio, it seems that *Thunderbolts** has been a critical and commercial success - and with good reason.

By focusing on a group of already established characters who have not yet had the spotlight, we get new dynamics not seen before, and get to know individuals better when we have previously only scratched the surface. There's a similar energy in this picture to the original *Guardians of the Galaxy*, which at the time was a massive risk that paid off for Marvel Studios. *Thunderbolts**, too, features no big hitters like Iron Man, Captain America or Spider-Man, and could have been ignored by audiences. Thankfully, a strong marketing campaign and positive word-of-mouth has led plenty of people to see this hidden gem.

The story is nothing ground-breaking, but serves as a platform for the characters to grow, both as individuals and as a team. The characters themselves are all loveable to some degree, even those that are the most flawed. The cast is great, with Florence Pugh particularly delivering an incredible turn as the former Black Widow assassin Yelena Belova. She brings the usual MCU quips,



but the entire performance is dripping with sadness, loneliness and quiet, faltering reserve. We rarely see roles of this depth and emotional reality in comic book movies, so Pugh really stands out.

The aching sorrow of Pugh's character is emblematic of the entire film. While this is a story about a bunch of costumed losers banding together to fight an evil Superman, that's only surface level. What *Thunderbolts** really is, is a study of mental health. Of depression, anxiety, insecurity and grief. It's incredibly mature, raw stuff, definitely not your typical comic book fare. Sure, some people will watch this movie and see only a typical Marvel romp, but anyone looking a little closer will see that everything from Yelena's vulnerability, to the fractured, apprehensive psyche of the mysterious Bob (Lewis Pullman), to the main antagonist's superpower literally being to make people confront their deepest fears and traumas, compliments and enriches the main plot.

Like any film, *Thunderbolts** has its flaws. While the humour is not as crowbarred in and misplaced as in many MCU offerings, it can still feel out-of-place at times. Certain characters, like Hannah John-Kamen's Ghost, feel under-developed, and the way Taskmaster (Olga Kurylenko) is treated is aggravating, bordering on offensive.

On the whole, though, this is a very strong entry in the MCU. By doing something different, something brave, it manages to stand out in a sea of spandex and punching. And it deserves its plaudits for that.