

Review of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, season 2

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Goldsmann, Akiva; Kurtzman, Alex; and Lumet, Jenny, creators. *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, season 2, CBS Television, 2023.

One of the high emotional moments in the second season of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* comes near the end of its strangest event, the musical episode “Subspace Rhapsody” (2.09). Communications officer Nyota Uhura (Celia Rose Gooding), experiencing the heightened emotions that by the Laws of Musicals mandate powerful expression through song, laments her intense loneliness and her sadness over the death of her family, only to proclaim a newfound sense of purpose and belief in the necessity of human connection:



How come everywhere
That I go, I'm solo?
Am I at my best unaccompanied?
My whole life has been “Fix this” and “Save you”
I'll light the path
And keep us connected
[...]
I absorb all the pain, mm-hmm
I hear everyone's voice calling my name
Building systems, I strengthen ties that bind
So no one has to be alone.

Uhura's self-realization is amplified one number later, where she sings to the entire *U.S.S. Enterprise* crew—in an intervention/finale to prevent the destruction of the Federation and half the Klingon Empire—that:

We're all rushing around
We're confused and upended
Let's refocus now
Our bond is imperative
Let's bring our collective together
As we fight for our lives

Followed by the crew's unified response of:

We know our purpose is
To protect the mission
Our directive
Cause we work better
All together
We overcome
Our obstacles as one.

It is a moment that completes the process by which the show has, over two seasons, transformed both the *Enterprise* and Starfleet into places of real and secure community in a hostile universe.

The musical is a touchstone for the sentiment surrounding the entire season, centered as it is on characters who, as Uhura sings, build systems—external and internal—to strengthen the ties that bind together individuals living in the dark and vast reaches of space. That sense of community as a bulwark against both an unrelentingly dangerous cosmos and deeply buried inner trauma gives SNW a particular emotional resonance that sets it apart from previous iterations of ST. It represents a newfound franchise maturity in its plausible preservation of a particular inter-universe complexity, one that balances the traditional progressive and exploratory spirit of ST with recognition of some of the darker aspects of humanity (and its alien analogues), together with a keen appreciation of the ways in which humor can serve ST as a natural part of the human experience.

Obviously, humor is subjective, but SNW's comic aspects to me strike a much more natural tone than many of the oft-painful attempts at humor that the original series, *The Next Generation*, or *Voyager* attempted. In the episode "Charades," (2.05) for example, Spock (Ethan Peck) is temporarily deprived of his Vulcan genetic code, rendering him completely human at the worst possible time for his future married life and giving him the explosive temperament of a pubescent teenager. Spock's exploration of the full range of human emotions has a number of funny and farcical moments, but these are artfully and realistically mixed with turmoil at his complicated romantic feelings for Nurse Christine Chapel (Jess Bush) and a newfound understanding of the isolation and rejection that Vulcan culture inflicted on his human mother Amanda. The construction of new personal and relational understandings means the building of these connective systems among the crew of the *Enterprise*.

Trauma goes hand in hand with past legacies in SNW season 2, leaving few characters untouched. In fact, the title of the second episode, "Ad Astra Per Aspera" (2.02) (Latin for "Through Hardship to the Stars") could justifiably serve as the theme for the entire season. That episode shows the fallout from the arrest of *Enterprise* first officer Una Chin-Riley (Rebecca Romijn) for the 'crime' of being a genetically altered Illyrian and hiding that fact from Starfleet. Her subsequent trial reveals the unjust and disastrous consequences of a policy made by the

Federation out of fear and internalized trauma caused by the Eugenics Wars. That fear resulted in bigotry and forced cultural assimilation towards Illyrians and a most un-Federation conviction that we must be forever what we are born to be. Una was a prisoner of that policy and the chains of secrecy it laid on her, until the idealistic image of unity that Starfleet represents drives her into the hazardous act of passing—Una takes risks because,

[i]f all those people from all those worlds can work together, side by side, maybe I could, too. Maybe I could be a part of something bigger than myself. Starfleet is not a perfect organization, but it strives to be. And I believe it could be ... Ad Astra per Aspera.

SNW posits that we will not reach our human potential among the stars unless we risk exposing who and what we are and, through that adversity, reach a place of healing and transformative change. In a remarkably poignant coda in “Those Old Scientists” (2.07), Una at last receives vindication for her journey of optimistic hardship when, of all people, *Lower Decks* ensign/ultimate ST fanboy Brad Boimler (Jack Quaid) and fellow ensign Beckett Mariner (Tawny Newsome) cross over from their own series to inform Una that in their time—her future—the motto that inspired Una to create a new life has become Starfleet’s recruitment slogan and Una herself its literal poster child. In Star Trek there is always hope of a better tomorrow and of societal and human progress.

The trauma of the past has dramatic impact on other characters as well. SNW is set in the (fairly) early aftermath of the horrific Federation-Klingon War, and Starfleet is heavily populated by veterans of that conflict, among them Chapel, Doctor M’Benga (Babs Olusanmokin), and Lt. Erica Ortegas (Melissa Navia). All three suffer both from bitter feelings towards their former adversaries as well as serious post-traumatic stress: one particularly harrowing episode—“Under the Cloak of War” (2.08)—deals heavily in flashbacks to the war in which Chapel and M’Benga both served in a field hospital under fire, watching young officers die horribly and (in M’Benga’s case) committing brutal atrocities in a conflict full of them. The two are united in their inability to explain to outsiders the nature of their ongoing psychological injuries and the isolation they produce; they hurt, and they hurt profoundly enough that it warps their relationships with others. However, they, too, recognize that, as Uhura and M’Benga sing during “Subspace Rhapsody”, “I look around and everyone I see/The pinnacle of guts and resiliency/Death threats are nothing new to us/It takes monumental strength and trust”, and Chapel in a solo song proclaims her joy and readiness at being free to pursue new successes that may provide psychic healing: “The sky is the limit/My future is infinite/With possibilities/It’s freedom and I like it/My spark has been ignited/If I need to leave you [Spock]/I won’t fight it/I’m ready.”

But personal traumas carry their own weight even when intergalactic war is not involved: Captain Christopher Pike (Anson Mount) suffers under the knowledge that he is destined to suffer a critical injury that will leave him paralyzed and disfigured, yet he makes the choice to build a system around acknowledging and welcoming present relationships, including fellow captain Marie Batel (Melanie Scrofano). He will likely always be struggling with the knowledge of his fate,

but forming emotional bonds becomes a critical way of coping. Once again, Boimler steps in with surprising pathos, asking Pike, who is planning to celebrate his birthday alone in part to muse over his failure to reconcile with his deceased father, “I’m sorry about your dad. But I wonder, if someday you’re not around anymore, how many people on this ship would wish they had another day to talk to you?” It is a doubly emotional moment because Boimler, of course, being from the future knows as a matter of history Pike’s final fate but cannot say anything for fear of changing the timeline.

Similarly, security officer La’an Noonien-Singh (Christina Chong) faces emotional difficulties on multiple levels—as the survivor of imprisonment by the Xenomorph-like/reptilian Gorn, she subsumes her own scarring PTSD. As a descendent of the infamous Khan Noonien-Singh, she worries that she, too, is a monster doomed by her genetic heritage—confiding this to Una’s defense attorney, the lawyer replies that,

They looked down at us [Illyrians] for so long that we began to look down at ourselves. Genetics is not destiny despite what you may have been taught. [...] You were not born a monster; you were just born with a capacity for actions, good or ill, just like the rest of us.

The severe and buttoned-up La’an gains a newfound self-confidence, and her emotional range expands even more after confessing to James T. Kirk (Paul Wesley) her feelings for him based on an attraction to an alternate timeline version of Kirk (in “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow” (2.03)). Though he gently turns her down, La’an sees both truth and beauty in the resulting sadness, noting that “I’m glad I took that chance. Maybe I could be someone who takes chances more often.” La’an, as do so many of SNW’s characters, develops newfound emotional maturity in the process of solidifying human connections and building systems of trust and fellowship.

Season 2 of *Strange New Worlds* centers on the understanding that humans are rife with deep internal conflicts that accompany them into space and inevitably inform their reactions to the universe around them. It asks the audience to consider what baggage we carry around with us as thinking and feeling beings, the realizations we come to about ourselves, and the value of forming found families within which are preserved love, loyalty, and newfound purpose. As ever with the best of ST, and indeed, science fiction in general, what is most human in us is what we carry to the stars and beyond.

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