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The Single Take

□ THE SINGLE TAKE

□ BOJACK HORSEMAN, KEITH UHLICH, NETFLIX, THE SINGLE TAKE, WHIPLASH

BoJack Horseman and Whiplash

The Black Stallion. Dark Horse. You Mustang Be Joking. Any of those (well, maybe not that last one...yikes!) would be good alternate titles for Netflix's, ahem, bleak beauty *BoJack Horseman* (now streaming). I've watched the first season three times through, and this 12-episode ode to fear, anxiety, and depression has gotten funnier, sadder, and more incisive with each viewing. (A second series is currently in production and it's got a tough act to follow.) Plenty of comedies go the mortification route, though even the best of them — like *Louie* or *Arrested Development* — I can only subject myself to once. *BoJack's* lash cuts as deep, yet for whatever reason I'm happy to watch an anthropomorphized horse scrape the barrel-bottom, then count the days until I can restart his abasement.

“Will is to grace as the horse is to the rider,” wrote Saint Augustine, but what happens when a steed is his own straphanger? Creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg and character designer Lisa Hanawalt have conceived of a colorful (and very R-rated) universe in which men, women and beasts live side by side and fuck top to bottom. BoJack (voiced by Will Arnett) is a beer-bellied former sitcom actor living off the residuals from his hit '90s television series *Horsin' Around*, a comedy about three cute orphans adopted by a cheerful, sweater-wearing bronco. He teaches the kids life lessons and utters studio-audience-stoking witticisms. (“Well that’s a horse of a different...*cruller*?” he quips while contemplating a donut.) The real-world BoJack is decidedly less endearing: A drunk, a drug addict, and an all-around awful individual, he lives a sequestered life in his hilltop Los Angeles mansion, watching reruns of *Horsin' Around* screwing the occasional

Los Angeles mansion, watching reruns of *Horsin' Around*, screwing the occasional sycophant (as well as his exasperated feline fuckbuddy/agent Princess Carolyn, voiced by Amy Sedaris), and constantly scolding the human loafer, Todd (voice of Aaron Paul), who's been camped on his couch for years.

At first glance, the series appears to follow the toxic *Family Guy* template of nostalgic superiority, thumbing its nose at TGIF era "classics" like *Full House* and *Step by Step*, while rat-a-tat-tat-ing its way through a nonstop supply of animal cracks. (Penguin Publishing is run by...penguins!) I've read plenty of articles about *BoJack* that assume the standard television-watching posture of "wait and see!" In other words, the weaker earlier installments will eventually give way to brilliance by episode three, four or five. I'd disagree; I don't think there's a dud in the bunch—with the caveat that it might take viewers, as it did me, a few chapters *tofully* see what's there from the start: an undercurrent of existential despair that gives every jest a defensive edge, and goes from trickle to tidal over the course of the series.

The emotional crux is BoJack's friendship with and romantic longing for Diane Nguyen (voice of Alison Brie), the young woman hired to ghostwrite his memoir. She also happens to be the girlfriend of our horse hero's effusive canine rival, Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Tompkins, the vocal cast MVP), star of a *Horsin' Around* copycat created, as revealed in one of the funniest jokes, by two showrunner titans. The first time BoJack and Diane meet he vomits an ocean of cotton candy, to her immense concern; during their last exchange, they both stare wistfully at the L.A. cityscape while Mick Jagger croons "Wild Horses." From gross-out gagery to soul-searing pathos, and in-between all manner of fumbling, embarrassment, insult, hubris, and, occasionally, tiny acts of kindness that suggest BoJack may not have fully given in to his bestial instincts.

That might sound like a noxious dose of treacle appended to theater-of-cruelty style comedy. But I think the key exchange in the series (from episode 9, "Horse Majeure") shows how Bob-Waksberg is aiming for something messier and profoundly unresolved. Per BoJack: "You know sometimes I feel like I was born with a leak, and any goodness I started with just slowly spilled out of me, and now it's all gone. And I'll never get it back in me. It's too late. Life is a series of closing doors, isn't it?" You should know that he's saying all this to recurring player Vincent Adultman, a character who only BoJack seems to recognize is "three kids stacked on top of each other under a trench coat." The fact that everyone else believes otherwise is initially cause for BoJack's annoyance, but soon enough becomes a strange, surreal way of dealing with his spiritual malaise. Wouldn't it be nice to believe otherwise? Wouldn't it be nice, really, to believe in anything again?

That point is never resolved: there's little closure in this world. "Closure is a made-up

thing by Steven Spielberg to sell movie tickets,” BoJack says to Diane early in the series, not realizing that his pronouncement will soon be put to the test. If forced to pick the best installments, I’d have to go with the one-two punch of episodes seven and eight: “Say Anything,” a Princess Carolyn-centric story that examines the emotional devastation BoJack leaves in his wake, and “The Telescope,” in which BoJack has an eventful visit with Herb Kazazz (voice of Stanley Tucci), the dying creator of *Horsin’ Around* who he stabbed in the back many years before. These are *BoJack Horseman* at its caustic and horrifying best, with one particularly despairing scene—featuring special guest star Anjelica Huston as a (not literally) snake-tongued network executive—that makes the skin crawl for how well it captures the ease with which someone can sacrifice everything and everyone dear to them.

It’s not all melancholy and infinite sadness: There are throwaways that make you giggle, like the early morning rooster jogger who shouts “Time to wake up!” or the chipper entertainment show host who goes by “A Ryan Seacrest Type.” There are episodes like “Downer Ending,” which has a narcotics-fueled dream sequence worthy of both “Duck Amuck” and *Akira*. There are uproarious cameos by Naomi Watts, a Rothko canvas-addicted Wallace Shawn, and “character actress Margo Martindale” as themselves. There’s Todd’s rock opera...oh, man, Todd’s rock opera. Yet Bob-Waksberg and his collaborators never lose sight of the pity beneath the playfulness. The first season builds to a tremendously ambiguous finale (“Later”) that hinges on BoJack’s idolization of Secretariat—in the world of the series, a disgraced Prefontaine-like runner who committed suicide (an event recreated in an especially chilly pre-credits sequence). Though our equine protagonist takes some steps to turn his life around, it still feels like he’s standing on the edge of an abyss that will always beckon. But is the void its own illusion? “I don’t think I believe in deep down,” says Diane. “I kind of think all you are is just the things that you do.” BoJack’s reply: “Well, that’s depressing.” True dat.



WHIPLASH

I finally caught up with Damien Chazelle’s Sundance-feted *Whiplash* (now playing), which further solidifies my impression (along with the pianist-in-peril thriller *Grand Piano*, which he wrote) that he’s a genre guy at heart. This is a monster movie, plain and simple: J.K. Simmons’ demonic college music teacher, Fletcher, identifies a kindred spirit in Andrew (Miles Teller), a jazz drummer whose raw talent is just begging to be sculpted for the worse (meaning, to all outward appearances, for the better). Several of my colleagues have opined that the film sanctions the mentor’s bullying perspective, which is

have opined that the film canonizes the mentor's salubrious perspective, which is punctuated by the kind of face-slapping, homophobic taunting that make him kin to R. Lee Ermey's *Full Metal Jacket* drill sergeant. But I think Andrew is every bit Fletcher's fiendish equal, just in more embryonic form. The tension in *Whiplash* comes from watching this young man slowly squelch his humanity so that he can live up to an exceptionally warped view of musical perfection. Chazelle's aesthetic both complements and counteracts Fletcher and Andrew's militarized approach to art. Edits occur on a rigid, rhythmic beat (call it young Eisenstein), while the consistently sickly pallor of the visuals makes it clear that this master-servant relationship is happening under a microscope. The thrill of the finale, when Andrew finally turns the tables on his creator, comes less from any flawless musical performance than the sight of a dyed-in-the-wool sociopath fully embracing his darkest nature. *That's* entertainment.

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