



Robson Arms: The Complete Second Season

Cast: Gabrielle Miller, John Cassini, Fred Ewanuick, Alisen Down

(CTV)

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by **Shaun Huston**

Season two of *Robson Arms* begins, by the look of Bobbi (Gabrielle Miler), seven to nine months after the earthquake that shook the building at the end of season one. The quake also seems to have shaken up the apartment's residents. "Change" and "transition" are good keywords for the new season as most of the characters find themselves trying to move forward, or just move, with their lives.

The season two premiere, "Ordinary Assholes", immediately introduces the themes of change and movement. Tom (Mark McKinney) and Janice (Megan Follows) have moved out together, while superintendent, Yuri (John Cassini), "works" to slap the building back together and the owner prepares to sell. As part of the improvement plan, Yuri is asked to build a wheelchair ramp to accommodate the resident Caldo Vasco (Leslie Nielsen), recently disabled in a drunk driving accident. As Yuri struggles to meet the demands of a newly attentive owner and Caldo tries to adjust to life in a wheelchair, they come into conflict, prompted by their respective asshole-ishness.

What makes *Robson Arms* worth watching is that the "ordinary" part of the episode's title is just as important as the "asshole" part. Neither Cassini's Yuri nor Nielsen's Caldo are reducible to the latter quality. Neither man is a prize, but both are played as real human beings, not types. Both suffer from loneliness and different forms of pain and stress, none of which are deployed as excuses for how they treat others. That they are both "ordinary" and "assholes" is simply a matter of fact, not a form of balancing where the former makes the latter "okay" somehow.

Having a larger than usual ensemble cast, *Robson Arms* is structured such that individual episodes feature different characters or distinct sets of characters. Those not featured might pop up in the background, particularly Yuri or the members of the Tan family, who operate the attached convenience store, or in the opening sequences, which continue to offer quick peeks into the lives and apartments of different residents, or they might simply be absent. This structure allows for more intensified engagements with particular characters, but tends to founder on the relative strengths and weaknesses of those featured.

Undoubtedly, different viewers will have different favorites and not-so-favorites, but for me Bobbi and Bobby (Tobias Mehler) remain almost too toxic to watch, something not helped by Mehler's one-note performance as a deer caught in the headlights of life. Unfortunately, they get two episodes in season two, including the finale (on the other hand, the series' producers decided to save the audience from having to witness the unseemly spectacle of watching Bobbi give birth while Bobby is off having sex with a co-worker, or some such scenario). That Bobbi seems ready to move on without Bobby by season's end may be a good sign for season three, recently started in Canada.

Virtually the entire returning cast makes some kind of life-changing decision in season two. Sault (Alisen Down) decides she wants to be happy and fulfilled, even in Vancouver. Nick (Fred Ewanuick) and Hal (Zak Santiago) decide to be more than friendly neighborhood slackers and pot dealers. Fred (Haig Sutherland) actually tries to cultivate friendships and relationships, and seemingly succeeds with cute geek girl Alicia (Jane McGregor). Carlisle (William B. Davis) dies. Geoff (David Richmond-Peck) and Stanley (Kevin McNulty) are perhaps the least changed, but do appear to have reached a new crossroads in their May-December relationship.

That crossroads is partly reached because of the appearance of Andrew (Gabriel Hogan) and Chris (Laura Bertram). Andrew is a "beautiful man"—tall, blonde, fit, and well-dressed – and Geoff is convinced that Andrew is gay. He tries, clumsily, to out the new resident in the season's fourth episode, "Something Straight Between Us". In the season's penultimate installment, "Lizard of a Doubt", Chris directly challenges Andrew on his sexuality. A brief view of Andrew at Geoff's door in the final episode completes the arc. Collectively, this quartet of characters opens up an exploration of the nature and ambiguities of love, sexuality, and identity rarely seen on American television, even off of the main networks.

If Andrew is caught in-between desires and identities, the series' other newcomers are also in their own transitional moments. Carol (Linda Kash) is trying to remake herself post-divorce and reconnect with daughter,

Georgia (Tegan Moss). Fabulist Wayne (Peter DeLuise) first tries to make friends by passing off his fantasy life as his real one, but then tries the truth. Even minor addition, Yuri's brother, Val (Bill Mondy), is struggling to right his life, albeit not very successfully.

As with the original cast, the new additions are a mixed bag. Andrew and Chris are the most interesting, followed by Carol, though mostly due to the fact that she brings Georgia with her. By herself, she's a rather flat and predictable "saucy" dame. Wayne's two episodes are perhaps the neatest package, with the character first serving as a foil for Hal and Nick and then getting to deal with his own issues.

The least effective and most irritating new member of the cast is A.J. McKenzie as building manager Elvis. It would be one thing if he were simply the dorky pipsqueak he's supposed to be, but McKenzie's line readings are also stagey in the extreme. And like Tobias Mehler's Bobby, he walks around with a single, stiff, virtually unchanging blankness. While there at least appear to be reasons for Bobby's emptiness, Elvis looks the same whether cracking the whip on Yuri or getting a handjob from Tan cousin, Kitty (Elizabeth Thai).

Kitty is featured in the one episode that focuses on a member of the Tan family, mom Toni (Gabrielle Rose). As with other characters, Toni is shown trying to come to terms with change, in this case aging and menopause. The Tans are an otherwise marginal presence in season two, perhaps stepping aside for the sake of introducing new faces. Similarly, and to me more regrettably, Sault, Nick, and Hal are infrequent presences in the season's thirteen installments.

They do, however, make cameos in the finale, "Texas Birthmark", which touches base with virtually all of the show's characters, or their close partners and family members. Each of these brief appearances signifies something about how the characters have changed over the course of the season.

This theme of change is also echoed in small changes to the series' visual style, which draws in more of Vancouver, and includes a more deliberately paced entry into the apartment from city streets, sidewalks, and walkways than season one's frenetic tours of the West End. In a sign that the show may have had its budget increased, despite being ostensibly even more dilapidated, the Arms actually looks slicker and more substantial, its apartments nicer, than in season one.

Season two is presented on two discs. Disc two includes a relatively conventional set of extras, including deleted scenes, bloopers, a behind-the-scenes promo, and a season trailer. More unique to the series is the inclusion of each of the openings featuring the Troubadours (Jason Dedrick and Tom Saunders), but the most fun is a set of "Hey neighbor" webisodes, which have Yuri, Hal, Sault, Georgia, Toni and Ruby (Justine Wong), and Geoff and Stanley offering advice on apartment and urban living.

At its best, *Robson Arms* is an innovative half-hour show that neatly balances comedy and drama. At its worse, you may find yourself wanting to skip episodes. On balance, though, even those episodes are worth the price just to stay tied into the old building that frames the series.

RATING:  8
EXTRAS:  6

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