

Echo brings the best of Netflix's Marvel era energy to Disney Plus

Disney Plus' *Hawkeye* miniseries purposefully kept its violence bloodless in order to secure the same family-friendly TV-14 rating that's shaped all of Marvel Studios' internally produced streaming projects. But with characters like Alaqua Cox's Maya Lopez, and her squad of tracksuit-wearing mercenaries, *Hawkeye* also foregrounded a kind of brutality that felt distinctly out of place in the MCU proper, and more like something one might have expected from one of Netflix's old Marvel shows like *Daredevil* or *Jessica Jones*.

After years of Marvel leaving fans to wonder what might have happened to Matt Murdock and the other Defenders following the conclusion of the studio's partnership with Netflix, it was interesting to feel *Hawkeye* aiming for a similar grittiness. It was genuinely exciting to see Vincent D'Onofrio reprise his role as the Kingpin because – even though the character felt a little different – his appearance signaled that Marvel *could* bring back even more faces from its Netflix era if it wanted to. Since then, Charlie Cox's return as Daredevil in *She-Hulk* and the announcement of a new *Daredevil* series has confirmed that to absolutely be the case, but it's been unclear how Marvel might plan to go about it given how much darker and mature Netflix's old superhero shows were compared to Disney Plus'.

In *Echo* – Marion Dayre's new live-action Marvel series – you can clearly see at least one promising path Disney could take to get all of its street-level heroes and villains running

around together in the same cinematic universe. And while *Echo* might be a self-contained spinoff of another show tailored for younger viewers, it also plays like a promising blueprint for how Disney plans to bring more adult-oriented content to its streaming platform.

Set after the events of *Hawkeye*, *Echo* follows Maya Lopez (Alaqua Cox) from the streets of New York City back to her hometown of Tamaha, Oklahoma as she searches for a way to crush Wilson Fisk's (D'Onofrio) powerful crime ring and remake it in her own image. Having recently shot Fisk in the head, seemingly killing him in the process, Maya's a woman on the run as *Echo* first opens. And with all of the bridges she burned while working for the crime lord, there aren't all that many people that she – a deaf amputee with a bounty on her head – can safely turn to for help.

Similar to *Hawkeye*, *Echo*'s story delves into how Maya came to see villains like Fisk as her family after the murder of her biological father William (Zahn McClarnon), and how her experiences with loss, grief, and discrimination hardened her over the years. Though Maya's tragic backstory doesn't leave her with superpowers, it puts her on a path to becoming a fighter who attacks to kill, and a person who sees vengeance as the only acceptable kind of justice. But whereas *Hawkeye* framed Maya as a morally gray figure trying to survive in the criminal underworld, *Echo* works to push her in a somewhat more antiheroic direction by pitting her against her former colleagues and exploring into the lives of the people who actually love her.

As *Echo* introduces Maya's uncle Henry (Chaske Spencer), her grandmother Chula (Tantoo Cardinal), and cousins Bonnie (Devery Jacobs) and Biscuits (Cody Lightning), you can both see and feel how much effort the show's production team put into transforming its Atlanta shooting locations into a slice of Oklahoma where Choctaw culture still thrives. Along with fantastical reimaginings of Choctaw mythology that punctuate

the series as allusions to Maya's personal story and her Indigenous roots, characters close to Maya slip into both Plains Indian Sign Language and American Sign Language with the ease you'd expect from people who raised and grew up with a deaf woman.

Though Cox was a formidable presence in *Hawkeye*, because *Echo* features so many more signing characters, she's able to bring a different, more dynamic energy to her performance that conveys so much more of who Maya is outside of her brawler persona. Even when she's facing "enhanced" individuals with unique powers, there's seldom any doubt that Maya's at least going to get a few good licks in just watching the way Cox absolutely throws herself into Echo's many expertly choreographed fight sequences. But the moments of tenderness that emerge when Maya crosses paths with people like family friend Skully (Graham Greene) are surprisingly moving because of how well they work to illustrate that much of Maya's stoic exterior is a front she maintains to guard against people who don't truly know her.

For all of the warmth and softness *Echo* leads with in its characterization of Maya's complex relationship with her family, the show's numerous knock-down, drag-out, blood-smeared fight sequences are the reason it's Marvel Studios' first series to arrive with a TV-MA rating. And while there's been some concern about what a more graphic Marvel might look like following Daredevil's brief appearance on *She-Hulk*, *Echo* feels like a solid sign that the studio knows precisely how it wants to go about bringing a little more grit to the MCU in small, controlled doses.

Somewhere between Maya launching a motorcycle at a crowd of police officers like a missile and her snapping a man's neck with her bare hands, it becomes clear that – despite its mostly family-friendly messaging about forgiveness and enterprise – *Echo*'s absolutely not a show for kids. The people coming after Maya have every intention of killing her and

anyone they think she might care about, and *Echo*'s consistent in framing her as someone who takes those kinds of threats seriously regardless of the law. But rather than merely giving her a gun and sending her off to shoot up her enemies, the show throws waves of goons at her, and zooms in on what it would take to survive that kind of endless fight for your life.

While the show's fighting choreography is beautiful and wince-inducing all on its own, what really makes combat scenes shine is the way *Echo* uses its sound design to put you into Maya's shoes by bringing background noises all the way down, and pumping up the sound of her heartbeat. That quietness is often contrasted by disorienting smash cuts back to full volume meant both to signal shifts in focus and illustrate how sound can be weaponized, and it's effective because the show's careful about not over-deploying the trick.

Along with being Disney Plus' first TV-MA Marvel series, *Echo*'s also the first to debut under the streamer's new Spotlight banner. And while it initially seemed like that branding might have meant the show was designed to exist in its own bubble off to the side, that doesn't seem like the case a few episodes in. The words "Marvel Spotlight" could end up meaning something very different as more projects launch under the banner, but in *Echo*'s case they seem to be an indication of Disney laying the groundwork to tell more Marvel-branded stories about characters who get down and dirty.

It's going to be very fascinating to see how this pivot to "grownup" superhero projects plays out for Disney going forward,, especially considering that Marvel also has its first R-rated MCU film on the horizon. But if *Echo*'s any indication, the studio knows what it's doing, and the MCU's probably going to start getting a bit more bloody around the edges in a very satisfying way.

All five episodes of *Echo* hit Disney Plus on January 9th.

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