Culture



Charlie Cox returns as the title character in “Daredevil: Born Again” on Disney+. The series, a continuation of Netflix’s "Daredevil," also features Vincent D'Onofrio as his arch-nemesis.  (Marvel Television)



by Kevin Christopher Robles

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Can you ever really be anything but the person you're meant to be?

Marvel Television's "Daredevil: Born Again" aims to answer this question -– and in so doing explores timely topics of faith, politics and race.

Daredevil, a rather lowly superhero in the Marvel roster, is the right character to explore these complex themes, and the small-screen format lets the audience spend time with the characters in a way that the films do not. Though Marvel's quality has been erratic lately, "Born Again" suffers no such inconsistency; it tackles its ideas headlong, with confidence and grace.

A continuation of the original "Daredevil" series that ran for three seasons on Netflix (and is now streaming on Disney+), "Born Again" takes place some years later. You can jump into the show without having seen the original, much like how one might jump into a new comic run of a long-running character. "Born Again," while keeping some main players from the original, features a new supporting cast, a new showrunner, a new style, a new composer — all in service of a fresh story adapting and remixing a number of different storylines from the comic books. And the new show focuses on the most important aspect of Daredevil’s character: his dual and contradictory nature.

Matthew Murdock (Charlie Cox) is many things, but chief among them are two primary identities: a blind Catholic lawyer and the superhero Daredevil. He lost his sight in a chemical accident as a child, but in turn gained superhuman senses, which he uses to fight crime in his home city of New York.



Vincent D'Onofrio portrays Wilson Fisk, the criminal mastermind known as the Kingpin, in "Daredevil: Born Again" on Disney+. Charlie Cox plays Daredevil. (Marvel Television)

Born the illegitimate son of a good-hearted Irish boxer, Murdock suffered further tragedy when his father was murdered by match-fixers for refusing to take a dive. He was then raised in an orphanage, unbeknown to him, by his own mother — a Catholic nun, who gave birth before taking her vows. Afterward, he began using his enhanced senses to fight against the criminal element that had begun to plague his neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen, which in the show's version of New York City remains the seedy and undesirable place it was when the comics were first written.

This strong association with Catholicism fuels Daredevil and makes him unique among Marvel characters. Rarely are superheroes portrayed as authentically and deeply religious as this one is. "Born Again" finds Murdock grappling with his faith and questioning the value of what he is doing as Daredevil. It is this struggle between his two sides — the Catholic lawyer who believes in the redemptive power

of the law, contrasted with the devil-horned vigilante who beats criminals to a pulp to protect innocents — that makes the character so uniquely compelling.

"I was raised to believe in grace," Murdock says when confronting his arch-nemesis Wilson Fisk (Vincent D'Onofrio), "but I was also raised to believe in retribution."

This duality extends beyond just Matthew Murdock, however. Wilson Fisk, the criminal mastermind known as the Kingpin, is subject to as much exploration as Murdock. As far back as the first season of the original show, D'Onofrio's portrayal of Fisk has received praise for being simultaneously one of the most terrifying and one of the most compelling villains in Marvel's roster of bad guys. The show takes the time to examine the Kingpin: his deep love for his wife, his genuine desire to make New York a better place, his struggle to move past his brutal past. "Born Again" finds him trying to go straight: After a past marked by criminality and violence, Fisk runs for and becomes mayor of New York City.

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It is in this Mayor Fisk storyline that "Born Again" really shines, providing very real commentary on the state of local and national politics. Fisk's rise to mayor comes as the real mayor of New York recently has been indicted on corruption charges, and his demagogic and straight-talking persona will remind viewers of our current president. His goal is to tamp down the rise of vigilantism in New York, going after the likes of Spider-Man, the Punisher, Daredevil and other local would-be heroes. It is an interesting commentary on how we create bogeymen out of imperfect individuals — not unlike the ways in which New York City and the United States have treated immigrants and migrants in recent months.

"Daredevil: Born Again" is, at the end of the day, a character drama. Both Murdock and Fisk are fighting against who they are. Murdock's doubts about being Daredevil lead him to try to be a regular lawyer, while Fisk's ruminations about his past cause him to try to be more legitimate. But as time goes on, they both find it increasingly difficult to pretend to be people they are not. When push comes to shove and they are forced to become the hero and villain they really are, we witness some truly great television.