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CINEMA



# THE MARVELS

Writers Megan McDonnell and Elissa Karasik  
power up the MCU

By David Somerset





## **Before they wrote a word on *The Marvels*,**

Megan McDonnell and Elissa Karasik were already immersed in the Marvel Cinematic Universe—its Disney+ TV side, at least. McDonnell had been part of the writing staff bringing *WandaVision* to life, while Karasik was aboard *Loki*'s acclaimed first season. Yet for both, such a giant new assignment was a surprise, since the two series represented their first produced work of any real scale. McDonnell was producing John August and Craig Mazin's *Scriptnotes* podcast and had worked on the 2016 horror comedy short video *Meet Cute*, while Karasik's experience was as an assistant to the writer-producers of *Bones* and *Backstrom*.

Being thrown into the maelstrom of a writers' room as working scribes, though, proved to be a crucial learning experience for the two, and they soon figured out how Marvel's setup was unique. "There's a lot about working with Marvel that is so magical, and getting to work with established characters everybody already loves is a real luxury," McDonnell enthuses, while allowing that the lesson was clear: "Be ready for things to change—a lot!" Karasik and McDonnell didn't properly meet when they were working on their separate shows because of Marvel's legendary tendency to silo its staffs to avoid leaks. Despite all the secrecy, Karasik in particular appreciated the approach, which she found different from the rooms she'd observed and aided in the past: "They really don't conform to a hierarchical TV writing process. It's best idea wins. There's a spirit of collaboration there that doesn't have to do with whether you're a staff writer or co-executive producer or whatever, because TV can be a very title-driven space."





*The Marvels*, of course, was a much bigger proposition. A follow-up not only to 2019's *Captain Marvel*, which introduced Brie Larson as the incredibly powerful Carol Danvers, it picks up plot threads from both 2020's *WandaVision* via Teyonah Parris' Monica Rambeau, the grown daughter of Carol's best friend Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch), whom we met in that first movie and the 2022 series *Ms. Marvel*, which of course also introduced Marvel superfan-turned-superhero Kamala Khan, played to winning effect by Iman Vellani. With *Little Woods* and *Candyman* director Nia DaCosta on board to oversee (and co-write) the film, the story finds the three women's lives interrupted when their powers become cosmically entangled, causing them to swap places whenever they use their abilities. So Kamala, for example, goes from sitting in her bedroom to screaming inside Monica's space suit—at least until she floats toward the Strategic Aerospace Biophysics and Exolinguistic Response, aka S.A.B.E.R., space station—and spots its commander, Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson).

At that moment, her fear dissolves as she goes into fangirl mode, while Carol winds up confused standing in the middle of teenage Kamala's bedroom, which happens to be decorated with multiple images of the hero herself. This strange turn of events is caused by Kree warrior Dar-Benn (Zawe Ashton), burning with vengeance against Danvers, who destroyed the Kree home world of Hala's ruling AI, the Supreme Intelligence, and causing havoc on the planet. Dar-Benn has sought out an ancient Quantum Band she can use to manipulate hyperspace jump points. Ultimately, her plan is to draw resources such as air, water and even the sun from planets linked to Captain Marvel in order to destroy Marvel's world in a way similar to how she feels her own was nearly destroyed. It's up to the heroes to stop her before our world and others pay the ultimate price.







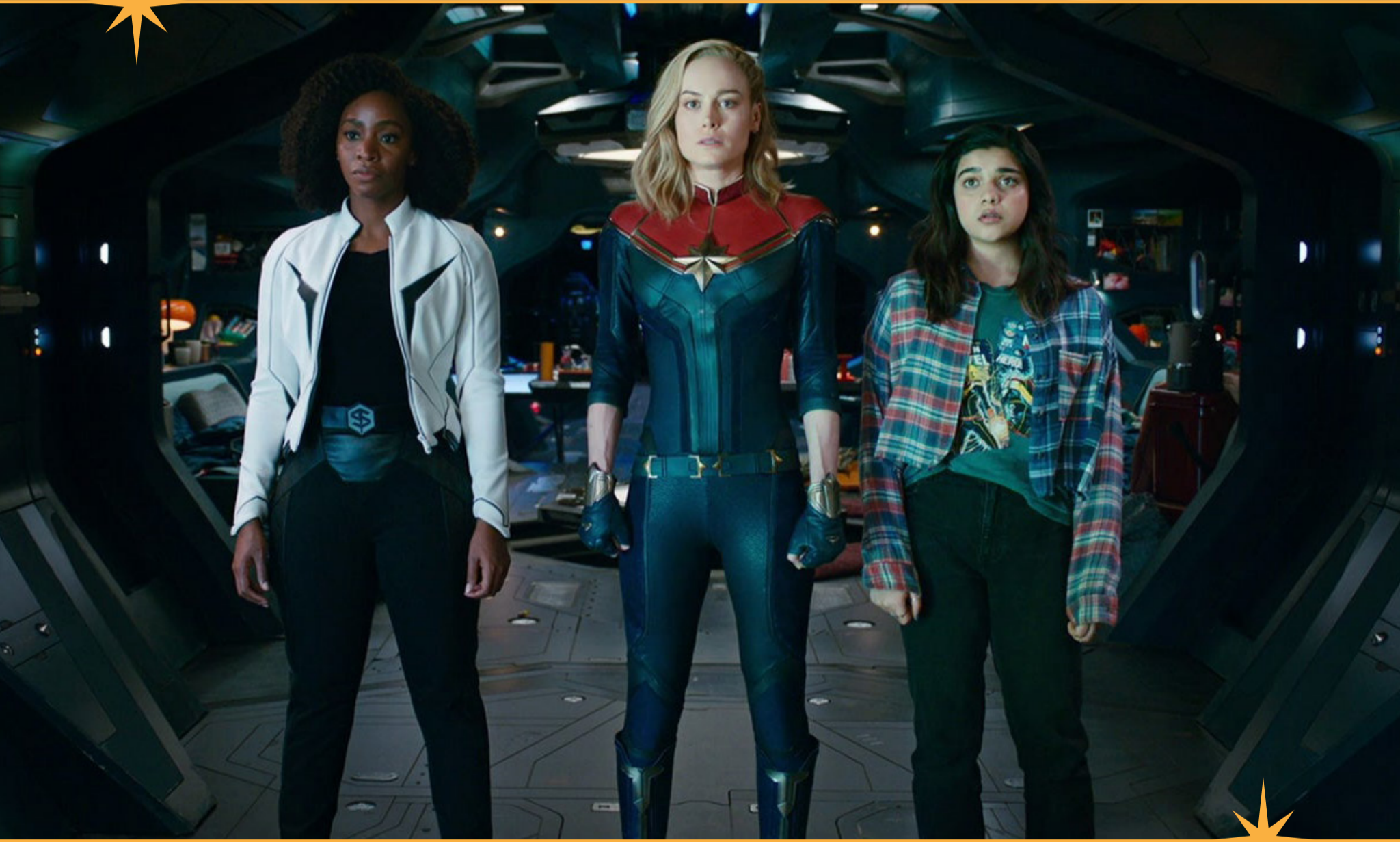
From Left: Writer Megan McDonnell, Writer-Director Nia DaCosta, Producer Mary Livanos, Writer Elissa Karasik

McDonnell actually pre-dates DaCosta on the project. She was hired back in January 2020 to start working with executive producer Mary Livanos, who'd also worked on *WandaVision*, to start figuring out a script for what was then an untitled sequel to *Captain Marvel*. This means she was already a key part of the team when the director was hired in August that year off the back of her pitch for the movie, which drilled down on the emotional and heroic dynamic of the three main women. She was also there to make sure it was still entertaining, especially for people who embraced the characters and wider universe the way DaCosta did. "When Nia came in, I did not get to sit in on her pitch," McDonnell says. "But it immediately became very collaborative in a really wonderful way."

Initially DaCosta and McDonnell worked on the script, but Karasik soon joined them. "Though we didn't technically have a writers' room, sometimes it felt that way, where we were all just passing the script around a lot," Karasik recalls. The three worked together—albeit in separate workspaces, collaborating over Zoom—to elaborate on themes that existed from the early days of development. "The concept of our heroes switching places when they use their powers at the same time was there from the very beginning," McDonnell notes, "and very central to the theme and to Carol's arc of, *Yes, you are extremely powerful, but you can't always be the one person standing between the universe and disaster*. Switching places with the others when using your powers, I think, was a good way to articulate that without making her any less powerful."









For Karasik, it was a baptism by blockbuster fire, learning how things work on a giant film. “When I came aboard, they’d already started building multimillion-dollar sets,” she says, “so it was a little bit of a puzzle. I got to run my hands through the script with a special lens for character work, tone and comedy, figuring out how you infuse and rearrange with certain architectural things in place.” She got a tough lesson on precisely that with an early scene she penned she figured would be an easy add—a moment set in a breakroom on the S.A.B.E.R. station. “Nia told me, ‘I said, no new sets.’ I replied, ‘But it’s S.A.B.E.R.! We have S.A.B.E.R.’ And she said, ‘What do you not understand? Anything you write has to be created—it has to be built. It might exist in your head, but it’s not there!’ It’s one of those things that becomes second or first nature when you spend time on set.”

Though they were on set at different times, the pair picked a couple of scenes they adjusted together during production as the most challenging. The first was an initial fight where Carol, Monica and Kamala are all switching places and battling Dar-Benn’s forces, which the writers feel was incredibly intricate to figure out. The second would seem to be more straightforward, since it’s essentially a conversation, but it proved just as tricky. “It was the scene in the Hoopty [Carol’s ship] between her and Monica. They have their first interaction at the Khans’ house, but it’s a little bit abbreviated because of the situation. This is their first real down beat, where they actually have the chance to talk for the first time in decades. That scene was one where we reworked the length of production because it was just such a weighty, important conversation. There’s a more condensed version of it in the movie now, but that scene was pages and pages originally.”

