

AN INSIDE LOOK AT DR. STRANGE

STARRING BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH



Dr. Strange Might Just Be the Future of Marvel Movies

K.M. McFarland unravels the secrets behind what makes Dr. Strange so different from those who came before.

The most notable thing about Doctor Strange isn't its dizzying visual effects or its kaleidoscopic action sequences; it's how much time goes by before the movie reminds you that it's set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Around halfway through its two hour run time, a librarian (Benedict Wong) tells surgeon-turned-sorcerer-in-training Stephen Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) that Strange's fellow students aren't just budding masters of arcana, but a cosmic complement to the Avengers in defending the Earth against malevolent outsiders. It's the only time the big team gets name-dropped. It bodes well for the universe's next crop of heroes: Rather than feeding into the ever-expanding, ever more complicated narrative web of the MCU, Strange wins big by staying small.

At the film's outset, Strange, a hot-shot neurosurgeon with a healthy dash of Tony Stark-style arrogance, gets in a serious car crash which renders his hands virtually useless. Pursuing any possible road to recovery, he tracks down Jonathan Pangborn (Benjamin Bratt), a former paraplegic who advises him to seek out the Kamar-Taj in Kathmandu, Nepal. There, he meets The Ancient One (Tilda Swinton) and fellow student Karl Mordo (Chiwetel Ejiofor), and learns of Kaecilius (Mads Mikkelsen), a fallen pupil who stole pages from a spellbook

and—big bad alert—wants to merge Earth with a being in the Dark Dimension in order to gain eternal life. If this all sounds overly complicated, don't worry: Strange glosses over the logic of these multiple dimensions, siding with action over exposition. Imagine the best spell fights from a Harry Potter movie married with the tessellating dream-architecture of Inception, seasoned with the trippiness of the Star Child sequence from 2001: A Space Odyssey. It's one of the only installments of the Marvel Cinematic Universe that demands to be seen in full 3-D. (If you thought the Bifrost Bridge scenes from Thor-

ing villain Thanos been stupendously ineffective at acquiring the Infinity Stones he needs for his gauntlet, but the enemies in too many Marvel movies—Guardians of the Galaxy, Iron-Man 3, even Captain America: Civil War—faded from memory soon after the credits rolled. There's no such problem with Mikkelsen as Kaecilius, whose eyes benefit from some of the best makeup work the MCU has seen. While he's a composite of various characters from the comics, Mikkelsen is so domineering, so effortlessly sharp, that he's indelibly memorable despite clearly functioning as a one-and-done foe.

But like the best films in the Marvel franchise, Strange succeeds by layering the conflict. The Ancient One is much more than a benevolent teacher; Mordo's arc turns Ejiofor's character from rival to something more pleasingly existential. Anyone familiar with Strange in the comics knows where this is heading, and it's great that something larger is planned for Mordo—but we'll be damned if this movie couldn't have been improved even more simply

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were impressive, just wait until The Ancient One introduces Strange to astral projection.)

SPELLBOOKS FULL OF VILLAINS

One of the most enduring problems in the MCU is its lack of compelling antagonists. Not only has overarch-



by swapping his role with Cumberbatch. Having said that, we can't say it's not gratifying to see Cumberbatch, sporting a Vincent Price goatee and oozing with arrogance, getting his ass and brain handed to him by a bald female monk, a black warrior and an Asian librarian.

But perhaps the best aspect of Doctor Strange is that for all of its talk of parallel dimensions—Mirror, Dark and others—and visual fireworks transporting Stephen through landscapes that would warp even MC Escher's mind, the events of the movie only affect a narrow community of sorcerers. The Avengers are headline-grabbing heroes whose exploits dominate newscasts; like Ant-Man before him, Doctor Strange's origin story is one of small-scale discovery, not averting global apocalypse. Even the third act's climactic battle

manages to edge away from the usual MCU face-off formula, in a way that's mind-bending without completely overloading the audience.

MARVEL'S NEXT PHASE

The Marvel Cinematic Universe spent Phase One assembling the Avengers and Phase Two creating a conflict between Iron Man and Captain America (and their loyalists). Phase Three, which began with Civil War and comprises 10 films over the next three years, shoulders the dual burden of resolving the Infinity Stone storyline while introducing audiences to dozens of characters who are far less recognizable than Spider-Man. But after seeing how Strange only hints at ties to the main thread, it bodes well for how Ant-Man and the Wasp will continue those

Benedict Cumberbatch as "Doctor Strange"

heroes' stories, Black Panther will feature in his eponymous stand-alone movie, and Captain Marvel will finally put a female lead on the map.

The MCU's gender problems linger in Strange—Rachel McAdams' talents feel wasted playing Strange's love interest, and the movie fails the Bechdel Test in spectacular fashion. But the dominant fear for the universe's Borg-like expansion is how it will continue to add more characters to an already crowded stable. Doctor Strange has memorable, complex characters and action sequences, along with a visual style that sets it apart from the previous 13 Marvel films. If its many team-up movies start to sag under the weight of gratuitous crossovers, at least the studio knows it can do origin stories right.

The band "Pink Floyd" did quite a lot of work with filmmakers



"WHY DOCTOR STRANGE SHARES ITS PSYCHEDELIC DNA WITH PINK FLOYD"

By: Jordan Hoffman

"Open your eye!" Tilda Swinton's version of The Ancient One intones as she presses against Dr. Stephen Strange's forehead, activating his pineal gland and sending him on a trip beyond the infinite that, even in these CG-saturated times, could only be described as "far out." It is one of many extended psychedelic sequences that makes Doctor Strange one of the headier films to play in wide release.

The common complaint about Marvel Studios' films is that, for all their high-tech armor and speed-of-sound slugfests, they tend

to be tempered in the visual department. The plot and exposition scenes in Scott Derrickson's Doctor Strange don't do much to break that mold, but when the story necessitates special effects to step in, the spacey spirits of comics visionaries like Jack Kirby finally get their day at the multiplex.

Doctor Strange was always an outlier in funny books. While it had the typical goofy Stan Lee patter ("By the Mystic Moons of Munnopor!" "By the Wondrous Winds of Watoomb!" and "By the Hoary Hosts of Hoggoth!"), to offer a sample set), its eastern setting and emphasis on mystical powers were, for 1963, just right for burgeoning hippies who wanted to expand their minds but also didn't want to read actual books.

The psychedelic entanglement got a push in its early days by two kinda-sorta secret connections between the comic and the heaviest acid-rock band of all, pre-Dark Side of the Moon era Pink Floyd. Perhaps the nicest grace note in Scott Derrickson's film is the wink to those in the know, man.



Pink Floyd's second album, *A Saucerful of Secrets*, transitioned between the visionary founder Syd Barrett (a victim of '60s over-indulgence hit hard by LSD use) to one of the greatest guitar players who ever lived, David Gilmour. Released in June 1968, the album's cover, created by the graphic designers known as Hipgnosis, is an abstract expressionist collage rightly suited for low lighting, incense, headphones and a plunge into the plasma pool of one's own mindscape.

But the recurring spheres on the left-hand side (one of which contains a silhouette of our poet-warrior-rockers, who recorded tracks such as *Set the Controls for The Heart of the Sun* and *Let There Be More Light*) certainly tripped a memory for keen readers of the four-color art. Further scrutiny showed the Sorcerer Supreme himself blended onto the cover as well as one of his deadliest foes.

Strange Tales #158, released in July 1967, featured two stories. One involved a shirtless Nick Fury fighting a Hydra citadel that shot out Death Spores of Havoc and Inexorable Violence in a Blinding Helix of Light (comics!). The other story, *The Sands of Death*, illustrated by Marie Severin and written by Roy Thomas, saw Doctor Strange battling the Living Tribunal, a cosmic being who sits in judgment over the Multiverse. The Living Tribunal addresses Doctor Strange by belowing: "Now shall be pronounced the Incan-

tation of Oblivion and your puny planet shall exist – NEVERMORE!!"

Six pages in, things get really freaky and the Living Tribunal offers Doctor Strange a vision of our world's imminent demise. Floating in a boundless inter-dimensional phase space, Strange sees an "S" of earths collapsing into red cosmic dust, headed toward a galactic spire of doom. Clearly this is an image meant for rock 'n' roll, and it was this panel that Hipgnosis designer Storm Thorgerson incorporated into the album cover.

Soon thereafter, Pink Floyd did a great deal of work with non-Hollywood filmmakers. They and the Grateful Dead contributed to Michelangelo Antonioni's counter-culture opus *Zabriskie Point*. (Yes, that furious rock number you hear as the house with all the loaves of Wonder Bread blows up is a re-tooling of the Floyd staple *Careful With That Axe, Eugene*.) They collaborated with Barbet Schroeder twice. Most memorable was the outstanding hippies-in-New Guinea picture *La Vallée*, which begat the 1972 Floyd album *Obscured by Clouds* (that term being what was used on maps for where the film's journey led).

Summer 1969, however, saw the release of *More*, a film little remembered today but quite a success in Europe at the time, dealing with disillusioned students, sex and drug addiction. (A German post-grad shacks up with a sexy American gal in Paris, and they

record, changes her clothes, shouts "Groovy!" and rolls a joint. For those who fetishize the hippy era, this scene essentially slams the pleasure centers of the brain with a ball-peen hammer. And amid all the nature imagery in the lyrics there are the lines: "The leaves are heavy round your feet / You hear the thunder of the train / Suddenly it strikes you / That they're moving into range/ And Doctor Strange is always changing size." Far out. If Doctor Strange is cool enough to be in this scene, he's cool enough for anything.

It's a long way from Barbet Schroeder to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but the new Doctor Strange does its best to represent its roots. Its first music cues go more for the joke (*Shining Star* by – dig this – Earth, Wind & Fire), but when there's a transition that needs a little oomph – right before the good doctor has his car crash that leads him on his eastern quest – there's the feedback wail from Pink Floyd's *Interstellar Overdrive*. One of Floyd's earliest tunes, this upbeat instrumental rocker clocks in at close to 10 minutes on their debut album *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. In live performances, it could stretch out even longer (see the 17-minute version on the *Tonite Let's All Make Love In London ... Plus* release). It's a psychedelic jam that has no business being in a movie aimed at a mainstream teen and preteen market, but if you only hear the first minute or two it sounds like perfectly serviceable guitar rock. (Might I suggest

listening to the whole thing, though, especially on headphones, as by the end the washes of noise fade from one side of your skull to the other.)

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The original score for Doctor Strange is a bit of a letdown. Composer Michael Giacchino is actually quite bold in lifting themes from his previous *Star Trek* score. The end credits, however, are a bit more fun. It mixes unusual instruments that sound to my ears like harpsichord, sitar and strings played in Middle Eastern modes. But when you get to the 2:25 mark, there's the little wink.

both escape to Ibiza before it fell to a phalanx of techno clubs.)

The soundtrack to *More* has some typical instrumental jams of the period, a tune called *The Nile Song* which, quite out of character for Pink Floyd, borders on Stooges-like heavy rock, and a lovely ballad featuring bongos called *Cymbaline*. Written by Roger Waters but sung by David Gilmour, *Cymbaline* pops up in the film when a sexy '60s chick gets out of her bed in her Paris apartment, puts on a

The thick keyboards are on a setting reminiscent of Pink Floyd's Richard Wright, and the guitar licks that come in after are reminiscent of David Gilmour's distortion effects. It is, however, in the style of Pink Floyd after the era of their explicit Doctor Strange connections (ie after *Dark Side of the Moon*), but it's still a nice gesture by Giacchino. And if anyone should be allowed to slip back and forth along the timeline, it ought to be Doctor Strange.

Doctor Strange REVIEWED

"The giddily enjoyable Doctor Strange is part of Marvel's strategy for world domination, yet it's also so visually transfixing, so beautiful and nimble that you may even briefly forget the brand."

-The New York Times

"Until the big climax - every Marvel movie has to have one - Doctor Strange is relatively quiet and visually beautiful, and some of its effects are wonderout."

- Time Magazine

"For a long while 'Doctor Strange' works both sides of the spiritual street with spectacular success. Then the film becomes what it was sending up so delightfully."

-The Wall Street Journal

"As visually dramatic as that initial automobile wreck may be, it's nothing compared to the ocular extravaganza that follows."

-The Washington Post

"Benedict Cumberbatch is as unpredictable and intriguing as the Marvel superhero in a brainmelting tale that reinvigorates the genre."

-The Guardian

