

BLACK WIDOW

Natasha Romanoff returns for her first solo movie under her alias of the Black Widow. Scarlett Johansson is joined by Florence Pugh to tell the story of a woman.

“This is the right time... to be telling [Black Widow’s] story,” Pugh said. “And we’re not shying away from the fact that this story is essentially about women getting their life back.”

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Scarlett Johansson makes debut in solo film for her superspy alter-ego

By Devan Coggan

Scarlett Johansson readies for battle the way a veteran doctor scrubs in for surgery or an astronaut gears up for her eighth space flight. Hair drawn back in a tidy braid, she barely glances down at Natasha Romanoff's familiar black catsuit as she buckles every buckle and zips every zipper with rhythmic efficiency. Squeezed into a closet-size armory on a Manhattan Beach soundstage, Johansson's assassin-turned-Avenger is surrounded by all the guns, knives, and glossy wigs a superspy could ever need. She moves like she's been doing this for a decade — because she has.

But this is something new: There's no Captain America or Hawkeye to assist her, no S.H.I.E.L.D. backup waiting out of sight. This is Black Widow's long-awaited solo movie, set in the turmoil between the all-star superhero team's breakup in 2016's *Captain America: Civil War* and their reunion in 2018's *Avengers: Infinity War*. The mission she's prepping for is personal, as the former Russian agent is going up against opponents from her past. When a fellow Widow, Rachel Weisz's Melina, wonders how they'll tackle one particularly formidable foe, Natasha replies, "Just get me close to him." It's not an arrogant quip or a self-congratulatory boast, just a matter-of-fact threat from a spy who is very, very

good at her job.

Then, just as Johansson pulls on her last glove with a satisfying snap...darkness. The studio has lost power; in the dark, someone calls out for flashlights. After a quick investigation, the production crew discovers the blackout is not the work of a diabolical supervillain but a blown transformer nearby. Natasha's mission will have to wait a little while longer — but that's all right. Black Widow knows how to wait.

When Johansson made her debut as Black Widow in 2010's *Iron Man 2*, the then-nascent Marvel Cinematic

Universe was more like a small galaxy.

Today, it stands as the most profitable film franchise of all time, a sprawling, 20-plus-film juggernaut that's demolished box office records and turned obscure comic characters into marquee names. Among them is Romanoff, the scarlet-haired superspy without superpowers.

Johansson's portrayal became an immediate fan favorite, thanks to her sarcasm and general penchant for ass-kicking, plus her dramatic evolution — she goes from playing Tony Stark's undercover personal assistant to Avengers founding member to savior of the universe.

Now, after 10 years and seven movies, this spider is finally playing solitaire. Cate Shortland directs the Black Widow stand-alone film (out May 1), a prequel that follows Nat before — spoiler alert! — she sacrificed

herself to thwart Thanos in last year's *Avengers: Endgame*. The Natasha we've known has usually preferred to look ahead instead of behind: First trained to be a killer as a young girl in the secret Soviet Red Room program, she worked as an assassin and KGB agent on some less-than-heroic missions. She's since devoted her life to more virtuous pursuits, whether that's foiling alien invasions (several times) or teaching Hulk self-care. Now she's forced to reexamine her history — and past trauma — when she's drawn into a Red Room-related conspiracy. "I thought it was interesting to explore this part of her life before she rejoins the Avengers, before she makes that ultimate sacrifice," Johansson, 35, explains. "How does she become this full person from all these broken pieces?"

Johansson — a recent double Oscar nominee for *Jojo Rabbit* and *Marriage Story* — says she and Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige first discussed a potential solo film during the press tour for 2012's *The Avengers*, as just "a tiny speck of an idea." As

fellow Avengers like Thor and Captain America got stand-alone sequels and threequels, Natasha continued to evolve within the main MCU story line until her death in *Endgame*, a noble finale for a character who dedicated her hero career to trying to right past wrongs. "We had been planning the conclusion for the Infinity Saga for the past five or six years, and Natasha's journey within those films took the priority," Feige explains. "The notion of breaking out for a stand-alone film that takes place in the past, for a character that we already knew and were already following, didn't feel right."

Even as journalists and fans repeatedly asked Johansson when Black Widow would be going solo, the actress was privately unsure whether that was something she even wanted. "I was like, I think I'm good," Johansson admits. "If we [were] going to do this, it had to be creatively fulfilling. I've been working for such a long time,

and I have to feel like I'm challenged. I don't want to do the same thing that I'd already done before."

What changed her mind was a meeting with Shortland, an Australian director known for her introspective, female-fronted indies like 2004's *Somersault*. "We just bonded over stories about trust and about intimacy and about women surviving," Shortland says of that initial chat. "You didn't have to be a superhero to identify with a woman who has had a really tough childhood and has survived and has a huge heart and helps other people."

Shortland — the first solo female director in the MCU's history — hadn't planned to pivot to superhero movies, but she was intrigued by Black Widow's resilience (and lack of



Scarlett Johansson poses as her Russian superspy character "Black Widow" for the new movie.

FAST FACTS

- 🕷️ Black Widow = Natasha Romanoff = Natalia Romanova
- 🕷️ She was originally born in Stalingrad, but truly originates from the (former) USSR
- 🕷️ Like Captain America, Natasha was injected with the Super-Soldier serum
- 🕷️ With these modifications, she ages much slower than normal and has superhuman durability and stamina
- 🕷️ Her first appearance in the MCU was *Iron Man 2*





Scarlett Johansson and Florence Pugh are the two leading ladies of the film, portraying a complicated sister-like dynamic.

superpowers). Says Weisz, 50: “Even though this is a fantastical universe, the way Cate directs, I think it’s quite real.”

“When I looked at the past films, there’s a lot of sitting outside of the character, so that she is seen and kind of objectified,” Shortland adds. “Oftentimes we don’t really get to see who she is when she’s by herself — who she is when she takes off the action-hero facade.”

Much of *Black Widow* peels away that facade. Over the years, Marvel has sprinkled in cryptic allusions to Nat’s past — a reference to Budapest here, a Red Room flashback there — but the new film dives deeper. “A prequel that simply filled in the blanks of things you already know is not very exciting,” Feige says. “How does she get her Widow stingers for the first time? How did she learn to do a flip? That doesn’t matter.”

What does matter is the people surrounding Natasha and how they helped shape her sense of self. With the *Avengers AWOL*, she turns to the only other kin she’s ever had: a hodgepodge band of Russian spies who went undercover together as a family when Natasha was a child. There’s Weisz as the mysterious Melina, who also trained as a Widow. There’s Florence Pugh (who’s also a recent Oscar nominee) as Yelena Belova, a no-nonsense Red Room alum whom Nat views as an estranged little sister. (Like many sisters, they settle differences by beating the crap out of each other.) And there’s David Harbour as Alexei, a.k.a. the Red Guardian, the Russian answer to Captain America (if Cap was a bearded, past-his-prime goofball). “I thought it would be a straightforward action movie, and then it wound up being a real character study of a dysfunctional family,” Harbour, 45, says.

To play that familial bond, the cast had to get close — really close. Johansson and Pugh had met only a few times before they filmed their first scene together: a brutal smackdown between Natasha and Yelena, who haven’t seen

each other in years. “Immediately we were in each other’s space, like, ‘All right, I’m going to grab your armpit, and you put your hand under my knee in a pretzel,’” Johansson recalls.

“I remember thinking at the time, ‘That is one way of getting to know one another,’” Pugh, 24, adds with a laugh.

The *Avengers* may have a diverse female roster now, but in 2010, *Black Widow* was the MCU’s only female Avenger. Now, with films like *Captain Marvel* and *Wonder Woman* topping the box office, a woman-led superhero flick is far less of a novelty. For Johansson, it’s a welcome shift, and although it’s been gradual, she says she felt it most while filming *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, battling aliens alongside Danai Gurira’s Okoye and Elizabeth Olsen’s Scarlet Witch, or watching Brie Larson’s *Captain Marvel* step on set for the first time. “For anyone who said to me, ‘Oh, this [Black Widow film] should’ve happened five or 10 years ago,’ I’m like, it would not have been as substantial. We just would not have been able to do it. This film is happening now as a result of what’s going on in the zeitgeist, and I think it’s pretty cool.”

“Oftentimes we don’t really get to see who she is when she’s by herself — who she is when she takes off the action-hero facade.”

- Cate Shortland, director

The key, Johansson argues, is not just casting female heroes but telling distinctly female stories. (She remembers being told once that the *Black Widow* movie “could be like *Bourne*, but with a woman.”) “I think this character’s strength really lies in her vulnerability and her acceptance of that,” she says. “She has emotional intelligence that has allowed her to survive without any real superpowers. She’s someone who is a problem-solver. She’s a pragmatic person. I think a lot of those qualities are inherently female.”

And although Natasha may have met her end at the bottom of that cliff on Vormir, Johansson wants her legacy to live on. “I hope that this film continues pushing that boundary, so that we can actually have more female superheroes who are inherently female, and aren’t just Batman in heels or whatever,” she adds.

In the meantime, Johansson has to finish this female-superhero movie. As the release date nears, she and Shortland have been in the edit bay making last-minute tweaks. This film marks the first time Johansson has taken on an executive-producer role for the MCU, and she admits

that she feels protective over Nat and how her story is received. “When we did San Diego Comic-Con [in 2019], I remember being so scared and nervous,” Pugh recalls of taking the stage with Johansson. “And when we came off the stage we held hands, and she was just as nervous.”

For its star, *Black Widow* is the culmination of a decade-long effort;

and, as Johansson points out, Natasha isn’t the only one who’s changed over the years. “This film is very much a result of that journey, my own personal journey,” she says. “I feel that I probably wasn’t as willing or able to go to the kind of uncomfortable, embarrassing, ugly places before. I think it’s just as you get older, you trust yourself more.”

After all, sometimes spies get the best results not by donning disguises but by stripping them away. “Maybe I wouldn’t even have been as curious about that part of [Natasha] before,” Johansson says. “Maybe I would’ve been more interested in wearing all these masks, and now I’m more interested in what’s behind them.”



TRAUMA IN BLACK WIDOW’S STORY IS ‘HORRIFYING’ BUT TIMELY

by Erik Swann

One of the most exciting aspects of Marvel’s *Black Widow* is that it will dive deeper into Natasha Romanoff’s mysterious past. With this, viewers will meet a number of faces from her past and get a sense of who she was before she joined up with S.H.I.E.L.D. and eventually Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. Of course, we know there are some relatively dark aspects of Natasha’s past, and it would appear that they will take center stage in her solo film. There’s one aspect, in particular, that makes the film somewhat “horrifying” in Florence Pugh’s eyes.

Florence Pugh, who plays Yelena Belova in *Black Widow*, recently explained that she finds the film’s story somewhat unsettling. This is due to the fact that it centers on women who are dealing with immense trauma from horrible upbringings.

“The storyline that we are telling is very horrifying. It’s about women that have been, essentially, abused and trained up to be killing machines.”

Hollywood has seen a bit of a shift both in front of and behind the camera, as the Me Too Movement has brought numerous stories of abuse to the surface. In the upcoming Marvel Studios’ *Black Widow: The Official Movie Special Book* (via Yahoo!), Pugh went onto stress that this is the right time for the film to be released and that it won’t shy away from its subject matter:

“As Scarlett said over and over, this is the right time for her to be telling [Black Widow’s] story. And we’re not shying away from the fact that this story is essentially about women getting their life back.”

Natasha Romanoff’s Marvel Cinematic Universe journey is one that’s filled with tragedy, abuse, violence and redemption. From a young age, she was trained to be an assassin with no personal ties and, as we learned in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, that even included being sterilized. Things began to turn around, however, when she got on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s radar and joined the organization in an attempt to get some of the red out of her ledger. Romanoff would do many heroic things as a member of the *Avengers*, but her greatest act was her tragic sacrifice in *Avengers: Endgame*.

With *Black Widow*, Marvel will turn the clock back and force both Natasha and Yelena to face their past, as the villainous Taskmaster will be using the Red Room to control a new breed of assassins.

The concept of dealing with trauma will hopefully be one of the most compelling elements of *Black Widow* and, if Florence Pugh’s comments are any indication, this could very well be the case. Natasha Romanoff has proven to be one of the MCU’s most complex and beloved characters, and it’s only right that she has a film fitting of her legacy in the massive film franchise.