

■ **AT THE MOVIES**

Netflix's live action Cowboy Bebop: travesty or triumph?

By Kai Curry and Stacy Nguyen
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Netflix's live action "Cowboy Bebop" released to streaming on Nov. 19. Based on the original anime, the show follows a crew of space age bounty hunters—"cowboys"—as they cruise the dilapidated universe in their dilapidated spaceship—"Bebop"—accompanied by a loveable Corgi and eventually, a wacked out hacker named Ed. They are always low on cash ("woos"), always accompanied by jazzy music, and kind of suck at their jobs. But they are endearing in their quirkiness and vulnerability and pretty good at fighting.

Stacy Nguyen and Kai Curry took a look.

How 'bout that John Cho?



Photo courtesy of Netflix

John Cho as the big haired, blue suited Spike Spiegel

Kai: I thought John Cho did a great job as the loved/hated Spike Spiegel/Fearless. It was appealing to me to watch Cho traverse through his career from eating White Castle burgers to obsessing over noodles, Spike's favorite food. Cho's acting trajectory has been steady and reliable and yet he hasn't received as much acclaim or coverage as some others. So, it was extremely satisfying to me to see him get a role that I consider a show horse. Bravo.

Stacy: Obviously he's still an angel sent down to Earth from heaven.

It was really, really nice to see him play Spike, a character that is a whole entire vibe. He's fun, flashy, stylish, sensual-sexual, and has great hair, which is really the kind of role I've been waiting for John Cho. I've been following his career since his "Better Luck Tomorrow" days, and a lot of the time, he doesn't seem to get to play leading characters that have a lot of quirks.

But in "Cowboy Bebop," he has more personality, and so it's fun to watch him in it.

What was your background or interest in Cowboy Bebop prior to the live-action version?

Stacy: Honestly, my only familiarity with "Cowboy Bebop" was that my brother used to watch it all the time, and I would walk into the living room as my brother was watching it. From that, I gathered that



Vicious (Alex Hassel, left) and Spike (John Cho, right) square off in the famous church window scene in "Cowboy Bebop."

Photo courtesy of Netflix

the music is super jazzy and dope, it was very swaggy and campy, and also noir-ish and masculine. And that really wasn't my bag.

So I don't know too much about the original anime, but I can see that the Netflix remake has made considerable efforts to pay homage to it. The remake is really fun to listen to, for instance. At the same time, I remember that, in the snippets that I did see of the original series, it was lighter and more comedic and hammy. The live-action adaptation feels heavier and darker, which I prefer in a general sense—but I'm sure hardcore "Bebop" fans are like, "WTF!" about it.

Kai: I was a fan of the anime. However, if I am honest, I always wanted to watch the original more than I actually watched it. Like many, the real appeal to me was the art. The music didn't catch me so much until this time when the opening credits with the remixed version of "Tank" became one of my favorite parts of the show. When I did watch the anime, I found it slow—and yet, I also found there was always a payoff if you stuck it out. I got a lot out of the philosophical bent of episodes such as when Dr. Londes, AI guru, encourages followers to "let go"—which this new version does a great job with. I had the same impression with the pace of the live action—slow at times—and the same verdict—except maybe due to the live actors, the payoff is bigger.

What did you think about the show?

Kai: I enjoyed it. I learned much more about layered plot and characters than I did before. I understood everyone's motivations more. I felt connected to the plight of Spike, to whom Vicious, a raging narcissist, does much disservice; Jet, whose anguish over his lost family is palpable; Faye, who wants to find her

see **COWBOY BEBOP** on 12

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DNA from 1

because I was with my people the whole time!” Johnson shared.

Her sister also encouraged her to try the 23andme kit, and those results took only a few weeks to return. She found out that she had first cousins living in the greater Seattle area.

Johnson was shocked to find close relatives pop up from the results. When she did the Ancestry DNA kit, the closest non-European match was a fourth cousin.

FIRST COUSINS

Annie Nguyen bought 23andme when it was on sale during Black Friday in 2019. Her sisters had done it before, and her main goal was to run a health test to find out what illnesses she would be genetically predisposed to. She was also curious to learn more about her family history.

It took a few weeks to get her results back and was pleasantly surprised by how they knew she was related to her sister based on DNA testing, despite her not submitting any personal information to them.

Some time had passed and then a few months ago, Johnson reached out to Nguyen on the

23andme app. In her message, Johnson noted that it was out of the blue and strange, but according to their DNA results, they are first cousins, and she wanted to learn more about her paternal side.

That initiated the unexpected, yet exciting family reunion.

Johnson told Nguyen that she was trying to find out more about her biological father, and was excited to find Nguyen in the process. Johnson was hoping Nguyen could fill in the blanks about the paternal side of the family.

Through the initial exchange between the two, Johnson shared that her mom had a casual fling with a Vietnamese man back in the 1980s, but that her mom’s memory isn’t great due to a health condition.

FAMILY REUNION AFTER THREE DECADES

Johnson lives in Tucson, Arizona now after moving from Seattle, but she and Nguyen learned that they would soon have an opportunity to meet in person. Nguyen and her girlfriends had planned a trip to visit Sedona and they would be in Phoenix for a short time before making the drive. The cousins decided to meet up in person.

“It was so strange how things unfolded so quickly, I was very excited but pretty nervous. I didn’t want to come off as weird or put too much pressure on the situation. At the same time, I just wanted to know her,” Johnson said.

Johnson said that she’s the only Asian person on her maternal side and she’s been unique in that sense. She’s never seen anyone that’s looked like her and was excited to meet Annie.

“This crazy moment has finally happened, and for it to have happened with so much serendipity was strange and awesome,” Johnson said.

Their meetup was short and sweet, but “a four-hour round trip drive is nothing compared to waiting 30 years to find somebody who shares your blood,” Johnson said.

Johnson’s mom and sister texted her every day, asking for new updates, and Johnson found it funny that she was getting excitement and pressure from her maternal side—they seemed more excited than she was in some ways.

“I’m still absorbing the fact that I found my cousin, and I still can’t really believe it,” Johnson said.

Nguyen had the same reaction.

“It was really cool to find a first cousin. This hasn’t happened in real life before, but the fact that it happened to me was really cool.”

Another crazy coincidence is the cousins almost share the same birthday, though a year apart. Kalena’s birthday is Nov. 18 and Annie’s is Nov. 19.

Determined to solve the mystery together, Nguyen and Johnson have one major clue. Johnson’s mom said the Vietnamese man she was seeing had an older son who still lived in Vietnam. Nguyen asked her mom about it and while her mom has several brothers, there was only one with an older son in Vietnam. Nguyen is looking through photos at her parents’ house to see if they would reveal more information, and Johnson is checking with her mom to see if she kept photos from that time, too.

“I think it’s really cool to discover a new family member, and on top of all that, we click so well too, I can definitely see us meeting again and making plans in the future,” Nguyen said.

While everything happened so quickly and Johnson’s initial goal was to find her dad, she said that finding Nguyen was a huge deal for her.

“To get to know her as an

individual and not just on my way to another goal. It’s a standalone event just meeting her and anything beyond that is, just discovering my ethnicity alone was also a huge deal. But meeting Annie and having her be super cool and sharing things in common, has been so much more than I ever expected. I haven’t prepared emotionally for any of it, and it’s just been crazy in a good way,” Johnson said.

Johnson and Nguyen are both excited to have a new cousin, especially since they share common interests.

“There seems to be weird little coincidences that have lined up. Typically throughout my life, when things seem to line up that way, it’s like it’s divine and meant to happen. I feel like I’m on the right path when things fall into place so easily. I’m excited to hang out with her more and get to know her more. When I go home to visit, this could just open this whole new part of my life, and find out more about who I am in a way... it’s very exciting,” she added. ■

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BLOG from 10

the turkey to cook it perfectly.

But the turkey I remember the most was not the one I cooked. It wasn’t the one that I enjoyed, even though it was cooked perfectly with the juices intact inside and the meat texture was okay. The stuffings were typical American stuffing, a mixture of bread crumbs, onion, celery, herbs, and lots of butter.

It was my first turkey in America. My host family invited me to their Thanksgiving dinner. They picked me up the day before so I could stay to spend the weekend with them. I didn’t know what Thanksgiving was about. Everyone at the party assumed I knew about Thanksgiving, an American tradition that goes as far back as the 16th century.

My host mother had spent the whole day preparing the day before and on Thanksgiving morning. The menu also featured three pies—apple, minced, and pumpkin. Everything was done in an

orderly fashion without chaos. It was a 25-pound turkey and she had put the bird in the oven that was over 100° before she went to bed. Before noon the next day, the bird was done. Right before an early dinner (around 4 p.m.), we were ready for the feast. What I observed was, the turkey always looked spectacular from the outside, but once I opened my mouth for the first bite, it was usually a great disappointment. My host father had neatly carved the white meat from the turkey, and arranged them on a beautiful plate. Where was all the dark meat? Where’s the delicious drumstick or the wings? I hope they didn’t throw them away. I don’t eat white meat and never had when my family raised me in Hong Kong. We used all the chicken white meat to make soup.

“Do I eat it or not?” I asked myself.

Sure, I did. I didn’t want to hurt my host family’s feelings. I ended up eating very little turkey. What about the stuffing or gravy? Thanks, but no thanks. But I ate a huge piece of apple pie topped with ice

cream to quench my hunger. That’s why when my children asked me to cook turkey at first, I wasn’t that enthusiastic.

Over the years, I couldn’t help but blame myself. Why didn’t I ask for the dark meat of the turkey from my host family? Why didn’t I tell the truth? As a 19-year-old at the time, I wasn’t that assertive. I only knew it’s best not to upset anybody, especially my American host family. I appreciated their good intentions.

I never found out what they did with the dark meat or the bones of the turkey. I should have asked. If they wanted to give them to their dog or throw it away, I should savor some of those. Those would be delicious for lunch or dinner in my dormitory the following week. But I was too timid to ask for what I wanted. The challenge is how to get what you want without offending anyone, or making the other party feel slighted. In hindsight, I should have just turned it into an interesting cultural exchange at the dinner table.

“Just wondering, mom (she made me call

her mom), what are you going to do with the dark meat?”

If she said, “Give it to the dog later,” I could have said, “Oh, can I have some? I love dark meat, too.”

If she said, “I will use it for a salad tomorrow,” I could have said, “Can I have some now? I prefer dark meat to white meat.”

And she might say, “Why didn’t you say so in the first place?” That would have been the perfect scenario. Sometimes, it’s not that hard to turn things around. All we have to do is to open our mouths and be frank. Mostly, we didn’t and just let things slide. Speaking up at the right moment, at the right place, and to the right person, requires intuition, courage, and practice. If we don’t do that, we shortchange ourselves by not getting what we want, and simultaneously, building up misunderstandings and ill will. Sad! ■

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COWBOY BEBOP from 8

real family, yet can’t help kind of liking the fake mom who betrayed her. Perhaps because we have real actors this time, there is not the distance that I felt in the anime version, where it’s easier not to take the characters seriously. Now, I agree that most of them are jerks—and love them all the same. There are complaints the actors aren’t young enough, and it’s true the overall feel is “older.” That’s okay with me. I’m older, too, and I will definitely be going on a ride with these cowboys for Season 2.

Stacy: Honestly, I’m pretty sure masculine-noire-meets-space-

cowboys is still not my bag. I had a bit of a hard time settling into the show. I think because this genre is so stylized—like, it looks really cool and is visually fun to watch—but I think the trade-off there is that the characters don’t feel totally real and human. They’re saying weird things like: “Sounds like blackmail. / Damn right it is, because Jet, you are Black and you are male.”

It’s like, kill me, I can’t see anymore because my eyes rolled out of my head so hard.

I liked the chemistry of the main cast members a lot though—over the course of the show, I believed in their friendship. And the set design and world-

building is textured and fun to look at. It doesn’t look all sleek and utopic like how a lot of sci-fi can look. It looks all grungy and like everyone needs a shower—and that’s how I like to imagine it being in our near future.

What would you have liked to see? How does it compare to the anime?

Kai: The internet is afire with terrible reviews. This is much ado about nothing. This “Cowboy Bebop” is as competent as 100 other sci-fi shows. People say the only way it resembles the original is “aesthetics,” which is blatantly incorrect. While there are changes to some characters (Ana works in

a club instead of a store), there is much lifted from the anime, such as the church showdown when Vicious (played by Alex Hassell) suggests “fallen angels turn into devils.” I checked the anime and I’m not seeing the problem. My opinion often veers off the mainstream but rarely this far, which makes me think there is an agenda here, possibly against Netflix, and “Cowboy” is the unfortunate victim—a crying shame because they worked so hard to get it right.

Stacy: If “Cowboy Bebop” gets a second season, I would love for them to figure out their dialogue issue and make it less cringe.

But also—and this is

probably sacrilegious—but as a non-fan of anime, I would like for the makers of live-action adaptation to move further away from the source material and just go all out and make it differently on their own. I think trying to stay too faithful to the anime made parts of this

show feel artificial and not as authentic-feeling as it could’ve been. ■

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