

BLUE BEETLE



# TRUE

34 | SFX MAGAZINE | SEPTEMBER 2023



THE FIRST DCU CHARACTER ARRIVES!  
**BLUE BEETLE** DIRECTOR ÁNGEL  
MANUEL SOTO AND STAR XOLO  
MARIDUEÑA TALK KICKSTARTING  
A NEW CINEMATIC UNIVERSE  
WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD

THIS INTERVIEW  
WAS CONDUCTED  
PRIOR TO SAG-AFTRA  
STRIKE ACTION

# BLUE



## BLUE BEETLE



kid,” Soto tells *SFX*. “He had moves, but he also had charisma. The way he expressed himself was very mature, but then you see him laughing and making jokes, and he’s a kid who definitely lives in the present.”

What Soto didn’t realise was that he had been bitten by the Maridueña bug. A year later, the filmmaker was invited by Warner Bros to discuss bringing DC stalwart Blue Beetle to cinemas, and as Soto started reading the superhero’s many comics, he couldn’t stop thinking about the young man he had met at Sundance.

“He looks exactly like him,” he says. “And after meeting his family and everybody involved in his upbringing... I mean, without trying, he already is [the Blue Beetle] Jaime Reyes. He has the martial arts background, he has the same physical attributes, and the way he handles life is not that dissimilar from Jaime. It was an obvious cast. I pushed for him because I couldn’t see anybody else. And he delivered.”

### FAMILY AFFAIR

Anyone uninitiated in Reyes’s comic-book past may be wondering why Soto was so intrigued by the actor’s family dynamic. After all, it’s not normally a necessity for your colleagues to meet your parents. The character of Jaime Reyes, however, is steeped in family. Where Peter Parker and Miles Morales hide their abilities, Reyes does not have a choice: he obtains his powers in front of his entire family.

In the film, Reyes first transforms into the Blue Beetle by accident in his kitchen. He’s been tasked with protecting a stolen, mythical relic that’s shaped like a scarab. The alien device latches onto Reyes, disintegrating his clothes and covering his body with a blue exoskeleton, and his family, including his mother (Elpidia Carrillo), father (Damián Alcázar), uncle (George Lopez), sister (Belissa Escobedo) and grandmother (Adriana Barraza), are all there watching on in horror.

The scene was Maridueña’s favourite to film and, his director explains, gives the film its emotional core. “Family is what drew me into the project, it was our North Star,” Soto says. “I love all these superhero movies [but] the tropes are always similar, and that’s okay, but one thing that was very satisfying to see in the script was that this doesn’t happen to him in an alley, or by himself. The family’s involved.

“That was fresh for an origin story and how that alters the course of the hero’s journey; how that refusal of the call, and stepping into that new world, comes differently thanks to the participation of the family.” For Soto, making sure the family had chemistry was one of the



He also has some really big guns, which helps.





Blue Beetle has the power of all beetles! Imagine.



Jaime (Xolo Maridueña) and the scarab.



"Um, Jaime... everything all right in there?"

most important aspects of the entire pre-production process. He gathered the actors together for what can only be described as an unusual rehearsal process. Rather than going over pages of the script, the ensemble instead spoke about their experiences, sharing both the saddest and happiest events of their life. The younger cast heard stories about Barraza's upbringing in Mexico and the fulfillment of having children.

"Everybody shared their highest highs and their lowest lows," Soto says. "They were hugging each other and supporting each other through those moments so that, when we were shooting, any improvisation came from that place. There were no egos, it was family."

The plot primarily focuses on Jaime as he comes to terms with his newfound abilities, which include being able to jet off to space in his suit and construct weapons from seemingly nothing. All the while, Susan Sarandon's villainous Victoria Kord, along with Raoul Max Trujillo's Conrad Carapax (aka the Indestructible Man), hunt down the person who took the scarab. But it's not only Jaime who ends up getting a heroic arc: each member of the family gets their moment.

"Everybody can see themselves represented on screen, not just because of race or ethnicity or gender," Soto says. "Your grandma is going to see themselves being a hero. Your younger

sister, your dad, your mom." With that in mind, writers John Rickard and Zev Foreman made sure that the villains were not world-ending destroyers or CG armies, and Soto wants to stress that the Reyes family fights more than just the usual sort of superhero movie threats. "It's about saving this family from gentrification, saving a community from exploitation and displacement," he says.

"My biggest fear is not an alien invasion but Homeland Security. That haunts me. Not being able to put food on the table, that's a real villain. Being able to take that and make an allegory with a superhero, and have him succeed so that he can then save the world, it's a unique thing, and I think it's going to surprise people."

*Blue Beetle* uses action sparingly compared to other recent superhero flicks. "We're not trying to blow your head every five minutes, we really wanted to focus on the family and the characters, to take you on a journey," Soto says. "It reminds me of the films that I grew up with, especially Latino cinema, which spends time with the characters before they head into action situations. Then, once they happen, and the film reaches its climax, it has a more visceral feel to it."

Soto often speaks about Latino cinema and its influence on him. *Blue Beetle* itself marks the first major live-action DC production to

centre on a Latino character. Soto wants to make clear that the Latino experience is not a monolithic one, and that *Blue Beetle* represents just a handful of experiences, but he's clearly excited that doors are opening to filmmakers of all backgrounds. "It felt like we had an opportunity to open the dialogue, open the doors," he says.

"For me, I cannot wait to see the next Latino superhero. Where is he going to be from? There are so many more stories to tell. My hope is that people are invited to our culture to see this family and have fun, to see superheroes through a different lens. I want to tell my story because my experience is different."

This version of Jaime Reyes is different, too. Unlike in the comics, where Reyes classically lives in El Paso, Texas, the scriptwriters created a new hometown for him, Palmera City. And while that may seem like a relatively minor detail (though one that has proven controversial with some fans), the implication for Soto was much greater.

"When you list DC superheroes, they have their own cities," he says. "The Flash has Central City, Batman has Gotham and Superman has Metropolis. To me, Blue Beetle having his own city means that we're seeing him as a hero that's climbing up the ladder to become A-list. But at the same time, I understand what it's like to have a hero from →



## BLUE BEETLE

your own city. We spent time in El Paso and used the architecture, the landmarks, the lights, the texture, so that we can integrate what's special about El Paso into Palmera City."

By creating a unique hometown for the Reyes family, *Blue Beetle* lays the foundation for an ongoing franchise, and Soto hopes his film succeeds so that they can continue with his plans for a trilogy that escalates the stakes from personal to galaxy-saving.

"This is the first act," he says. "We introduce the character, we introduce his family, we do not have him going out and saving the world straight away. We wanted to ground him. This one feels like a prologue to his journey, where we take our time building the world, meeting people, seeing where he lives, what he eats, how he smells. So that when he ends up saving his family, you think, 'Maybe he can save the world? And maybe he can save the galaxy?' After this movie, I do believe Blue Beetle is ready to become one of the A-list heroes that the world is desperate to see."

With James Gunn and Peter Safran, the new heads of DC, rebooting the universe, there's been some speculation that *Blue Beetle* may be a storytelling cul-de-sac that will inevitably be redone. Gunn, however, has already clarified that Reyes is the very first new DCU character, and while that was not something Soto knew going into the project (the regime change happened during post-production), Gunn's words have been seen as a "stamp of approval" on the film.

"It's a testament to the hard work of all the cast and crew," Soto says. "In a cultural sense, the fact that a Latino that looks like me is the first new superhero in the DCU is exciting. We've always known we are superheroes and now finally the world is going to see us as superheroes. We can stand with all these other superheroes, from Batman to Superman to Flash to Aquaman to Wonder Woman. Having them all standing shoulder to shoulder, I would



The family indulge in some gentle bullying.

have loved to have seen that when I was growing up.

"I just hope people are open to it and understand that this movie, this character, is just the beginning. His story doesn't end with the credits roll. There are so many more opportunities. I cannot wait to see what the future brings for him."

Let's all hope that the hero can charm the world just as Maridueña charmed Soto all those years ago. 🌟

*Blue Beetle* is in cinemas on 18 August.



"Now THIS is something I really wasn't expecting."







Director Ángel Manuel Soto (second from left).

## BUGGING OUT

Xolo Maridueña is the Blue Beetle

**Family plays a major role in *Blue Beetle*. Does that make this a different superhero film?**

● That's definitely one of the biggest things that makes this movie different. One of my favourite scenes to film, and just one of my favourite moments in any superhero movie, is when Jaime's getting his powers for the first time in front of his whole family.

That keeps the story so honest from the beginning. Oftentimes in superhero movies, a big conflict is having to keep your identity hidden from your family, and if there's one thing that's for sure about Latinos it's that nothing can be hidden.

**Which superheroes would you say Jaime Reyes is most like?**

● Something I really like about the Blue Beetle character in the comics, at least – and we don't necessarily see as much of it in the movie yet, because our movie is really self-contained – is how much of a code-switcher he is. He's able to be cool with the cool kids, he's serious with Batman and Superman.

And there's this really aspirational feeling about him that comes from his sense of honesty and his earnest demeanour in a way that is believable. He's had such a strong sense of love from the beginning of his life. I drew from that and the *Young Justice* animated series. He's also so sassy in the *Injustice* games, I love his quips and taglines, he's hilarious in those games. I was able to blend it all in.

**What aspects of this film do you think will most surprise people?**

● Don't let the colours fool you, this is a serious movie as well. I love the '80s neon, *Akira*-inspired universe that we're making. But this is a movie for all ages. A lot of people are meeting Blue Beetle for the first time ever and I'm just so excited for that to play out.

**What was it like wearing the suit?**

● I wanted to live in the suit. It's the coolest suit I've ever seen. The reason that I really want everyone to see the movie is because they said if we make a second one, I get to keep the suit! I'm kidding, but the suit, it feels both alien and techy. It really is fantastic. It's practical. I felt it hugging my back and the pincers and all of these different things. It fooled me. I was like, "What! I'm a superhero? What the heck." It looked like I had a Brazilian butt-lift.

I feel like I was the only person showing up at three in the morning so excited. They were like, "Please, just be quiet. I haven't had my coffee." Even watching the trailer for the first time, I was astonished at how amazing it looks on set.

**James Gunn has called *Blue Beetle* the first DCU character. That must be a huge honour...**

● Absolutely. People should be excited about this new chapter and the opportunity for unity. *Blue Beetle* is not going to resemble all the rest of [the DC universe] – that's why we have all of these different types of movies, *Swamp Thing*, *Superman* and *Creature Commandos*. I'm excited for *Blue Beetle* to set the bar for the quality of movies regardless because we didn't make the movie thinking we were [setting the] stage. We just set out to make the best movie. The next movie that they got coming out is *Superman*. We're ready to roll out the carpet for the boy with the red cape.

**There's been talk of *Blue Beetle* taking on a leadership role. Does he have those qualities in this film?**

● We 100% see that in this film. One of the biggest differences from the comics is this version of Jaime having more sense of self. He's right out of college, he has a good head on his shoulders, and also he's coming back home feeling like he's the man he's ready to be. He cares about his family and he's ready to go above and beyond to help. I'm so excited to see how this young man, who's really just started to find himself now that the universe is giving him his first big test, reacts to that.

**There's been talk of a *Blue Beetle* trilogy. Are you ready for that?**

● I'm ready for it to be like *Star Wars*, six movies. I'm just kidding. But yes, I am. Everyone involved, even [producers] Peter Safran and James [Gunn], we see this as a larger story, and I want this to be a trilogy. There's so much more to tell in this story. I'm honoured to have just made this first one.



SEPTEMBER 2