

ADAPTED FROM THE ACCLAIMED
COMIC BOOK, NETFLIX'S **THE OLD GUARD**
INTRODUCES US TO CHARLIZE
THERON'S IMMORTAL MERCENARY
ANDY. CREATOR GREG RUCKA AND
DIRECTOR GINA PRINCE-BYTHEWOOD
TALK ABOUT WHAT MAKES THIS STORY
OF IMMORTALITY DIFFERENT

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**



I C M O M O



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“**W**HO WANTS to live forever?” the great Freddie Mercury once sang. Who indeed? For

some, the dream of eternal life is the ultimate trophy, but think about it: yes, you may be able to one day jet off to work in a flying car, chew on a Sunday roast food pill or finish Marcel Proust's *Remembrance Of Things Past*, but is it really worth seeing everyone you've ever loved grow old and eventually croak before your ever-youthful eyes?

That's the sadness behind the action of Netflix's new SF flick *The Old Guard*, in which a band of ageless mercenaries, headed up by the tired-of-life and centuries-old Andy (Charlize Theron), are pursued by a ruthless pharmaceutical honcho who plans to replicate and sell the group's death-defying powers.

Immortals are a heavyweight presence in the world of SF, from Marvel's *Eternals* to the elves of Middle-earth, but usually it's all about them being serene and god-like and impossibly wise. What few books or movies ever seem to explore is the built-in tragedy of a life spent without death as its inevitable end.

“I had this idea for this woman – I knew she was a woman – who was just so incomprehensibly old and was also so incomprehensibly sad as a result,” says comic book writer Greg Rucka, who debuted *The Old Guard* via Image Comics in 2017. “I knew she was old because she couldn't die, and I knew she was sad because she couldn't die, but everybody else had.”

Rucka's initial thoughts for the story were, somewhat amazingly given the melancholic nature of the eventual comic book, more akin to a Looney Tunes cartoon.

“I thought it was kind of silly. I could do anything I wanted to them, and they'd be fine!” he laughs. “But the further I got into it the more I got to recognise what it was I was actually writing about, which is I was actually trying to thematically argue the necessity of death. Why it is people have to die, and why it's important

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If you're immortal, why bother being stealthy?

and right that they do. We are creatures of narrative. All of us are born knowing, or eventually learning, that the story ends the same way, no matter who you are. Prince or pauper, you're gonna die. And that inevitability is what gives our lives meaning. If you don't know that there is a last chapter coming, then what's the reason to get out of bed in the morning?” he reasons.

GROWN-UP

That first story, eventually published as *The Old Guard: Opening Fire*, focused on a tight-knit group of centuries-old warriors drafting in its first fresh member in 200 years, US Marine Nile Freeman. The movie, adapted by Rucka from that first volume, is a largely faithful retelling of the opening salvo, directed by African-American filmmaker Gina Prince-Bythewood.

She made her name with a run of intimate, fight-lite indie dramas such as 2000's *Love & Basketball* and 2008's *The Secret Life Of Bees*. Not an obvious choice for a globe-spanning, high-octane SF action flick, but then that's what production company Skydance was after, it seems: someone who could bring a fresh eye to a film that, if done wrong, could have been lost in the crowd as just another punchy comic book adaptation.

“I'm a big fan of graphic novels and especially Greg Rucka who's doing such interesting things, especially with female characters,”

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Prince-Bythewood tells *SFX*. As a comic book fan, she had devoured his female-fronted series *Lazarus*, but hadn't encountered *The Old Guard* until the screenplay landed on her desk.

“I knew within five pages that I was in,” she enthuses. “It just felt so different, having two female leads, one being a young black woman. That, and the fact that the story kept surprising me. It was those elements that made me jump into something big like this.”

What's immediately striking about *The Old Guard* is how gritty real-world it is, certainly compared to the sugared, poppy house style of the MCU. Imagine Kathryn Bigelow trying her hand at a high-concept SF movie, and you'll be close to the kind of grown-up comic book movie *The Old Guard* wants to be.





"...and then she says, 'But I've only had one drink!'"



KIKI BLINDER

KIKI Layne is US Marine Nile Freeman

This is quite a different role for you. Yes, it's very different from *If Beale Street Could Talk*! My introduction to it was: I had a meeting with Skydance, and then I ordered the graphic novel. When I started reading it, I got even more excited, then I learned that Charlize was attached to it, and by then I was like, "I need to do this."

How was it doing the action choreography? Can you handle yourself in a fight now?

You really pick up these skills. I was doing all this training, learning how to throw punches and all that - these are real skills now that I have. Doing these, you learn things about your body and it's like, okay, I didn't know my leg went that high!

What was Charlize Theron like to work with?

It was really cool being on set with a woman as confident as she is. Her knowledge of filmmaking is amazing to me. She was so aware of the shots, the choreography, the cameras, it was all amazing. I learnt so much about film from working with her.

How did you find filming in the UK? Was it your first time here?

I'd visited a couple of times, but it was cool to actually be there and be able to enjoy London and do all the touristy stuff. I certainly found a love of tea there. I've never had that much tea in my life!

GETTY

be able to identify with and believe in these characters."

As prep, Prince-Bythewood absorbed herself in crunchy action classics, from the jittery docu-realism of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *The Hurt Locker* to James Mangold's genre-splicing *Logan*, which would prove a major influence on the dark, adult stylings of *The Old Guard*.

"I loved *Logan* so much because I felt it elevated the genre," she says of the Oscar-nominated *X-Men* spin-off. "The fact that I could cry in that film, the fact that the emotions felt so real, that it was dealing with real themes of mortality and what that means - it showed you where the genre could go."

While *The Old Guard* marks Prince-Bythewood's first frolic in the action movie sandpit,

for Greg Rucka it was his first ever time working in the medium. The whole experience was so strange and so desperately surreal for the 50-year-old Eisner Award-winner that it took some time for the reality of what was happening to sink in.

"There were different moments when I understood, 'Oh they're planning on making a movie...'" he tells *SFX*. "They're talking about the budget, they're talking about studios, they're talking about locations, they're talking about casting, then oh my god, they've cast →



"Yes! I've been pre-selected for a prize draw!"

"When I read it, it came to me pretty immediately that I wanted this to feel grounded," Prince-Bythewood says. "I wanted an audience to believe that these characters could be sitting next to us at a Starbucks. I think everybody at some point in their life wishes they could live forever, without understanding what that really means: that it can be a gift, but also a curse and a tragedy. To be able to feel those things within such a fantastical conceit, I thought the more grounded it was the more an audience would

Disagreement over top billing got serious.



MAGIC MOMENTS

Director **Gina Prince-Bythewood** on her favourite scenes

"Really, there's two," Gina Prince-Bythewood says when *SFX* asks what her favourite scene in the movie is. "The airplane fight [between Charlize Theron's Andy and KiKi Layne's Nile] is the very first thing we shot for the film and - I'm not going to lie - I was worried. I was like, 'Why aren't we starting with something I'm more familiar with, like a one-on-one scene?' Then on the other hand I was like, 'Let's go big or go home, let's go for it.' To be able to do that scene right off the bat, and for it to turn out as well as it did, gave me confidence."

Prince-Bythewood's other favourite scene is when we, the audience, discover that this band of mercenaries have these hitherto undisclosed superpowers. It's a powerful moment, when the film (which starts off without any indication of its sci-fi trappings) announces what kind of movie it is. "I wanted an audience to be able to feel what I felt when I read the script and came across these moments that surprised me - and that was certainly one of them," she says.



"No really, look - I might be able to win a yacht."



Charlize Theron!" He laughs, remembering the pinch-yourself weirdness of the moment. But he says the time it really hit home was when one of the movie's producers, Marc Evans, sent Rucka a photo of the cast.

"The thing about it was, they had collectively posed in the same pose that Leandro [Fernández, artist] had drawn for one of the group shots in the trade collection," he smiles. "So they're all in character poses, with character attitudes, and in costume and with weapons! I remember just staring at that picture, and I was like, 'Oh my god, they're making a movie!'"

THE NEWER GUARD

Scripted by Rucka, the film is largely faithful to the beats of those first five issues, even if it's tonally a different beast. "The comic is goofier," Rucka suggests. "It draws with a very broad brush. When I blow people up in it I can make them look as goofy as possible - or Leandro does when he draws it."

"But you can't do that in a movie. If I have someone jump on a hand grenade in the comic, that's going to look maybe a little gross, but it's also going to look funny. If you do that in a movie, it just looks gross."

"The graphic novel was my bible, and it was great that the creator of the graphic novel wrote the script," says Prince-Bythewood. "There's a reason why we all fell in love with the graphic novel, so why stray from that? Whenever I do an adaptation I always want to stay true to the source material, and when the source material was this good there was no reason to stray. I think we've improved little things with it and gone a little deeper with some aspects, but it's certainly the graphic novel," she adds.

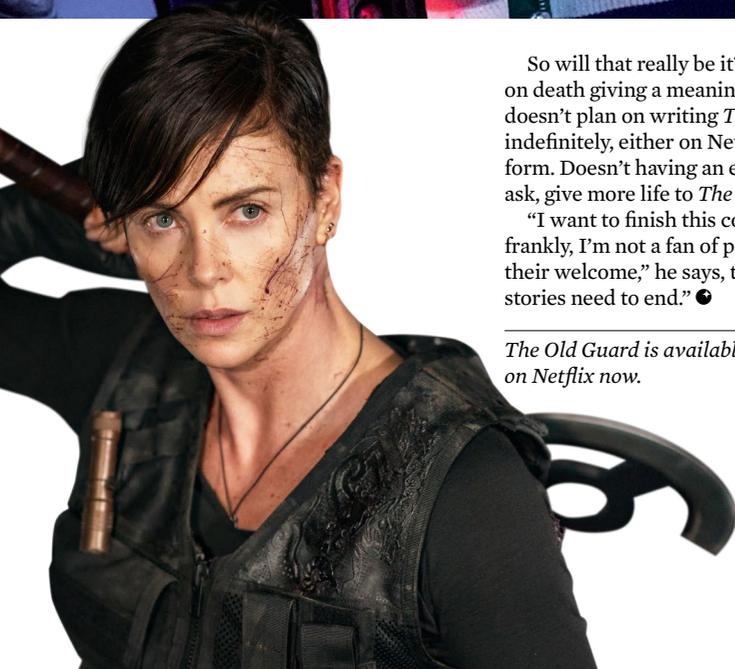
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Rucka's comic has just completed a second storyline, *Force Multiplied*. And it's clear from the movie - not much of a spoiler alert here, but it ends on a cliffhanger - that Netflix is up for more stories involving this band of impossibly photogenic immortals. Certainly Gina Prince-Bythewood is hungry for it - "It would be great if we could do more, as I love those characters," she coos - but Greg Rucka insists that, despite the fact that the movie sets things up for a possible sequel, any follow-up remains "hypothetical" at present.

What is certain is that a third *Old Guard* mini-series is coming in 2021, titled *Fade Away*. "I'm working on it now," Rucka teases, before adding, "That's, for me, the conclusion of this particular arc."



Getting into the Bouncers' AGM wasn't easy.



So will that really be it? Rucka's thoughts on death giving a meaning to life suggests he doesn't plan on writing *The Old Guard* indefinitely, either on Netflix or in comic book form. Doesn't having an ending in sight, we ask, give more life to *The Old Guard*?

"I want to finish this complete story and, frankly, I'm not a fan of people who overstay their welcome," he says, tellingly. "Some stories need to end." ●

The Old Guard is available to stream on Netflix now.

LIVE FOREVER

Our favourite immortals from film, TV and books

CAPTAIN JACK HARKNESS, DOCTOR WHO/TORCHWOOD

Not born immortal, the omnisexual flirt-monster was given the power of everlasting life by Rose Tyler in the season one *Doctor Who* finale "The Parting Of The Ways". Through various episodes of *Doctor Who* and spin-off *Torchwood*, Jack has been offed countless times, even getting blown to smithereens in the five-part "Children Of Earth" story. But even being shattered into a thousand bloody pieces wasn't enough to stop Captain Jack.



THE GRAIL KNIGHT, INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE

Immortality may be fascinating if you're out there, watching the changes fly by in the real world, but imagine the mind-numbing agony of spending eternity in one place, guarding the Holy Grail from marauders. We presume this Knight is still there, guarding the chalice just in case Donald Trump fancies his chances.



MICHAEL MYERS, HALLOWEEN

It's never specifically stated that the Shatner-mask-rocking serial slasher is immortal (though 1996's *Halloween: The Curse Of Michael Myers* alluded to it), but we can presume he is, simply due to the amount of times he's been apparently killed, only to return in the next *Halloween* instalment. It looked like it might have finally been it for the Shape at the end of 2018's *Halloween*, as Michael apparently burnt to death in Laurie Strode's basement, but hey, he's back in this year's *Halloween Kills*.



DORIAN GRAY, THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Oscar Wilde's swoonsome narcissist is blessed/cursed with everlasting youth, his real ageing showing itself only on a portrait hidden far away from prying eyes. At the climax of Wilde's 1890 novel, Gray slashes away at the gruesome painting, and finally dies. But presumably if he hadn't attacked it, he'd still be around today, still fresh of face, probably Instagramming himself 30 times a day and dating a Kardashian.



PHIL CONNORS, GROUNDHOG DAY

No matter how many times curmudgeonly weatherman Phil Connors tries to kill himself he keeps returning to the same day, again and again... There's one thing the movie never makes clear, though: for how long exactly is Connors stuck there, repeating 2nd February? Director Harold Ramis originally thought 10 years, but later revised it given that by the film's end Connors is a brilliant ice sculptor and pianist. "It takes at least 10 years to get good at anything," Ramis said, "Allotting for the misguided years he spent, it had to be more like 30 or 40 years."

