HOLY MOTHERFORKING SHIRTBALLS: THE RETROSPECTIVE HILARITY OF THE AFTERLIFE

Review by Katarina O'Dette

Schur, Michael, creator. "Season Two." *The Good Place.* **Performance by Kristen Bell, Ted Danson, Jameela Jamil, Manny Jacinto, William Jackson Harper, and D'Arcy Carden. Fremulon and Universal Television, 2017-2018. Television.**

Series actor Marc Evan Jackson describes *The Good Place* [*TGP*] as "one of the smartest, dumbest shows on television wherein philosophy and fart jokes often share the same paragraph" ("Ch. 1"), but the series' easy friendship between morality and scatology is only the beginning of what makes it, and in particular its second season, unique.

TGP is about the selfish Eleanor Shellstrop who is mistakenly sent to the Good Place, a non-denominational afterlife. Desperate not to be discovered and banished to the Bad Place, she and fellow mistake resident Jason Mendoza take moral philosophy classes from her chronically indecisive soulmate Chidi Anagonye so they can learn to be good people and blend in with their do-gooder neighbours[1], like socialite Tahani Al-Jamil.

At least, this is what the first season pretends the series is about, until the finale reveals that this is a trick by the neighbourhood's architect, Michael: Eleanor and her friends have been in the Bad Place the whole time; Michael and their neighbours are actually demons; and the four humans are being used to torture one another.

This total overhaul of a series' premise would be shocking on any show but is particularly so on a half-hour American comedy. Viewers are accustomed to fellow NBC sitcoms like *Friends* (1994-2004), *The Office* (2005-2013), and *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) where, although the cast may change, characters evolve, and new plotlines emerge, the basic premise remains throughout. *TGP* deletes its premise with a literal snap of Michael's fingers. In the new season, the neighbourhood gets rebooted 802 times but, though the humans' memories are wiped each time, they keep figuring out the ruse. Michael has no choice: he will be 'retired' if his boss realises he has failed, so he joins forces with the humans. They will pretend they have stopped figuring out Michael's scheme if the amoral demon attends Chidi's ethics lessons and finds a way to get them to the real Good Place.

It takes three episodes to push Michael and the humans to the point where they agree to work together. These episodes sometimes feel awkward: viewers, whether or not they are conscious of it, are accustomed to knowing a series' premise after the pilot, and while dramas like *Alias* (2001-2006)

have changed premises, it is significantly less common for comedies. When premises do change, the switch is usually accomplished in one episode, rarely leaving viewers uncertain for long. The fact that *TGP*'s transition takes three episodes contributes to its initial awkwardness; for some viewers, having this uncertainty extended over one hour of screen time is an uncomfortable experience that reflects poorly on the series, as its writers are expected to clearly and urgently guide viewers toward the new premise. However, this discomfort does not remain on a re-watch, suggesting that once viewers know that there will be a new premise as enjoyable as the original, they do not mind premise-less episodes. The discomfort is potentially more reflective of how accustomed viewers are to constantly knowing a series' premise, rather than an actual weakness of the season. And any initial awkwardness proves worth it, as the new premise opens up fresh pleasures in watching the series.

Now on the other side of the curtain, viewers can enjoy the construction of the fake Good Place. Subtle aspects of the *mise-en-scène* become noticeable, like that all the furniture in Eleanor's apartment is designed to be uncomfortable (Jackson, "Ch. 5"). While the neighbourhood's lush gardens and charming village seemed idyllic in the first season, their true purpose becomes clear in season two: torturing Eleanor with a daily, visual reminder that she is not worthy of this elegant paradise. Details that were funny in the first season because they were incongruous with paradise – the clown paintings in Eleanor's house, the excessive number of frozen yogurt shops, the pairing of ethics professor Chidi with ethical disaster Eleanor – can now be appreciated as deliberate torture mechanisms. In turn, they become jokes again because they contribute to a specific notion of hell, as illustrated when the characters discuss the neighbourhood's clam chowder restaurants:

> Tahani: "Oh, the place with the chowder fountain."
> Eleanor: "No, that's Pump Up the Clam. A Little Bit Chowder
> Now has the lazy river of chowder. Ugh! How did we ever think
> this was the Good Place?" ("Team Cockroach")

Viewers are invited to laugh: at the characters who believed this was the Good Place; at themselves last season for believing this was the Good Place; and with the production team for suggesting that this is what the Bad Place would be like.

Representations of 'good' and 'bad' specifically reflect the writers' and production designers' pet peeves. Frozen yogurt, Hawaiian pizza, and coffee pods are portrayed as edible torture. The strong, absurd personality behind good and evil prevents the discussion of ethics from turning preachy and pedantic. In the second season, it also opens up humorous insights into Michael. As Stefan Ekman points out, there is often a link in Fantasy between ruler and realm that "[tells] the reader something about the rulers by describing the realm that surrounds them" (213). Because Michael constructed the neighbourhood, every detail gains another layer of comedy because it reflects what he personally considers torture, as when he describes the prevalence of coffee pods as "diabolical" ("Everything is Great!"). Torture reveals how the creators (both the production team and Michael, the in-series creator) view good and evil.

This meta self-awareness continues in the casting. As Michael, Ted Danson spent the first season drawing on viewers' intertextual memory of his roles in *Cheers* (1982-1993) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present) to play up his character's innocence and obscure his evil nature. Danson brings this likeability to season two to soften Michael, using a dry line performance to lend credence to his portrayal of an immortal demon and an infectious enthusiasm for illogical human memorabilia and behaviour to lend plausibility to Michael's character arc.

Eleanor is likewise infused with intertextual knowledge of Kristen Bell. Best known from *Frozen* (2013) and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007), Bell has a reputation for sweetness and strong principles that makes viewers sympathetic towards her character; even when faced with flashbacks of Eleanor's unethical behaviour, viewers are more likely to forgive and align with her.

Contrastingly, the rest of the main cast, all new to major television roles, benefit from being unknown. Manny Jacinto (Jason) utilises his lack of recognition in the first season to convincingly portray both a silent Buddhist monk and a dim-witted, destructive amateur DJ from Florida. Jacinto's earnestness prevents Jason from becoming annoying even as he becomes increasingly oblivious in the second season. William Jackson Harper was planning to quit acting before being cast as Chidi, and this uncertainty allows him to portray the philosopher with a relatable anxiety that prevents the series' straight man and moral centre from becoming dull. D'Arcy Carden utilises her improv background to switch between helpful, rule-abiding Good Janet[2] and farting, insult-generating Bad Janet with spontaneous hilarity. Because of her relative anonymity on television, she convincingly portrays a character who falls nebulously between human and robot: a portrayal that might feel artificial if she were well known for human roles. While British audiences may recognise Jameela Jamil (Tahani) as a former presenter, she is new to acting and uses her freshness and lack of pretence to embody the narcissistic socialite with an unapologetic attitude and vulnerability that incurs viewer sympathy.

This may be *TGP*'s greatest feat: creating likeable, sympathetic characters out of denizens and proprietors of hell, and tackling complex ethical issues without becoming dark or gritty. *TGP* depicts hell while retaining the high key lighting of sitcoms: though it does not shy away from serious questions about morality, it remains both figuratively and literally light, never sacrificing its fundamental goodness or humour. This tonal conviction and consistency is vital to a series built on change. Season two ends like season one: with a turn of events that drastically alters the premise, characters, and setting. At the time of writing, viewers are again unsure what the premise will be for the upcoming season. *TGP* has established that it will constantly change. But more importantly, it has established that it will use that change to unveil rewarding new layers of its world, characters, and themes.

NOTES

1. Neighbourhoods are small sections of the afterlife specifically constructed by an immortal architect

to either please or torture its assigned residents, depending on whether they are in a Good or Bad Place neighbourhood.

2. Janets are personified AI systems, with a Good Janet assigned to every Good Place neighbourhood and a Bad Janet to every Bad Place neighbourhood.

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BIONOTE

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