



Honey, I shrunk the superhero

How do you follow something as massive as Avengers: Age Of Ultron? The answer is go small. But, while **Ant-Man** is Marvel's tiniest hero yet, the studio's ambition remains huge...

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN

ANT-MAN



ANT FACTS TO ASTONISH!

#1 Paul Rudd

"As soon as water comes into the picture, ants grab onto each other's legs and form a raft. And they put the youngest ones into the middle, because they're the most buoyant. Yeah, baby ants make great flotation devices."

BRIEFING

ANT-MAN

RELEASED: July 17

DIRECTOR: Peyton Reed

STARRING: Paul Rudd, Michael Douglas, Evangeline Lilly, Corey Stoll, Bobby Cannavale

STORY: Former thief Scott Lang (Rudd) is asked by reclusive scientist Hank Pym (Douglas) to go back to his bad ways, but for a very good cause: to pull off a world-saving heist. And to help, Pym gives Lang a super-suit that enables him to shrink to ant-size.

ANY OTHER ANT POWERS?

Yes, he can also command and control ants, retain human-level strength even in tiny form, and ruin a good bowl of sugar like no other superhero.

Then, in May 2014, just three weeks before the shoot's planned start date, Wright walked, taking several key collaborators with him. Sources report that by this point the script had been rewritten by Dave Callahan (The

Expendables) and Eric Pearson (Agent Carter). Whatever the case, it wasn't a happy parting. On Twitter, Joss Whedon raised a Cornetto in solidarity, and the world wondered who the hell had *cojones* large enough to step into Wright's place.

That person turned out to be Peyton Reed. Lacking Wright's fervent fanbase, his credentials at first looked iffy: his most recent film was 2008's *Yes Man* (which may explain why he couldn't say no). But the more you learn about him, the more it makes sense. He had developed a *Fantastic Four* movie with Feige at Fox in 2004, and delivered an impressive pitch to Marvel for *Guardians Of The Galaxy*. His best films, *Down With Love* and *Bring It On*, prove that he has a knack for snappy choreography and for making potentially absurd material appealing. He's also an Ant-Man fanatic; a flyer for his '80s punk band Johnny Quest saw him riding a flying drum kit in a replication of an iconic panel from that very title.

"Was it a strange situation? Absolutely," Reed says of his recruitment. "One of my concerns upfront was, 'Someone else has developed this movie for a really long time. Can I come in and make it my own?' And that has absolutely been the case. For one thing, Marvel have let me explore the dark side of Hank Pym, this tortured, guilt-ridden guy. I love that this is a mentor/pupil story, but with a fucked-up pupil and a *really* fucked-up mentor."

The director says he and Wright have exchanged emails: "We both acknowledged the general weirdness of the situation. It's all very odd, but it's been really nice to communicate with him." While insiders say that Wright's animatics and storyboards were still used as the basis for the action sequences, the script was hastily adjusted by Paul Rudd and his Anchorman director Adam McKay, squirreled away for weeks in the Chateau Marmont.

Clockwise from above left: Corey Stoll as the villainous Yellowjacket, in combat with Ant-Man; Paul Rudd as Scott Lang; Hank Pym (Michael Douglas) with rival scientist Darren Cross (Stoll).

"I'VE GOT A SACK OF CLOTHES AND a sleeping bag and a gigantic beard and I'm covered in ants. Yeah, man, it's going well!"

Peyton Reed, talking in early May from a post-production fortress somewhere in Los Angeles, is not being serious. At least, we don't think so; it's not a Skype call. One thing's for sure: he sounds nothing like a man under more stress than the Hulk's trousers. Which, as director of Marvel's forthcoming Ant-Man movie, he surely is.

Firstly, his film is arriving mere months after the planet-crushing behemoth that is *Avengers: Age Of Ultron*. Reed recently headed to LA's El Capitan Theatre, 26-and-a-bit hours into a 29-hour Marvel marathon, sidestepping slumbering Thor cosplayers, to screen the new Ant-Man trailer. Staying to watch *Ultron*, he managed to enjoy the brawling on screen without freaking out about having to follow it. "Just the simple joy of how Cap throws his shield," Reed rhapsodises. "I was a kid again."

Secondly, he's releasing the first major miniaturisation movie since *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids* (we're not counting its sequels, the rubbish *Gulliver's Travels* or the bits in *Tooth Fairy* where *The Rock* wears a tutu). Ant-Man feels fresh, but it also feels risky. "I don't know what the poster's going to be," the director told *Empire* on set a year ago. "Is it the suit? Is it him flying on an ant? I can imagine your average moviegoer saying, 'That's ridiculous! How is that going to be cool?'"

Finally, he's competing not just against the rest of the summer's spectacles, every last one of them a wannabe billion-dollar blocksmoother, but also against a film that doesn't and will never exist. The *other* Ant-Man.

BACK IN 2001, BRITISH WHIZZ-KID Edgar Wright had superheroes on the brain. In his TV show *Spaced*, hero Tim Bisle had recently created *The Bear*, an orphan boy who gets special powers

after he's experimented on by Doktor ("It's got a K in it!") Mandrake. Meanwhile, Wright took a meeting with Artisan Entertainment, who then held ownership of Marvel titles. Skip to the end: he agreed to work up a treatment for Ant-Man with his pal Joe Cornish.

Over the next 13 years, the project kept chugging away. Artisan became absorbed by Lionsgate, and Wright began working with Marvel chief Kevin Feige, who during that time drove his studio from success to mega-success and eventually found it a home at Disney. Instead of giving the central role to the comic books' original, '60s-era Ant-Man — genius scientist Hank Pym — Wright and Cornish's screenplay riffed on 1979's *To Steal An Ant-Man* story, foregrounding a young crook, Scott Lang, who must pull off the heist of his life and take on the villainous Nano Warrior with Pym's help. In 2012, a VFX test wowed Comic-Con. Everything looked peachy as a picnic.



ANT FACTS TO ASTONISH!

#2 Evangeline Lilly
 “If you eat an ant, they taste like lemon. Because when you bite into them they release this acid as a protection mechanism. I actually knew that prior to this film — from eating ants. I was kind of a dorky kid.”



ANT FACTS TO ASTONISH!

#3 Michael Douglas
 “I can’t beat Paul’s fact, but I certainly know an amount about working ants. They enjoy blue light, which is why people put blue lights above ant boxes. It relaxes them and helps the little guys build their tunnels.”

“I was in Africa doing humanitarian work while all the drama was going on,” remembers Evangeline Lilly. “I flew back and met with Paul in a little restaurant in New York City, and he talked me through how the movie was changing. I think the most defining difference between the two scripts was that Edgar’s didn’t take itself as seriously. It was fun and silly and brilliantly irreverent — a romp from beginning to end, in classic English fashion. Whereas where we’ve gotten to is so much more American. There’s tons of levity, but just as much emotion.”

On set in Atlanta, Michael Douglas is telling a story. This is not a rare event: Michael Douglas is a man with infinite stories and a willingness to share them whenever there’s a lull. On this occasion, he’s regaling his co-stars with the one about the time he crashed a party full of Hawaiian Tropic bikini models. “Hey, I was a Hawaiian Tropic girl once!”

Clockwise from top:
 Evangeline Lilly and Douglas check out the small-but-deadly Yellowjacket suit; Ant-Man in full effect; Cross turns on his charm... and his flashy lights.



interrupts Lilly. “And I won the competition.” Then, sheepishly: “I really needed a vehicle. My family were *sooo* proud.” Douglas strokes his beard. “They should have been. It’s a serious contest...” The star, who has just celebrated his 70th birthday with nine rounds of golf, admits that superheroes are not his bag. Aside from that wonderfully silly sequence in *Disclosure*, where he dons a virtual-reality suit to investigate a filing cabinet, Douglas has largely eschewed the fantastical. But then he saw *Guardians Of The Galaxy*. “On IMAX 3D it was a mind-blower,” he raves, conjuring the surreal image of Gordon Gekko cheering on Groot. “I’ve just become such a fan of these IMAX 3D experiences. And, y’know, it’s a Marvel world. My God, my son is so excited I’m doing this. Forget my Oscars. He’s just like, ‘Wow! Are you the Ant-Man?’ And I go, ‘Sort of... It’s a long story.’” Before taking the role, he rang Jack Nicholson. “He’d had a great time

doing the Joker, and I was nervous about doing an effects movie,” Douglas says. “I wanted to know if there’s a special technique for acting against nothing, because it’s hard for us control freaks to trust that it’ll end up looking alright. It turned out there is no technique. But it’s okay. This is Marvel. To quote Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid, ‘They’re very good.’” Hank Pym’s mansion sprawls across the sound stage, full of telling details. On the bedside table is a book called *The Elegant Universe*, so weighty that it might as well be a sign saying, “Genius scientist here.” Real ants scurry around a formicarium in the workshop downstairs. And here and there can be seen tiny objects — an itty-bitsy armchair on the dining table, a minuscule satellite on the mantelpiece. Are they models or test cases from Pym’s shrinking experiments? Hank lives here in self-imposed exile, nursing a long-held secret and

tended to only by his hard-nosed daughter, whom Lilly describes as “kind of a bitch... a very hard woman on a journey towards becoming a decent person.” Then, one day, along comes Scott Lang. Burglar, divorcee and father to a young girl, he has the potential to become one of the most interesting characters in the MCU. Thanks to the strange suit he finds in Pym’s house, he’s certainly one of the most interestingly outfitted. While Douglas finishes his tale, Paul Rudd stands nearby, getting fitted into his Ant-Man costume by a small pit crew. Bolts are screwed in, leather is tightened. It’s far from the first time he’s been through the 12-minute process, but

Rudd’s broad grin suggests the novelty of clambering into the burgundy-and-black get-up, complete with metal helmet and bug antennae, hasn’t worn off. “It’s impossible to put that thing on and not feel a little badass,” he admits later on. “It’s this old, beat-up thing with scuffs and marks that looks incredibly cool. It reminded me of the Stormtroopers in *Star Wars*, where you feel like they’ve been wearing those suits a while.” Today’s scene is a beat in a training montage. Preparing to invade a hi-tech building for righteous reasons, Scott must learn to shrink-leap through the keyhole of a door. We watch various disastrous iterations, many of which look quite painful for the stuntman involved, before our hero finally pulls it off. As for the ins and outs of the suit’s workings, based around the nebulous concept of “Pym Particles”, Rudd’s keeping schtum. “I’m sorry,” he shrugs. “I shan’t give away my ant-secrets.”

How low can you go?

HOW DOES ANT-MAN MEASURE UP AGAINST CINEMA’S OTHER INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MEN (AND WOMEN AND CHILDREN)?

WORDS NOAH DUNBAR ILLUSTRATIONS BILL MCCONKEY



150mm approx.
NAME: Alice Kingsleigh
(Alice In Wonderland, 2010)
SHRINK METHOD: “Drink Me” potion



115mm approx.
NAME: General Decker
(Mars Attacks!, 1996)
SHRINK METHOD: Martian ray



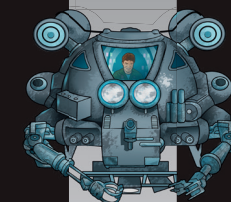
25mm approx.
NAME: Scott Carey *(The Incredible Shrinking Man, 1957)*
SHRINK METHOD: Radiation/insecticide cocktail



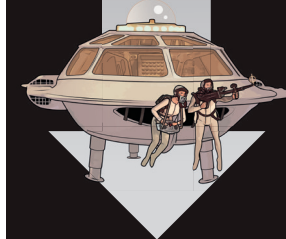
19mm approx.
NAMES: Nick and Amy Szalinski, Ron and Russ Thompson
(Honey, I Shrunk The Kids, 1989)
SHRINK METHOD: Shrink ray



3.5mm approx.
NAME: Scott Lang
(Ant-Man, 2015)
SHRINK METHOD: Pym Particles



7.5µm approx.
NAME: Lt. Tuck Pendleton
(Innerspace, 1987)
SHRINK METHOD: Shrink ray



5.5µm approx.
NAMES: Agent Charles Grant, Captain Bill Owen, Dr. Michaels, Dr. Duval, Cora Peterson
(Fantastic Voyage, 1966)
SHRINK METHOD: Shrink ray

ANT-MAN



ANT FACTS TO ASTONISH!

#4 Peyton Reed

"I've become obsessed with the bullet ant. The size of it, the fact it looks weird and prehistoric, the effect of its venom... There's this thing called the Schmidt Sting Pain Index, and a bullet-ant bite is a four, which is the highest register."



Reed's résumé has some eclectic crannies. He worked on the 'making of' featurette for Uncle Buck, gaining world-beating access to Pooter-The Clown. He directed the behind-the-scenes docs for Back To The Futures 2 and 3. And, ironically, he shot the pre-show video for Disneyland's Honey, I Shrunk The Audience attraction. "I got to do an elaborate Steadicam scene with Eric Idle," he recalls, "which, as a massive Rutles fan, was amazing. The ride is long gone, but it was pretty cool at the time. You'd whizz around with massive mouse tails at your feet..."

Notable by its absence on set is, well, anything massive. "We had conversations about whether there was a place for gigantic pencils or balls of yarn," says Reed. "But really there wasn't. It was sad. We went to the closing of the giant-pencil factory. It was a dark day for them."

Instead, a dedicated macro unit was set up, employing a Milo rig, ARRI ALEXA cameras and gargantuan levels

Clockwise From Above: Ant-Man perfects his ant-chat; Hope, Scott and Hank scope out blueprints; Rudd with director Peyton Reed.



of patience to achieve some extreme close-ups. "The idea is to reveal the next level of detail," says second-unit visual effects supervisor Evan Jacobs, watching as 15 crew members huddle around a vacuum-cleaner bag — one of a variety of actual-size props. "You get all this crazy, weird texture. This shot's tricky because there's a lot of swirling debris." The team are also labouring at ant-pace to scan every set in microscopic detail, creating what Jacobs terms "an insanely deep, dense data-ball", allowing action scenes to be created later with minimum CGI.

That's one part of the puzzle. The other is Rudd and Corey Stoll, facing off on a green-screen stage and trying not to make each other laugh. "Every time we shrink or get bigger, Paul and I had to literally go into a squat or jump up into frame," says Stoll of their combat sequences. "I really think kids are going to flip for this movie, because it's about the power of being small. I can imagine kids doing the exact same thing,

squatting and leaping at each other on the way home."

Yellowjacket is a formidable foe, equipped with snapping mechanical armatures and plasma cannons. But Scott's an able fighter himself. Capable of flinging full-size men across the room, even when half-an-inch tall — his combat style is less Muay Thai than Muay Tiny — he can call on ants in a tight spot. "I've definitely developed more of an affinity for the little guys," muses Rudd. "One day I was going to work and they were all in a line on my car door, thousands of them. Previously, I would have been disgusted and gone to the car wash. Instead, I thought, 'This is great, these are my co-stars.' I don't mess with the ants."

Like its jailbird hero, Ant-Man has a past. It remains to be seen whether it'll be funny and thrilling enough to stop fans pining for the Edgar Wright take, or whether it'll be viewed as the homogenised version of what could

have been. A recent trailer, with cameo from Thomas The Tank Engine and smash-cut out from a micro-brawl to show how silly it looks from human POV, gives hope that it'll be a quirky palate-cleanser; Marvel downsizing after the city-smashing Age Of Ultron.

And, of course, Ant-Man has a future. While it wraps up the studio's Phase 2 of releases, Scott Lang will return in Captain America: Civil War to swap suit notes with Tony Stark or, possibly, bug out with Spider-Man.

"It's an impressive world and I can't help but get caught up in the excitement," says Rudd, whose previous comic-book experience amounted to a youthful obsession with *The Dandy*. "Way more than other movies, when the trailers come out, the talkbacks are enormous. I avoid that stuff, though. If you start it's like potato chips — I just don't stop."

Reed has laced his film with hat-tips towards the MCU. We'll see an onscreen poster advertising green Brazilian soda

Pingo Doce, as seen in The Incredible Hulk. There will be pithy asides from Hank Pym (who, in the comics, created Ultron) about his S.H.I.E.L.D. past. Anthony Mackie's Falcon could be set to appear; as for other Avengers members, the director says, "That's classified information. That's buried. It's possible."

And that poster he was fretting over a year ago? He needn't have worried. Thanks to the Australian marketing team, an Ant-Man ad has been created that's both ridiculous and cool: insect-scale billboards have started appearing around Melbourne and Sydney, ensuring that the vast Antipodean woodlouse demographic is fully in the bag.

"There are more tiny things coming around the globe," says Reed, issuing a promise rarely heard in Hollywood. "With our movie, the answer to how to make noise is to go small." ■

ANT-MAN IS OUT ON JULY 17 AND WILL BE REVIEWED IN A FUTURE ISSUE.

Size extra-small

THE SECRETS OF THE ANT-MAN SUIT

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN

2. THE TUBES

Mysterious chemicals whizz around Scott's body, via tubing. "We had a long discussion about the two cables going into his helmet," says Coveney. "They're a massive weakness — Yellowjacket could just rip them off and he's dead. But, in the end, it just looks cooler with them on." Adds Sheldon: "The fact that he's shrinking is enough to get away with anything else, really!"

1. THE HELMET

Suit designers Sammy Sheldon and Ivo Coveney, who've been on board since the Edgar Wright days, were still tweaking the look during shooting. As for why Lang needs a helmet, Sheldon explains, "When you shrink, the molecules in the air are too big for your lungs. He has to be fully contained or he'd die."



3. THE GLOVES

A red, thumb-operated button is mounted on each glove: the right one shrinks, the left one enlarges. Elements of the suit light up during transformation. "There are 159 LEDs in each suit, with 18 different circuits, all individually adjustable to make it glow," says Coveney. "That will also be augmented by visual effects."

4. THE FABRIC

One of the reference points supplied by Wright, '60s caper movie *Danger: Diabolik*, is still visible. "It's cool and stylish, but with a retro feel," says Sheldon. The fabric — pearlised leather — also has a nod to bugs. "We used references from flies' eyes and other insects. We considered having the patterns change shape, but scrapped it, as it looked a bit Blue Peter."