

THE FRONT ROW

“EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE,” REVIEWED: THERE’S NO THERE THERE

Despite the presence of Michelle Yeoh, this is a vapor puff of corporatized fantasy.



By Richard Brody

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With its bland and faux-universal life lessons, the film comes off as a sickly cynical feature-length directorial pitch reel for a Marvel movie. Photograph courtesy A24

The movie world is awash in fantasy, and that’s a problem, because fantasy is the riskiest genre. There’s no middle ground with fantasy because there’s no ground at all. Even a middling work of realism inevitably rests on experience, observation, and knowledge, but a mediocre fantasy is a transparent emptiness, a contrivance of parts that aren’t held together by the atmosphere of social life. It’s the triple axel of cinema: when successful, fantasies are glorious, seemingly expanding the very nature of experience by way of speculative imagination. Some of the best movies of recent years—“The Future,” “Us,” and “The French Dispatch”—are fantasies, and their artistic success is doubled by their very resistance to the corporatization of fantasy in the overproduction and overmanagement of superhero franchises. But a failed fantasy is a wipeout, and that’s the simplest and clearest way to describe “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” a new film (opening Friday) by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (a duo called Daniels). Were it not for the appealing and charismatic presence of its cast, it would leave nothing but a vapor puff that disperses when the lights go on.

The emptiness of “E.E.A.A.O.” is all the more disheartening inasmuch as its fantasy has a substantial and significant real-world premise, one that gets a flip and generic treatment for the sake of some neat-o special effects. “E.E.A.A.O.” is the story of a married couple, Evelyn Wang (Michelle Yeoh) and Waymond Wang (Ke Huy Quan), who were born and raised in China and came to the United States as adults. They own a laundromat in the Simi Valley, in California, and have trouble, business and personal. The laundromat is losing money and Evelyn and Waymond are growing distant from each other; she is demanding and peremptory, and he is mild-mannered and whimsical. Her father

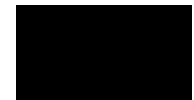
(James Hong), called only Gong Gong (“maternal grandfather”), is visiting from China, and the couple try to maintain a cheerful front to convince him that they’ve made a success of life in America. Their daughter, Joy (Stephanie Hsu), is a recent college graduate at loose ends; when her mother introduces Joy’s girlfriend, Becky (Tallie Medel), to Gong Gong as her “good friend”—i.e., she hides from him that Joy is queer—this failure instantly rips the mother-daughter relationship apart.

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The Wangs’ biggest and most pressing problem is taxes: they’re being audited by the I.R.S. At their appointment, the auditor, Deirdre (Jamie Lee Curtis), is stern and aggressive; she threatens to seize the Wangs’ business and personal assets, giving them until six that evening to reorganize and refile their claims. But Waymond has already given Evelyn a way out: in the elevator, he transforms into someone like himself, who’s not exactly himself, and gives Evelyn a set of instructions—on the back of a divorce filing, no less—that will enable her to enter the so-called multiverse, the realm of alternate lives that she could have lived.

What’s in a name? Sometimes, all one needs to know. The auditor’s full name is Deirdre Beaubeirdra (yes, she was named according to “The Name Game”), which exemplifies the arbitrary and

sophomoric whimsy that runs through the film and governs its plot and tone. The portal to the multiverse is a janitor’s closet down the hall from Deirdre’s desk. The multiverse launch involves switching shoes to the wrong feet, special scans, special earbuds, whirlwind video effects, a murder in the closet, a punch in Deirdre’s nose, a call for security, and a fight with security in which Waymond uses his fanny pack as a lethal weapon. Despite the chaos, the multiverse very quickly emphasizes one road not taken: Evelyn, instead of leaving China with that “silly boy” (as her father calls Waymond), stays home and becomes a movie star in martial-arts films. And why not; there’s poignancy and irony built into the idea. If only Kwan and Scheinert had stuck with it and developed it. Instead, Evelyn’s alt-career merely crops up intermittently amid a plethora of other transformations—a surfeit of caprices that attempt to conceal the movie’s hollowness.

Long aggrieved and newly offended, Joy becomes Evelyn’s superhero nemesis, Jobu Tupaki, a character of many costumes who has one constant. It’s as embarrassing to say it as it is to watch onscreen: she says that she “put everything on a bagel,” and she means not the flavor but the universe itself—therefore “the bagel becomes the truth,” and the truth is that “nothing matters.” (Yes, she both wears a symbolic bagel on her head and emblazons a giant rotating one at the altar of her lair.) There’s an alternate universe in which Evelyn and Deirdre are lovers, with fingers as hot dogs squirting mustard and ketchup; one in which no life existed and Evelyn is a rock on a cliff; one in which Evelyn turns into a piñata dangling from a tree; another in which security guards get their kung-fu power from trophies stuck in their asses. And the realms interact, so Evelyn fights in the I.R.S. office with these alternate tools, whether martial arts or an egg that she’d once flung as a Benihana-style chef.

Yet, through it all, the dual stories—the couple fights to save their business and their home, and the

same couple realizes different lives in China—remain basic; instead of unfolding over two-plus hours, they merely lurch ahead in plot-point-y snippets. It’s here that the definition of imagination as an artistic quality emerges—negatively. Kwan and Scheinert don’t envision in detail the daily lives of a small-business owner in California or of a celebrity in China. The stories suggest an ample array of poignant and nuanced possibilities, which go unrealized. They’d be all the stronger with a sense of subjectivity, and of alternate worlds as they leak consciousnesses into one another—not just how a laundromat owner imagines life as a martial-arts star, but also vice versa, and whether and why that might even seem preferable. (Spoiler alert: when it does happen, it only delivers a deflating, generic dash of sentimental bathos. There’s no place like home.)

Kwan and Scheinert show little interest in the experiences of their characters. Evelyn is written as a vague outline whose substance is provided by the presence, the performance, and the identity of Michelle Yeoh. The other characters offer their actors even less to work with. The C.G.I. conjures rapid-fire flashes of alternate lives, but not the pathos of feeling one of them slip away. Instead of personality, the characters have problems to solve; instead of traits, they have single-factor backstories; instead of subjectivity, they spew psychobabble and aphorisms borrowed from a superhero’s whiteboard quest. For all the gyrating action, the movie lacks physicality; the characters don’t seem to be in one another’s presence, their feet don’t touch the ground. The template for “E.E.A.A.O.” isn’t the observation of life from the amplified perspective of imagination; it’s the factitious world of superheroes, adorned with the action of martial-arts movies and the dazzle of effects and gaudy costumes, filled with undergraduate late-night epiphanies and sophomoric humor.

When Waymond expounds the rules of the multiverse to Evelyn, there might as well be a flashing sign

reading “Exposition” over the screen, because there’s an absolute absence of awareness that two characters are having a meaningful conversation. It’s exactly such scenes that provide a litmus test of imagination and prove its power to illuminate reality—creating a form to give experience an original and singular identity. Instead, Kwan and Scheinert deprive their characters of identity; the protagonists are universalized, stripped of history and culture, lacking any personal connection to the wider world. With its bland and faux-universal life lessons that cheaply ethicalize expensive sensationalism, the film comes off as a sickly cynical feature-length directorial pitch reel for a Marvel movie.

The photo caption on this article has been updated.

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