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Portlandia (2011)

Director: *Jonathan Krisel*

Writers: *Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein, Jonathan Krisel, Allison Silverman*

Starring: *Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein*

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The Plot: *Portlandia* is a sketch comedy program that bounces around the city of Portland, Oregon. We get to meet Fred (Fred Armisen) and Carrie (Carrie Brownstein) as they have outrageous conversations with the mayor (Kyle McClachlen), as well as the lunatics who generally run wild in this liberal free-thinking utopia. We meet the ladies at the feminist bookstore, who generally have nothing but antagonism for all men, and we also run into a wide variety of outrageous characters who get into adventures during these everyday situations. A place where few seem to hold down regular 9-5 jobs, Portland is shown in a ideal manner where everyone is focused on green energy, sexual equality and a total neglect of all things mainstream.

The Review

Although the title of this website may be Varied CELLULOID, we remain open to almost any form of entertainment. The parallels between cinema and television are closely knit, and the reviews found on this website are left open to either medium. When it comes to comedy, I think it is more than safe to say that television has inspired a true dominance over the disbursement of humor. While there have been numerous films that have proven to make a indelible mark on the fabric of pop culture, movies such as *Animal House* are few and far between. While you might await the next big comedy event to arrive every five to ten years



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when it comes to cinema, all it takes is watching television on any given weeknight to find something unique and truly original. *Portlandia* is the pet project of Saturday Night Live cast member Fred Armisen and musician Carrie Brownstein, who decided to make a sketch comedy show focusing on one of the very strangest and most insular cultures in all of America: Portland, Oregon. Known as one of the most left-leaning and open minded cultural vacuums that there is, if you know anyone from this area then they are sure to fill you in on a million different stories ranging from a broad array of topics. Even author Chuck Palahniuk once wrote a book entirely about this strange city (*Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon*), because it is honestly too “different” to ignore. As the introductory song says in the very first episode says, “*The dream of the nineties is alive, in Portland.*”



Portlandia is essentially a love letter to both Portland, and the youthful rebellion that can be found in any number of college towns. The affection can be felt in every episode, but at the same time the lampooning that this show does is razor sharp. A celebration of this sort of weirdo liberal youth culture that has somehow thrived within this small cultural melting pot, *Portlandia* establishes itself as both adoring and critical. The first episode seems to set the tone for this, as it opens with the previously mentioned “Dream is Alive” music video but then quickly jumps into satirizing the same sort of technological and organic focused fixations that are shared by these groups. The show regularly has fun at the expense of the hipster element within this culture. If you’ve ever seen the kids who wear one hundred percent renewable hemp clothing, ride bicycles, refuse to use any item that doesn’t come in a bio degradable carton, etc. then you can imagine the main targets that *Portlandia* aims at. As the show develops, hippie culture gives way to dot com companies with youth oriented advertising. These topics are not entirely focused on Portland itself, but there’s a mini Portland to be found in every big city it would seem.

The comedy within the show seems based off of a lot of improvisational acting, as one might guess, and some of the best moments come in obviously improvisational dialogue. During one of the first episode, Jason Sudekis shows up in a inspired cameo as a cult leader. His death scene, which seems as if it was fabricated from out of nowhere, is absolutely brilliant. In the same episode Armisen plays the leader of a adult hide-and-go-seek league, but instead of having fun he finds himself being insulted by an elderly woman who points out the obvious insanity of this concept. As the show continues on, it develops other reoccurring characters who also deliver in a similarly inspired manner. Kyle Maclachlan shows up in one of the most surprising roles, starting off as what appears to be a cameo but what actually turns out to be a reoccurring character, as the Mayor of Portland. During a bizarre subplot, the mayor is actually caught up in a “scandal” that could only be found in *Portlandia*. After going missing for a

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couple of days he actually shows up as the bass player for a reggae band, and when he is laid to persecution by the local media: their questions consist of the obvious “Are you in a REAL roots Reggae band?” And, “What kind of Bass are you using?”



Featuring a near-endless number of cameos from stars who pop in and out, the show attracts some surprisingly big names for a IFC program that flies as heavily under the radar as this one does. In this first season Steve Buscemi, Jason Sudekis, Aimee Mann, Sarah McClachlan, Selma Blair and the band Echo Echo all show up. Speaking of this show flying a bit under the radar, I had never even heard of the show before being contacted about the DVD release. IFC has been known to develop some rather interesting programs over the years, however, and there’s a good chance that I had never heard about it because my finger is about as far away from the pulse as any hand could get. Still, I was very surprised to see that this show is as slick and polished as any sketch comedy show that I have seen in quite a while. *Portlandia* may have its problems, but it certainly stands out as one of the better comedy programs on the market right now. As far as those “problems” that the show might suffer from, I suppose the antagonism that it develops with its audience might be the number one issue that I have found. In the true lineage of Andy Kaufman, *Portlandia* sometimes tests the limits of its audience and their patience. Some sketches intentionally go over-the-top and draw out in as annoying a manner as possible. Some jokes travel from being moderately entertaining, turning into blatantly annoying, and they are then stretched out to such a degree that the intention is that they become entertaining yet again. This works for me for the majority of the time, but some audiences will most assuredly disagree.

The DVD

Portlandia comes in a dual DVD and Bluray package, which features all of the video and audio quality that one might expect. All six seasons from this first season are available on the set with audio commentary feature Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein and writer/director Johnathan Krisel. The rest of the special features include a preview of season two, a fun little blooper reel, some extended/deleted scenes and a hilarious speech made by Fred Armisen to recent graduates of Portland based OES highschool.

The Conclusion

As someone who hasn’t been able to keep up with a lot of television in the past few years, I am glad to see that there is still some very funny programming to be found in American television. Armisen and Brownstein have created a show that

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is deeply fascinating for its strange cultural influences, but also for its incredibly sharp sense of satire. I give this season 1 set a four out of five stars. To be honest, it almost earns that perfect rating, and it proves to be a must buy for anyone who has a slightly absurd sense of humor.



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