

REVIEWS

Ambitious, Outrageous *Everything Everywhere All at Once* Is All That and More

Michelle Yeoh anchors an overstuffed fantasy about Chosen Ones and people with hot-dog fingers—and somehow, it works.

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BY DAVID BORNFRIEND/A24.

To say that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* takes big swings is a profound understatement. This movie's swings proliferate wildly and take their own swings, which then give birth to thousands more swings, all of which drop acid together and explode in a display of fireworks (which may or may not involve butt plugs).

In the race to make the most meta piece of entertainment of all time, the competition is fierce. (Before the screening of

Everything Everywhere I attended, there was a preview of the upcoming movie in which **Nicolas Cage** plays Nicolas Cage). But thanks to an extraordinary cast and an emotional undertow that proves irresistible, *Everything Everywhere* ends up being — if you can ride all those big swings — satisfyingly bonkers. Or bonkersly satisfying. I am not sure the latter phrase is grammatically correct, but this movie may have broken my brain.

I have no complaints on that score, because the incandescent **Michelle Yeoh**, making the most of the roles of a lifetime, did much of the breaking. That choice of the word “roles,” by the way, was not an error: Yeoh plays an astonishing array of versions of one woman, and these filmmakers understood she was the only woman on Earth that could have made this batshit ride actually work.

Although, confession time: Did I love the scenes of her with hotdogs where her fingers should be as much as directors **Daniel Kwan** and **Daniel Scheinart** clearly did? I did not. But *Everything Everywhere* is that kind of movie. It’s a lot on top of a lot, and then more is piled on top of that concatenation of concepts. You’re unlikely to vibe with every element of it, but never mind: because before you know it, it’s sprinting on to the next thing. Anyway, the kindest thing to do at this point would be to pause and let you have a moment to process the concept of “hotdog fingers.” If it’s any consolation, they end up being one of the least weird elements of the film. I really want to tell you about the desolate cliff where a [blank] talks to a [blank] — a truly lovely moment in which the film slows down to let you catch your breath — or the scene in which a vengeful woman beats a man with [blanks], but I also don’t want to spoil too much of its exuberant loopiness.

Everything Everywhere is certainly a very 2022 movie, in that its characters are often overwhelmed, confused and rarely sure that linear time exists anymore (and if it does... *ehnnnnh*? Does it matter?). That’s not to say that the main character, Evelyn (Yeoh), allows herself the luxury of feeling exhausted. There is too much to do in her personal life and in the struggling laundry she runs with her earnest husband, Waymond (**Ke Huy Quan**). The first half of the film spends a lot of time laying out the strange things that happen to Evelyn and her family, and the rules (“rules”??) of how it all works. Suffice to say that she is, in spite of the humdrum nature of her existence, a crucial Chosen One destined to fight a titanic battle. Out of a vast multiverse of Evelyns — a film star, a chef, a martial arts expert and so on — the overworked Evelyn, the one just trying to plan a party for her dad (**James Hong**), is the One who must defeat an equally powerful foe. Due to

the laundry's tax issues, a good deal of that battle takes place inside a truly cursed IRS office.

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A lesser actor would have used this expansive *Into the Spiderverse* meets *Inception* meets *Airplane!* premise to go broad and abandon subtlety. But the directors and Yeoh understand that the audience won't buy into any of it unless Evelyn — all the Evelyns — are real, textured, intelligent people. The main Evelyn is not always likable and not always able to truly see her husband and her daughter Joy (**Stephanie Hsu**). This is largely because she's allowed herself to be swallowed up by her responsibilities, which distract her, at least some of the time, from her lack of self-confidence and hope. (And that may be the most impressive trick of *Everything Everywhere* — that Yeoh could believably play a woman in her flop era).

One might wish for some streamlining here or there; some exposition is ungainly, and there are uneven moments that emanate the shaggy, indulgent bravado of ambitious film students fresh off a powerful bong hit. But arriving at some kind of acceptance — making peace with things that can be flawed, overstuffed, yet delicious — is a theme that percolates through *Everything Everywhere*.

A lot of sad movies underscore the fact that our existences can be mind-meltingly hard, and reality can feel, at times, like a tornado of confusion — one that makes it hard to figure out how to find moments of meaning, grace, truth or love. This movie uses absurdity to explore those ideas, but when it's on its A-game — and with this cast, it often is — it's anything but grim. How could it be, when it's paying homage to classic Hong Kong action cinema and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless*

Mind at the same time?

Yeoh imbues Evelyn with moving shades of melancholy, regret, resolve and growing curiosity. She’s the kind of woman the world (and Hollywood) routinely overlooks, but Yeoh makes her embrace of lead-character energy positively gripping. Quan, a former child star, plays multiple iterations of his own character as well, and he is stunningly effective as quite different versions of Wayland (all of whom possess a similar spark of steadfast integrity). In every reality, he holds his own with Yeoh; if he doesn’t get a *ton* more work after this, Hollywood has failed us all.

There are deliriously bizarre martial arts battles and hotdog fingers; one page of my notes just says “good raccoon stuff.” *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is not for everyone, but within ten minutes, you’ll know if it’s for you. I will admit to a weakness for projects that, when you describe them, you sound like you’ve taken leave of your senses — but only if that wild abandon and imaginative momentum is tied to something deeper and richer. *Everything Everywhere*’s final-act swerve into emotionally charged territory works like gangbusters, thanks to vulnerable, deeply impressive work by Quan, Yeoh and Hsu. (Hong steals almost every scene he’s in, but of course, that’s par for the course for him.)

I can’t sum up this movie — and that’s a feature, not a bug. But I can say that *Everything Everywhere* is at least partly about not letting the forces of cynicism, isolation and hopelessness win. At the core of this wildly ambitious thrill ride, there are quite accessible ideas about connection, change and love. Those may be cornball (hotdog?) sentiments. But it is not for this lowly mortal to tell Michelle Yeoh she’s wrong.

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