

FARSCAPE FOREVER!

SEX, DRUGS AND
KILLER MUPPETS

EDITED BY

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FRELLING FANTASTIC

FARSCAPE, THE SHOW THAT BROUGHT BACK THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

JUSTINA ROBSON

Farscape is different. Every fan comes to that shock of realization at some point: “My God, they really are going to do that!” For me, I think, it was when Crichton was split in two, one of him going off with Aeryn and one staying on Moya. No merging of the two, no convenient death of one (at least not until much later, when it meant something). Farscape was not afraid to make its viewers uncomfortable; it was brilliantly, unrelentingly adult, despite the muppets. And the sex. . . . Farscape was adult about that as well. The brilliant Justina Robson talks about all this and more.

IN MY ORIGINAL PLAN for this essay I thought I'd write about the way that *Farscape* dealt with sex and humor, and how these things set it apart from other sf TV shows of recent times. I was going to say that it had reclaimed pleasure for the lives of the characters, and showed that it was possible to have fun, enjoy yourself, make a hash of your life and still take part in week-by-week sf drama. By contrast, the people in other shows, from *Star Trek* to *Babylon 5*, were leading lives focused almost entirely on Issues of Immediate Action or scientific and political

shenanigans, which filled up story lines on their own and left no room for any kind of normal human interaction. But then I began to think about space opera per se, and realized that *Farscape* was only following a long tradition of the riotous assemblage offered by horse operas, soap operas and sitcoms. It wasn't the subject matter that was different; it was the style of the show that allowed this stuff to emerge. That rather put a spanner in the works of my first plan, since I'd been about to attribute the best bits to Rockne S. O'Bannon and Brian Henson doing their part to drag screen sf into the heady zeitgeist of the early 1990s. But heck, I'll say that here, and then go on with Plan B.

In Plan B here, I'm going to angle this essay in my new direction, and say that it's the type of show, rather than any agenda or great forethought, that permitted this happy union of character, setting, sf cliché and ironic awareness to flourish and madly prosper. After that I'll mention something about why it seems to me that the pleasure principle was and is missing from a lot of sf, both on and off the small screen, and why it's important that *Farscape* brought it back. I probably won't be able to omit talking about those season three and four costume shifts (black leather, anyone?) and erotic stereotyping. This will no doubt lead to some mention of Orientalism, and sf as the genre of The Other. Finally, there will most likely be a concluding paragraph which will say something like Hooray for *Farscape*! There are a lot of other subjects and features of *Farscape* to talk about and celebrate, but for the sake of this essay I'm going to call it quits at Hooray!

Just so that you know, because there really is no reason why you should know this beforehand, I'm writing here as a fan of the show who happens to also be a professional writer of novels and short stories in the science fiction and fantasy genres, and who sometimes reviews sf literature in the British national press. What I have to say comes from that position. I would shore up my arguments with lots of quotations and references from other worthy writers and thinkers, but unfortunately I am too ignorant, so all this opinion is as much my own as I can make it. Where I can, I will point out anyone who had any good ideas that crop up during the discussion.

I first saw *Farscape* on its UK terrestrial TV debut and thought it could go either way: become either something truly dreadful or something rich and strange. It had all the hallmarks of terrible media sf: an overconfident American hero, obviously human "aliens" in squiffy Nazi uniforms running another version of the ancient and banal *Star Wars* Empire, cute

THEATER OF FACES

HOW THE NONHUMANIDS OF *FARSCAPE* CREATE A UNIQUE SF EXPERIENCE

MICHAEL MARANO

I can't nail down exactly when Rygel and Pilot stopped being muppets and started being characters to me—it just happened without my realizing it, some time in the midst of season one. At some point the muppets stopped making Farscape less real and started making it more real. Michael Marano explains how.

NATURALLY, WHEN I THINK OF PILOT on his home planet looking longingly at the stars in the episode “The Way We Weren’t” (2-5), I think of a really ambitious Scottish guy who doesn’t know that advice from witches needs to be taken with a grain of salt. And of course, when I think of Rygel looking at the ship on which he was tortured by that dickweed Durka at the start of “PK Tech Girl” (1-7), I think of a really hot Gypsy chick singing her lungs out to a dashing Spanish officer. I also think of a guy in a rubber suit knocking over models of Tokyo, how much I love an accumulation of green dryer lint named “Kermit” and a *Babylon 5* actor doing improv in the Sahara. In fact, when I think of any of the vast array of nonhumanoid (I guess “non-Sebaceanoid” is more applicable, but that’s too hard to spell) beings that populate *Farscape*, I most often think

of innovations of live theater from the 1970s and the early 1980s... and the fact that I'm thinking of anything at all while watching *Farscape*—rather than marble-eyed drool-staring at the phosphor-dot teat-tube that weaned my brain—might be indicative of what makes *Farscape* so treacherously addictive for science fiction freaks like myself.

The renowned and boot-to-the-head-iconoclastic theater (and sometimes film) director Peter Brook famously said in his 1968 study of theater: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage.”¹ Brook put this notion to an extreme test in 1972 when, through his Paris-based International Center of Theater Research, he took a collective of actors and theater persons—among them *Babylon 5*'s G'Kar himself, Andreas Katsulas, Helen Mirren of *Prime Suspect* and Elizabeth Swados, creator of the Broadway hit *Runaways*—on a journey through Africa to places without formal theater traditions in order to create improvisational theater in marketplaces and on street corners. Then, in 1981, Brook directed a still-controversial production of *Carmen* that boiled Bizet's opera down to a lean ninety minutes, eschewing formal scenery and instead using carpets and throw pillows to create settings, much to the dismay of opera purists who prefer their opera more... I dunno... *operatic*. Brook's reimagining of *Carmen*—which was staged without a full orchestra or crowd scenes and used a cast of only five principal actor/singers—was a stripping away of the grandiose excesses that Bizet imposed on the original bare-bones story by Prosper Mérimée. This was a fact that didn't register with opera buffs, who only seem to dig their productions cluttered and the spaces of their stages anything but empty. And you thought the fans of the original *Battlestar Galactica* were sticklers about “reimaginings.” Thank God there wasn't a robot Daggit in Bizet's version.

The nonhumanoid aliens of *Farscape*, brilliantly crafted by Jim Henson's Creature Shop, are, at least partly, empty spaces like the ones Brook sought in Africa and created on the stage for his *Carmen*. The play of their features and their bodies is the play of theater; they push some of the same buttons that live theater does. Pilot, Rygel, the horse-headed Scarrans, Namtar and company are all incomplete creations to a certain extent, unlike Boris Karloff wearing Jack Pierce's makeup in *The Bride of Frankenstein* or Randy Cook's big dumb Cave Troll in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, neither of which could ever be called incomplete. The creatures of *Farscape* were not crafted and animated to seem *real* as the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* were crafted to seem real. (By the way, could I men-

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 1.

DOWN THE WORMHOLE

COGNITIVE DISLOCATION, ESCALATION, PYRRHIC VICTORY AND *FARSCAPE*

JEANNE CAVELOS

Conventional wisdom has it that the plots of television dramas could be boiled down to Problem-Complication-Resolution. Brian Henson and company must not have gotten the memo. Farscape episodes can be boiled down to Problem-Much Bigger Problem-Frelling Ridiculously Big Problem. Unless they fall under the formula Problem-Great Sex-Psychedelic Episode-Heartbreaking Tragedy. Actually, Farscape never seemed to follow any formula, which is how it stayed surprising all the way through its run.

IT'S NINE O'CLOCK ON FRIDAY, and for lack of anything better to do, you flip to that strange science fiction show, *Farscape*. It's the story of John Crichton, an astronaut whose spacecraft went through a wormhole and was spit out in some distant part of the universe, where he has adventures on a living ship with a group of argumentative aliens.

But what's this? Your TV seems to be showing the launch of a space shuttle, not a futuristic living ship. Do you have the wrong station? No, there's Crichton, but what is he doing in an old Earth spaceship?

Ah, it must be a flashback. Or a dream. Lots of TV shows have flashbacks and dreams—especially when they’ve run out of episode ideas. Indeed, Crichton seems to be reliving his old *Farscape* mission, the one in the pilot. There’s his father in Mission Control. You’ve got it all worked out in your head. Crichton should wake up in his bed at any moment now.

An electromagnetic wave hits Crichton’s ship; he’s knocked unconscious. And then he does wake up.

But he’s not on Moya. He’s in a hospital on Earth.

And his dad is there.

“What the hell?” John says.

Your thought exactly. In fact, you realize this is often your thought when watching *Farscape*. You try to remember the previous episode. Did you miss some big new development last week? No, you distinctly remember watching it, and it ended with Crichton on Moya, as usual.

Crichton’s dad asks how he feels.

“Hot. Dizzy. Kind of . . . feel like I’ve been hit by a house.”

Again, not dissimilar to your feelings at this point.

Crichton’s dad bends over for a hug. Crichton loves his father. This should be a comforting moment. Whatever strangeness is going on, together they’ll be able to figure it out and put everything to rights.

Crichton seizes his father and wrestles him to the floor, screaming, “I am not your son!”

Orderlies and nurses rush in and pull Crichton off as he yells hysterically.

You spot Aeryn in the background with relief. She’ll inject some reason into this craziness. But her hair looks weird, and she’s wearing a white lab coat, and a stethoscope is wrapped around her neck.

Crichton calls to her, but as they hold him down on the bed most of his ravings are lost in a spray of saliva and insanity.

And we cut to the opening credits.

Thank God. You were about ready to start foaming at the mouth yourself. What the frell is going on?

It’s just another Friday night of *Farscape*, the series that raises that immortal question, “Did the writers phone this script in from the insane asylum?” So many science fiction series limit strangeness and confusion for fear of alienating the viewer. They bend over backward to make the viewer feel comfortable and at home, and to provide sufficient explanations to stamp out any confusion. Expository dialogue is stuffed into the mouths of the characters. Spock explains to Kirk that they can’t interfere

PUPPETS, SENTIENT BLUE VEGETABLES, BODY FLUIDS AND LOVE OR, HOW *FARSCAPE* SCREWED WITH ITS CHARACTERS

DORANNA DURGIN

Farscape breaks every rule in television. So how the hell did it ever get made?

A man walks into a bar.

No, really.

Okay, let's say it's not quite a bar. Let's say it's a posh little place with the trendy name of Ratings, where flavored oxygenated sparkling water from Outer Kazootaville tops the menu and the napkins are undyed hemp, hand-embroidered with meaningful karmic characters. One discreet attendant moves smoothly from table to table, refreshing the aromatherapy oils tucked in amongst flowers notable for their spare, expert arrangement. A long sash angles over her head, half hippie, half trendy chic, and her layered skirts muffle the slight jingle of bells. A toe ring gleams, winking in and out from beneath the hem of the skirts.

Atmospherically posh. Oh yes.

So. A man walks into what we'll call a bar and orders an exotic combination of freshly squeezed fruit juices blended in ice. A man who knows what he wants. A man who pays for facials and precision shaping of his silvered, thinning hair and who wears a suit so beautifully tailored

that it almost hides the middle-aged slump of his body. He sits on a stool and snaps open an industry rag, his hand already reaching for and expecting to find the drink. He is not disappointed.

But he is bored. Not even the nearby mix of invigorating rosemary, mint and juniper essential oils makes his industry reading—the gossip, the speculation, the I-told-you-sos—seem stimulating. He lingers over an I-told-you-so.

So. There's already another man at this bar. A younger man, with his hair in a knockoff cut that's supposed to look as trendy as Ratings but instead crosses the line into grungy. The two-day beard doesn't help, nor does the tiny soul patch trying to hide in the growth. This man's got a laptop computer and a Wi-Fi connection, and he's scowling. He reaches for his iced chai and bumps the arm of his neighbor, and only then does he notice that he's no longer alone. "Excuse me," he says, and then there's the hint of a double take. Recognition. "Sorry, sir."

The bored man looks pleased at this recognition, and no longer quite as bored. "That's okay," he says. "You seem distracted."

And the young man hesitates, as though thinking whether he wants to have this conversation here, with this chance companion, or whether he should respond with a meaningless social nicety. But temptation and opportunity win out. "This assignment has me stumped."

"You're an entertainment writer." A statement of the obvious. The initials for *entertainment writer* are EW. Too amusing to ignore. And the man who makes the pronouncement—the man who garners such respect and feels he deserves it—this man has *Network Executive* written all over him. NetEx.

"Yes," says Ew. "Freelance. A little hungry right now. So I need this gig. But this show—*Farscape*—I'm just not getting it. The fans are rabid—"

"Loyal," says NetEx. "We like to think of all dedicated viewers as loyal."

Ew's response is hasty. "Yes, of course. Loyal fans. Enough of them so that once the show was canceled, the network allowed a miniseries finale."

NetEx nods. "Heard something about that."

Ew perks right up. "Are you familiar with the show, sir? Do you have any insights?" He spreads a sheaf of papers on the counter, between the iced fruit blend and the chai. They are seasonal episode guides—gleaned from the Web and sprinkled with neatly handwritten notes—and character sketches, complete with photos.

"I know all I need to know," NetEx says, but he puts down his indus-

FLATULENCE, FOOD AND FORNICATION

RICK KLAU

Helium farts do seem a bit improbable unless Rygel runs on nuclear fusion (unlikely, given how much he eats). But the helium is not the point; the farts are. The farts, the eating, the sex, the greed. . . Farscape's muppets were more real than most Federation captains, and far more interesting.

MY GRANDMOTHER INTRODUCED ME to *Star Trek*. I don't remember exactly when it was—it must have been 1974 or so—that I found her watching the show. Aware of my geek tendencies, she invited me to watch with her.

I was mesmerized. There was a smart, severe-looking dude with pointed ears. A buff, no-nonsense captain. A rock creature with glowing coals. I mostly remembered the creature. The Horta¹ burrowed its way through rock, oozing lava and threatening members of the crew. After Spock successfully mind-melded with the creature, the crew discovered that the Horta was the last of its race and actually a benevolent entity. Quite probably, this was my first exposure to humanist science fiction. In retrospect, “The Devil in the Dark” is one of the worst *Star Trek* episodes, but to this five-year-old, it was mind-blowing.

Watching *Star Trek* with my grandmother became a regular activity. At first glance, this seemed an odd show for my sixty-something-year-old grandmother to enjoy.² After all, she was a big fan of westerns and

¹ Legend has it that one day designer Janos Prohaska wore the costume in *Star Trek* producer Gene Coon's office. Coon was so taken with the creature that he wrote an entire episode around it.

² I never got a chance to ask her about it. By the time I began to wonder about this idiosyncrasy, my grandmother had passed away.

this was a show filled with spaceships and ray-guns. It wasn't until many years later that I put it all together. *Star Trek*, like most science fiction television, was nothing more than a western set in space.³

She soon introduced me to the the 1950s George Reeves *Superman* television show. At five, I was already a comic book reader and knew all about the Big Guy, but this was different. There he was on TV!

I began to wonder what else was out there, sending me on a never-ending quest for the elusive perfect science fiction show. Like *Star Trek* and *Superman*, I discovered in syndication *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*. *Planet of the Apes*, *Quark*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Amazing Spider-Man* and others would come and go in an orgy of failed dreams and broken promises.

I also explored fantastic literature. I devoured the works of Bradbury, Burroughs, Matheson, Brown, Le Guin, Boucher, Dick, Sturgeon, Moorcock and others. My comic book reading continued unabated and reached a fever pitch in the mid-eighties, when creators like Alan Moore and Frank Miller burst upon the scene. By my early twenties, I had become a scholar of sorts, of both science fiction/fantasy and comics. My bookselling career was in full swing, and I had begun to dabble with editing and writing comic books.

Science fiction television offered nothing but a series of disappointments. Until 1987.

I refer to myself as a passive Trekkie. I know a lot about the *Star Trek* universe. I can name major characters, discuss individual episodes. I've seen every *Trek* movie in the theaters (including, to my dismay, *The Final Frontier* and *Nemesis*). But I won't rearrange my life to see an episode, don't write fan fiction, haven't read the novels⁴ and you'll never catch me dressed up as a Klingon.⁵ I did, however, watch the premiere of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with both excitement and trepidation.

My roommate, several friends and I gathered to watch that first episode.⁶ The premiere, "Encounter at Farpoint," was fair, but it showed a

³ To be fair, so is most sf literature.

⁴ Except one. I read the novelization of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* back when the movie first came out. Ah, the folly of youth.

⁵ Yes, I did see *Trekkies* and enjoyed the hell out of it.

⁶ This communal experience seems unique to geeks and sport fans. You don't catch many groups watching *Jeopardy!*, *CSI* or *Survivor*, but science fiction and horror shows are different. I've known groups of people who got together for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files* and even (gasp!) *Highlander*. (The exception is *Melrose Place* and its ilk. I don't know if kids are getting together to watch *The OC* but it wouldn't surprise me.) Over the next seven seasons, I probably watched less than a dozen *Next Generation* episodes by myself.