

'WandaVision,' a sitcom sendup, was a pandemic parable, too

By Ted Anthony

Imagine being trapped in the confines of your own neighborhood, losing a sense of the outside world — and of yourself — with each passing day.

Things are seeming kind of flat lately, and sometimes downright colorless. Everything looks reasonably placid, but something's not quite right with reality. The days feel ... episodic. Does the world taper off at the end of the block? Does life loop back on itself? Are your neighbors with you, or against you?

This has been the premise of "WandaVision," Marvel's latest foray into the intricate, immersive universe first cobbled together in the comics by Stan Lee six decades ago. Not incidentally, it's also an apt description of life in many corners of America during this pandemic micromoment.

In an era when meticulously crafted fictional universes are entertainment's billion-dollar baby, "WandaVision," whose inaugural and probably only season concluded Friday, took it all a step further, turning the seven-decade tradition of the American sitcom into a decade-hopping suburban prison.

Episode by TV-homage episode, it pinballed through unsettling sendups of "The Dick Van Dyke Show," "Bewitched," "The Brady Bunch," "Family Ties," "Malcolm in the Middle" and "Modern Family," swallowing an entire New Jersey town and its people and, along the way, serving up a darker version of Marvel's already dysfunctional funhouse mirror.

The pitch-perfect result: a distorted reflection not merely of America, but of the way it has seen itself through its broadly drawn television comedy across three generations.

How did this show manage (inadvertently, of course, since it was conceived before the virus arrived) to match the tenor of its comfort-craving moment? Because it reached so lovingly into the mannered, structured lore of sitcoms, which were comfort food for the American TV watcher's brain long before the word "streaming" ever tumbled into the lexicon.

The television scholar Robert Thompson once described the contentment that people find in old sitcoms as "the aesthetic of the anesthetic" — a style of narrative that reset itself every week, making sure society's norms were reinforced by presenting nonthreatening communities populated with nonthreatening characters doing nonthreatening things.

Conflict

"WandaVision" coopted that vision and upended it. It used, as foils, those landscapes of assuagement and the way they morphed over the decades to match the times. Their surface tranquility and amiable conflict were backdrops for a slowly unfolding Marvel plot that, in its wink-nudge bubblegum darkness, was pure 21st century.

There's irony, too, in the fact that Marvel has been owned for the past 12 years by Disney, a conglomerate built by self-described "imagineers" who were instrumental in stamping the sensibility of immersive fantasy onto more than a half century's worth of American children — and onto the landscape itself.

Wanda Maximoff, the world-building witch at the show's nucleus, is a stand-in for Walt Disney himself, who built his gauzy childhood memories of early 20th-century Midwestern life into theme parks and an entertainment empire. Like the world of "WandaVision," Disney's

creations reflected not quite reality but its saccharine stepsibling, recognizable and appealing but hardly real life.

By the time "WandaVision" got to its take on 1980s television, the gentle opening credits of that "very special episode" sang this to us, revealing the theme of the show (and of pandemic life too): "We're making it up as we go along."

Yet like those 1980s horror movies in which the dreamer of the nightmare awakens, only to find out that he or she is still asleep, in "WandaVision" the "real" world is still the fantastic one of the Marvel Universe. The "Inception" model is at play: You're still in the layered matrix, still separated from actual reality by several strata of Marvel and a robust layer of Disney.

In one of its later episodes, "WandaVision" offers its take on the "Malcolm in the Middle" opening credits of the early 2000s. This theme song, more aggressive and insolent than its predecessors, offers up the following lyrics: "What if it's all illusion? Sit back. Enjoy the show."

As the first storyline of its astonishingly extensive streaming lineup of shows concludes, that could be Marvel's overall tagline. Because — first in comic books, then in theaters, now on all our assorted screens — Marvel IS the universe. It is comics and movies and video games, TV and toys and collectibles, cosplayers and party favors and an entire pantheon of secular giants.

You could even argue that its seamlessly cross-marketed cosmos is the new American suburb — a completely immersive neighborhood, interconnected and self-perpetuating, privileged and complex and, sometimes, brimming with the emptiness of the industrially manufactured Technicolor narrative. It is us, but amplified. (AP)

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Eddie Murphy appears in a scene from 'Coming 2 America.' (AP)

Film

Sequel not as funny or edgy as the original

'Coming to America' for a #MeToo world

By Jocelyn Noveck

Once upon a time, dear children, before you were born, they made a fairytale movie about a kingdom called Zamunda. "Coming to America," starring Eddie Murphy at the height of his popularity and charisma, became a huge hit and a cult classic.

In this film, dear children, Murphy played Prince Akeem - he didn't need to be called Prince Charming, because he was already so darned charming. We met him on the morning of his 21st birthday, awakening in his palace bedroom to a full orchestra, servants tossing rose petals at his feet, and gorgeous naked women servicing him in the bathtub until his royal appendage was deemed clean.

Oops! Sorry, kids. Some parts of "Coming To America" didn't age very well. Including most of the stuff about women.

But 33 years and one #MeToo movement later, it's time for a reboot. The good news about "Coming 2 America," directed by Craig Brewer, is that things have gotten better for women in Zamunda. Yes, it's still a patriarchy (more on that soon) and yes, there are still obedient royal bathers. But we don't see their naked breasts or backsides. There's also a bathtub gag involving the great Leslie Jones that flips the gender dynamic entirely and gratifyingly (especially for her).

And now, Prince Akeem is not a randy young heir but an established family man. Happily married for 30 years to Princess Lisa - the bride he found in Queens in the last film - he has three daughters, brave and feisty. The eldest wants to be his heir. A female heir? That's not done, in Zamunda. But the times, they are - or might be - a-changin'.

That's the good news. The bad news is that this sequel, despite (or perhaps because of) its nod to modern sensibilities, isn't nearly as funny or edgy

as the original. It has seemingly everything -- the original cast, some well-known newcomers, high-profile cameos - and eye-popping costumes by the great Ruth E. Carter (an Oscar winner for "Black Panther"). It has set pieces and choreography and de-aging technology and overlaying plot lines. What it has less of, is fun.

Still, just like we go to college reunions 30 years later to recapture the magic, fans of the first will flock to it on Amazon Prime. They likely won't be too disappointed. Especially because, despite the knowing references to urban gentrification, transgender offspring, Teslas and even unnecessary movie sequels, little has really changed.

Obviously Murphy is back, as producer and star. So is Arsenio Hall, as trusty sidekick Semmi (and a bunch of other roles). Also back: the stately James Earl Jones as King Jaffe Joffer; Shari Headley as Lisa (a seriously underwritten role); and Louie Anderson as Maurice. John Amos is back as Lisa's dad, still ripping off McDonald's. And of course the My-T-Sharp barbershop crew is back in Queens.

Appealing

A new presence is the casually appealing Jermaine Fowler as Lavelle, Akeem's previously unknown son. Celebrity guests include a highly amusing Wesley Snipes as flamboyant General Izzi, leader of Nexdoria (next door); Tracy Morgan as Lavelle's uncle; and Jones as his uninhibited mother. Another "Saturday Night Live" face, Colin Hanks, makes the most of a brief cameo. Among notable musical appearances, Gladys Knight sings "Midnight Train From Zamunda."

The plot follows a familiar trajectory, beginning in Zamunda and traveling to Queens to solve a major need. In this case, the need is not a bride, but a male heir. Akeem, who becomes king upon his father's death, learns he unknowingly sired a son

during that Queens trip three decades ago (it was Semmi's fault!) He needs a male heir to cement his power. So he brings Lavelle, a ticket scalper who aspires to much more, back to Zamunda, along with Mom.

But Lavelle needs to learn royal ways, and pass a "princely test" which includes facing down a lion. There's also the matter of Akeem's daughter, Meeka (a luminous KiKi Layne, not given enough screen time), who rightly deserves to be queen one day. Complicating matters entirely, Lavelle falls not for his intended bride, Izzi's daughter, but for his royal barber, Mirembé, who aspires to her own shop one day (women don't own businesses in Zamunda).

Again, it all feels like a 30th reunion - maybe because it IS one - where the liquor flows, old stories are rehashed, the men haven't aged quite as well as the women, the kids steal the show, and by the end you're happy to have gone but feel no need to be at the next one.

Directed by Craig Brewer ("Hustle & Flow") and co-written by Kenya Barris ("black-ish"), "Coming 2 America" adds a host of new talent, including Jermaine Fowler as said son, Leslie Jones as the mother, Tracy Morgan and "If Beale Street Could Talk's" KiKi Layne. James Earl Jones, Shari Headley and John Amos also reprise their roles from the original. Unsurprisingly, the film was originally going to be a big theatrical release.

"Coming 2 America," an Amazon Studios release, has been rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America "for crude and sexual content, language and drug content." Running time: 110 minutes. Two stars out of four.

MPAA definition of PG-13: Parents strongly cautioned, Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13. (AP)

LONDON: Banksy appears to have thrown his support behind a campaign to turn a former prison in the English town of Reading into an arts venue, a town spokesman said, after the street artist confirmed that artwork that appeared on a red brick wall of the prison was of his making.

The elusive artist confirmed the picture was his when he posted a video of him creating it on his Instagram account. The monochrome picture shows a man escaping using a rope made of paper from a typewriter. It appeared Monday outside Reading Prison, famous as the location where writer Oscar Wilde served two years for "gross indecency" in the 1890s.

The prison closed in 2013, and campaigners want it turned into an arts venue. Britain's Ministry of Justice, which owns the building, is due to decide mid-March on its future.

In his Instagram video, Banksy is shown stealthily stenciling and spraying paint to create the artwork, titled "Create Escape." The footage is juxtaposed with an episode of a traditional art instruction video called "The Joy of Painting with Bob Ross."

The campaign to turn the former prison into an arts venue has won the backing of actors including Judi Dench, Stephen Fry and Kenneth Branagh.

A spokesman for Reading Borough Council said it was "thrilled that Banksy appears to have thrown his support behind the council's desire to transform the vacant Reading Gaol into a beacon of arts, heritage and culture with this piece of artwork he has aptly called 'Create Escape'." (AP)

NICOSIA, Cyprus: Dozens of Orthodox Christian faithful sang Church hymns outside of Cyprus' state broadcaster on Saturday to demand the withdrawal of the country's controversial entry for the Eurovision song contest — titled "El Diablo" — that they say promotes satanic worship.

Some of the protesters, including families, held up placards reading in Greek, "We're protesting peacefully, no to El Diablo".

The broadcaster and the singer of the song insist it has been misinterpreted and the song is actu-

ally about an abusive relationship between two lovers.

The protest came several days after the powerful Orthodox Church called for the withdrawal of the song.

Last week, police charged a man with uttering threats and causing a disturbance when he barged onto the grounds of the public broadcaster to protest what



Fry



Dench

he condemned as a "blasphemous" song.

The state broadcaster insisted that the entry won't be withdrawn, but its board chairman, Andreas Frangos, conceded that organizers should have done a better job explaining the core message of the song.

Even the Cypriot government waded into the controversy, with

Presidential spokesman Viktoras Papadopoulos saying that although the views of dissenters are respected, the government cannot quash freedom of expression.

"The Government fully respects creative intellectual and artistic freedom that cannot be misinterpreted or limited because of a song's title, and unnecessary dimensions should not be at-

tributed," Papadopoulos said in a written statement.

The song's performer, Greek artist Elena Tsagrinou, said that the song is about a woman who cries out for help after falling for a "bad boy" known as "El Diablo" and coming to identify and bond with her abuser. Tsagrinou insisted that any other interpretation is "unfounded." (AP)