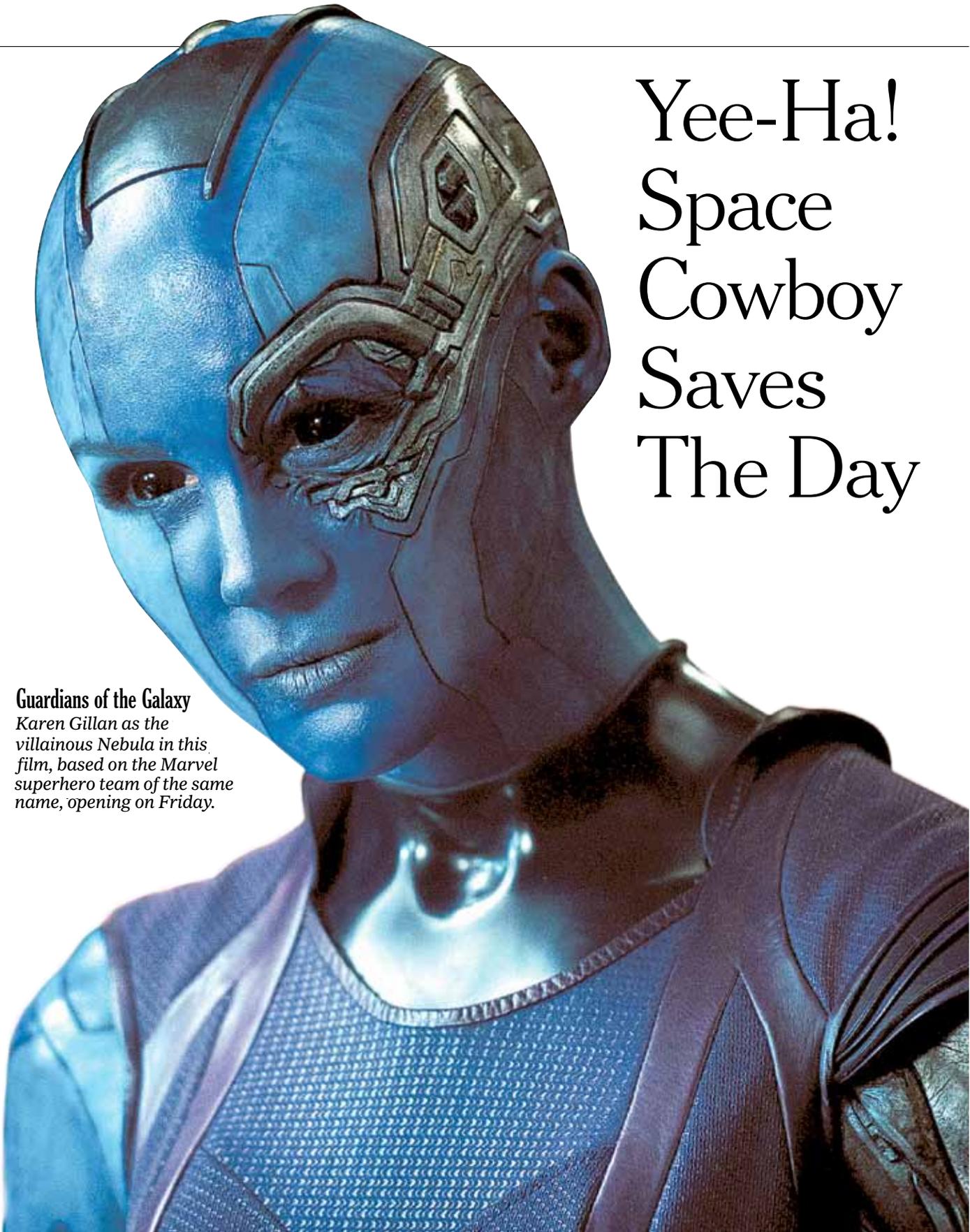

Weekend Arts I

The New York Times

Yee-Ha! Space Cowboy Saves The Day



Guardians of the Galaxy
Karen Gillan as the villainous Nebula in this film, based on the Marvel superhero team of the same name, opening on Friday.

TALKING about directing in blockbusters is sometimes nothing more than wishful thinking. Most are such impersonally operated machines — dedicated to the business of brand storytelling — that they tend to obliterate any whisper of individuality. That there's a palpable directorial sensibility in “Guardians of

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the Galaxy,” along with other signs of genuine life, helps separate this latest Marvel cash grab from a lot of off-the-rack movie cartoons. Here, a pulse, wit, beauty and a real sensibility have been slipped into the fray, alongside the clockwork guffaws, kabooms and splats.

Lifted by a cast of professional charmers and a “What, me worry?” vibe, “Guardians of the Galaxy” is one of those interstellar westerns about a motley group of appealing baddies who rise to the heroic occasion and ride to the rescue, on spaceships rather than Appaloosas. The John Wayne role here — or, really, the 1970s Harrison Ford one — belongs to Chris Pratt, an easygoing, comic performer who's very good at putting up a persuasive cute-dumb front and then shifting into a slyer, more knowing register. Wearing a swinging duster and some fetishistic head gear, Mr. Pratt slides into “Guardians of the Galaxy” doing a Gene Kelly soft shoe, but is soon flexing his action-hero bona fides (bang-bang, etc.) as Peter Quill, a heavily armed professional scavenger.

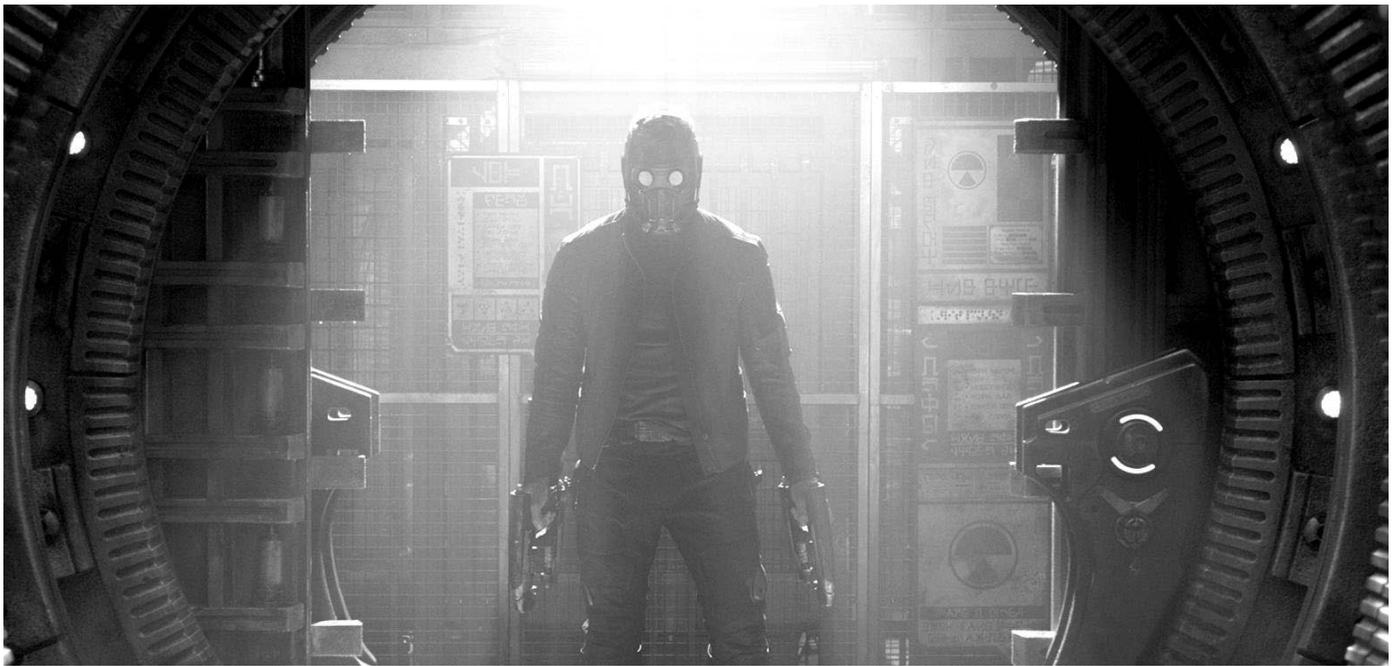
Quill is a good and a sometimes bad guy who fights and jokes amid swirling, polychromatic smoke and cascading words like Xandarians, Morag and the Celestial (and awesome) Head. He comes into possession of a pretty blue rock that everyone would risk death trying to get, hence a throwaway about “The Maltese Falcon.” You see, in 1539, some crusading knights persuaded the king of Spain to give them the island of Malta. ... That's not what happens in “Guardians,” which is based on a comic that first hit in 1969, but no matter. What counts are the dreams of Quill and his compatriots, including a wisecracking raccoon and an ambulatory tree, which have been ushered into existence by the director, James Gunn, with an eye to those who don't know or care about the source material.

In other words, you don't need to be held hostage by the Marvel Weltanschauung to

enjoy “Guardians.” The story may be confusing and generic by turns, but if you shake off the bonds of narrative coherency it's liberating letting the weird words — Yondu, Necrocraft, Sakkaran — just slide right past you, much like the zigzagging, exploding 3-D spaceships. What sticks are the fantastical landscapes, the beautiful creature designs and the actors delivering lively performances, even with strata of makeup and digital wizardry. Among the many amusements is the floating head (kind of like in “The Wizard of Oz”) that yells at a villain, Ronan (Lee Pace, with notes of “Star Wars” and “Prometheus”) who wants the blue rock so he can destroy Xandar, a post-racial Eden run by Nova Prime, a space-age Hillary Rodham Clinton (Glenn Close).

Filled with a multihued populace, Xandar is shiny, clean and bright, and looks familiar because it evokes both our world (one building suggests the Gherkin in London) and your favorite tattered science-fiction paperback. It's nice if a little ho-hum (as utopias tend to be in movies), particularly when compared with the darkly colored, visually seductive realms and spaces conjured up by Mr. Gunn and his team. From location to location, and character to character, the quality of the special effects meets the demands of the imaginative designs in sweep and detail. There are different ways to get lost in a movie, and while “Guardians” takes you down one after another crazy narrative turn, it also pulls you into — and, for the most part, keeps you in — a fully realized other world.

That's a relief, because the movie doesn't start promisingly, opening with not one but two female clichés: the dead mother and the disposable chick. Both belong to Quill — he tells the chick, who enters with bed hair and not much else, that he forgot she was even there — and they suggest that however futuristic the movie may be, its sexual politics and world-view are antediluvian. (You have to wonder if the people who make these entertainments ever think about what such tired stereotypes say to young viewers, not to mention their own sons and daughters.) The sense that the movie's appealingly old-fashioned jocular, reminiscent of late Howard Hawks, has its fatal drawbacks dissipates with the introduction of Gamora (Zoe Saldana), a green, mean, not-so-jolly killing machine.



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From top, Chris Pratt as Peter Quill, an interstellar adventurer who leads a band of baddies in “Guardians of the Galaxy”; Zoe Saldana, left, as the assassin Gamora, and the ambulatory tree Groot (voiced by Vin Diesel); Rocket Raccoon (voiced by Bradley Cooper) and Dave Bautista as Drax the Destroyer.

However familiar, Gamora turns out to be better than most Strong Female Characters — you know those girls: They’re fierce and finally inconsequential — that the blogger Tasha Robinson went after in a recent post about the so-called Trinity Syndrome. This pervasive sexist disorder affects a lot of filmmakers and is named for the “Matrix” character whose trajectory doesn’t deliver on her exciting promise. Gamora is given more to do than make a splashy entrance and wear tight costumes,

and Ms. Saldana remains a charismatic screen presence, even when she trades in her Emma Peel-ish catsuits for a miniskirt, a costume change that’s accompanied by the image of a soft female hand resting on a strong male shoulder. This is another movie that mock-skewers the stereotypes it embraces.

It’s old news that the major studios, having long absorbed the lessons of B-movie titans like Roger Corman, are now primarily in the business of churning out big-ticket exploitation

flicks. (As a studio executive said way back in 1975, “What was ‘Jaws’ but an old Corman monster-from-the-deep flick?”) It’s perfect, then, that Mr. Gunn, having started out working for Troma Entertainment, that gleeful purveyor of barrel-scraping trash, has been tapped by Marvel for its latest bid at box-office domination. He’s a funny guy who brings a light touch to cartoon violence, whether he’s going for giggles (as in “Slither”) or uglier yuks (“Super”). But in “Guardians of the Galaxy,” he also summons up some emotion and even quiet desperation amid the scares and the brutes like Drax (a terrific Dave Bautista).

Given these moments of feeling, it doesn’t seem accidental that two of the brightest char-

acters in the movie, which Mr. Gunn wrote with Nicole Perlman, are the raccoon and the tree, both surprisingly melancholic figures whose presence proves more resonant than their patter. The raccoon, Rocket (given an effectively grating screech by Bradley Cooper), is a nasty, often crude piece of work who’s never as funny as he thinks. But, much like the tree, a gorgeously rendered creature called Groot (Vin Diesel, in his finest role since “The Iron Giant”) — who nibbles his own tender sprouts and, in a nod to the 1931 film “Frankenstein,” offers a child a bloom — the raccoon carries with him an air of regret, a sense of loss and despair that, in the end, speaks more to our world than to that of the movie. ■