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Jeff Goldblum guest stars on *Portlandia*. [PHOTO: DANIELLE MATHIAS/IFC]

Portlandia: Season Two


BY PHILLIP MACIAK ON JANUARY 5, 2012 JUMP TO COMMENTS (0) OR ADD YOUR OWN

RIOT GRRRRRL EMERITUS, SUPERGROUP FRONTWOMAN, EX-NPR blogger, and Elaine May-style improv comedian, Carrie Brownstein has occasioned an ungainly amount of wordplay in the last few weeks. In advance of the return of her hit IFC sketch show *Portlandia*, media outlets have been profiling Brownstein under headlines as on-the-nose as *The New Yorker's* "Stumptown Girl" and LOLcat-esque as *The New York Times's* "Riot Grrrnup" (my own personal addition to this pantheon would be "Renaissance Grrrl"). Puns, in this case, play the helpfully reductive role of allowing journalists to pithily define just exactly who or what the prolific Brownstein is these days. While the hilarious new season of *Portlandia* will do little to help sort out her multiple personalities, it shows a performer whose swagger, timing, and raw energy are as magnetic in comedy as they ever were in punk. *Portlandia* has become the Sleater-Kinney of comedy.

Crucial to the success of that band, of course, was the crackerjack interplay between its members, and Brownstein is certainly not alone in fronting *Portlandia*. Her co-captain is Fred Armisen, the ex-hardcore drummer who has been peppering *Saturday Night Live* with avant-garde-ish conceptual comedy for nine seasons. Like Droopy the Dog in a Woody Allen costume and with an impressionist's ear for the speech patterns of the earnest, Armisen has never been a breakout *SNL* cast member (as was noted in a recent *New York Times* piece, his Barack Obama is too subtly accurate to be a good comic impersonation), but in the first season of *Portlandia* he found the right venue for his talents and the perfect partner off which to play.

Indeed, while the show's letter-perfect satire of hipster culture is its major selling point (so far this season includes an artisanal knot maker played by Jeff Goldblum and an almost clinically detailed sketch about *Battlestar Galactica* addiction), the shorthand chemistry between Brownstein and Armisen is *Portlandia's* real magic. Cleverly wrought sketches like the *Battlestar Galactica* homage and the SCTV-style Allergy Pride parade will likely get the most critical attention this season, but an easily forgettable early sketch—ostensibly about whitewater rafting—really encapsulates what makes the show work. The scene features Armisen and Brownstein, in wigs as usual, posing as a lovingly co-dependent heterosexual couple (again, as usual), readying their rafts for a day trip on a scenic Northwestern river. (The setup, from the chemistry of the players to the aggro-comedy aesthetic, recalls a similar one from *Enlightened*.) This skit, unlike the others, has no clever twist, no incisive jab. It consists mainly of Brownstein splashing and pratfalling into passing rafters while shouting nonsense syllables at her partner as she floats away. The sketch has a kind of minimalism reminiscent of *Kids in the Hall*, but its absurdity isn't its main selling point. Rather, it's the goofy, ambiguous, but perilously close relationship between our two leads that compels us to laugh.

*Portlandia's* second season isn't as painstaking as its first. Sketches are often more loosely defined, and, an extended take on alternative wedding planning notwithstanding, nothing so far is as immaculately constructed as the previous season's skewering of the Ace Hotel, for instance. In lieu of this transcendent attention to detail, however, there's still Brownstein and Armisen's magnetic and mysterious central relationship. While most of the couples they portray are



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explicitly straight (with the major exception of the popular feminist bookstore owners, variations on the bougie hipster couple anchor most of the sketches in the first several episodes of the season), there's a wry sexual ambivalence to these portraits, as if both actors were not just in costume, but in drag. Along with *Parks and Recreation*, *Portlandia* is one of the best comedies about gender politics on television, and like that other show, it's also a wonderfully rich comedy about friendship. Armisen and Brownstein work on *Portlandia* not because they have the sharpest critical eye or the tightest grasp on sketch writing, but because at the heart of every character they portray is a weird, committed, and almost unsettlingly earnest love.

CAST: Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein AIRTIME: IFC, Fridays @ 10 p.m.



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