The Orville, Season 2

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THE ORVILLE. MacFarlane, Seth, creator. Season 2, 20th Century Fox Television, 2018-2019.

It seems an axiom that any television show involving humanity's future in space must inevitably be compared to *Star Trek*, the mother of them all. That makes sense, given the long shadow of cultural and aesthetic influence that the *Trek* franchise casts on televised science fiction. That shadow received particular notice in 2017-2018, when a brief online war erupted between dueling fans of *Star Trek: Discovery* and the comedic drama *The Orville* over which show was more worthy of carrying on *Star Trek*'s cultural mantle. Fans of the former contended that *The Orville* was a derivative and unfunny farrago of Seth MacFarlane-penned *Family Guy* nonsense, while adherents of the latter pinned *Discovery* as pointlessly dark and gritty Trek that overturned franchise history for no good reason and continued the Star Trek Enterprise/Kelvin Universe obsessions with revisiting and reworking the past. Like a great many Internet wars, there was evidence to support both cases. However, I submit that Season 2 of *The Orville* demonstrated that MacFarlane may prove a better custodian of the *Trek* legacy–*Orville* has inherited, much more deeply than *Discovery* or the Abrams films or even *Star Trek: Picard*, the spirit of *Star Trek* at its most thoughtful, optimistic, and socially conscious.

In its worldbuilding, *The Orville* greatly resembles its television ancestor. The show is set in the 25th century, taking place primarily on board the eponymous vessel, an exploration ship serving the Federation-like Planetary Union. The show's lead is Captain Ed Mercer (MacFarlane), a Union officer whose career took a downturn after his adulterous betrayal by ex-wife and first officer Kelly Grayson (Adrienne Palicki). The first season, as is often the case, was an opportunity for worldbuilding—we learned about a number of the species that populate (and some that oppose) the Union, most notably the Klingon-like Moclans, an aggressive single-sex species of which one member is Orville's second officer Bortus (Peter Macon). We also encounter the Xelayans, a humanoid species noted for their great strength in Earth-like gravities, through the ship's security officer Alara Kitan (Halston Sage), as well as the reptilian Krill, powerful enemies of the Union. By the end of the first season, the Orville had truly come together as a cooperative crew, and Mercer and Grayson had generally reconciled their emotional issues. Although the first season was marked by a not-insignificant amount of MacFarlane's characteristic mixture of lowbrow humor and pop culture references (the subject of much of the criticism leveled at the show in the media), it also contained several episodes that would have not been out of place on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or *Star Trek: Voyager*, and that demonstrated the show's potential for emotional range and character complexity.

Season 2 embraces that range and complexity. True, the lowbrow humor does not disappear entirely. Indeed, when it does appear, it has the effect of making the characters more relatable and, oddly, more human. *The Orville*, by and large, avoids the temptation to which iterations of *Star Trek* have sometimes fallen to make its characters permanently upstanding and so serious and morally earnest they can seem artificial. Although most of the heavy lifting for MacFarlane's humor falls in Season 2 onto helmsman Gordon Malloy (Scott Grimes), there is enough of it go around to make *Orville*'s crew seem more natural in their humanity., less the cardboard cutouts of polite perfection that the *Next Generation* crew, for example, sometimes became. But, broadly speaking, in Season 2 *The Orville* truly comes into its own as a show of characters with inner lives and rich emotion. Show creator MacFarlane has the gift of understanding what gives Star Trek its particular charm and identity, and he brings that to *The Orville*. He is well aware that what made *Trek* so beloved was never the plots or the action scenes or interstellar combat. It was never even *Trek*'s particular commitment to exploring social issues. Like the best of *Trek*, *The Orville* shines because its characters are less a collection of crewmembers than a family; the show succeeds because it focuses on exploring the emotional bonds—expressed via empathy, concern, inside jokes, anger, exasperation, fear, love, and joy - that a close family forms through shared experiences, as well as how those bonds can tighten or fray in times of crisis.

Those personal crises abound in Season 2. In "Primal Urges", the ship's mission to rescue the remnants of a civilization from the expansion of its red star is put at risk from a shipwide computer virus. The source of that virus? A VR pornographic program used by Bortus, who is hiding from his husband Klyden (Chad Coleman) both his addiction to pornography and his growing emotional distance from Klyden. The crisis is resolved in time (though not without Bortus having to bear Mercer's fury), but Klyden and Bortus face a crisis in their marriage that they mutually agree to face and overcome together. The strains in their relationship are sources of ongoing conflict for the remainder of the season. The episode "Nothing Left on Earth Excepting Fishes" gives us Mercer enjoying a happy romantic relationship with Lt. Janel Tyler; that romance is shattered when Tyler is revealed as Teleya (Michaela McManus), a Krill operative disguised as a human and sent to capture Mercer in order to secure his Union command codes. The two are thrown together in a mission to survive an attack from another species; in the course of this struggle, the two develop a grudging respect for each other, and Mercer chooses to release Teleya to her people in the hopes that good relations may open as a result. The episode is charged with Mercer's sense of betrayal and violation of trust, as well as Teleya's own complicated feelings towards him.

There is no overarching story arc to Season 2, but one relationship marks the most dramatic events of the entire season. *Orville* medical officer Claire Finn (Penny Johnson Jerald) finds herself falling in love with science officer Isaac (Mark Jackson). Isaac is a Kaylon, a unit of a race of artificial life forms, sent to the *Orville* to observe organic life and pass back reports to his homeworld. Isaac initiates a romantic/sexual relationship with Finn as part of his study of humans, but finds himself developing a true emotional bond with her. This relationship takes

a fateful turn in the dark, high-stakes double episode "Identity", in which the Orville returns a malfunctioning Isaac to Kaylon 1; what follows is the *Battlestar Galactica*-like revelation that the Kaylon wiped out the humanoid species that created them and now intend to launch an invasion of the Union and destroy all organic sentient life. The Kaylon hijack Isaac and the *Orville*,and send a massive armada to Earth. The resulting space battle between the Kaylon, the Union fleet, and the Union's recent enemies/new allies the Krill, is one of the most elaborate and well-shot battles ever made for televised science fiction. In the end, the invasion is thwarted in large part because Isaac has formed deep family ties to Finn and her children, and turns against his own species. The consequential importance of strong emotional relationships is reaffirmed in the season finale "The Road Not Taken", where an alternate timeline is formed in which Mercer and Grayson never go on a second date and therefore never marry. Without that marriage and subsequent divorce, Mercer never commands the *Orville*, Finn never meets and falls in love with Isaac; the Kaylon invasion thus succeeds in conquering the Union because Isaac never develops the feeling of family he used in the original timeline to inspire his changing alliances.

These stories and others in the season demonstrate that *The Orville* is not just *Star Trek* with *Family Guy* jokes; it is rather a surprisingly good example of character-driven televised science fiction with a strong, emotionally resonant core. *Orville* makes the case that an SF television show need not sacrifice humor or lightheartedness or human failings in order to chronicle progress towards the final frontier. Those character traits—all part of the rich emotional mosaic of humanity—provide substantial character development and story depth, that provide relatable, fallible characters free of the moral earnestness that ofttimes afflicts the *Trek* franchise. With *The Orville*, MacFarlane makes entertaining use of humanity's light and dark sides alike, as he champions and celebrates the human drive towards exploration and discovery.