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Review: Harley Quinn (Season 1)

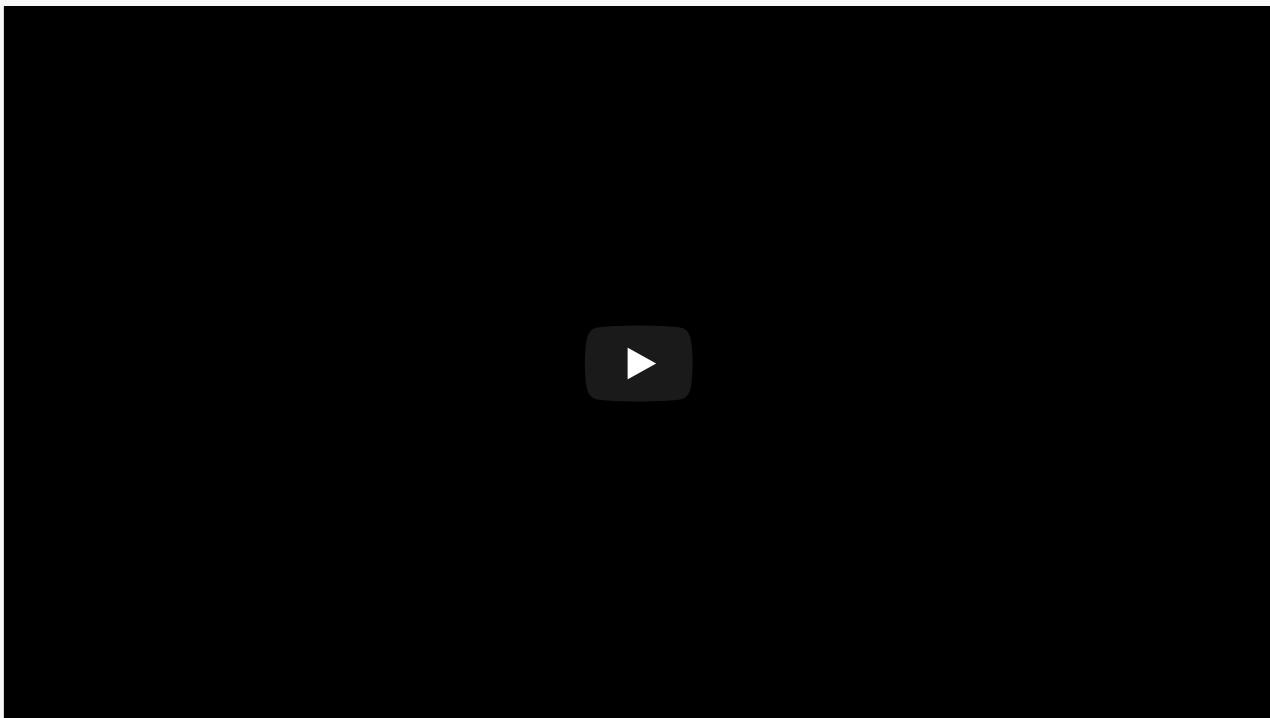
2019-11-22 11:00:00 by [Chris Compendio](#)

No subheading I think of will be as funny as this show

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There is something so profoundly unsettling to me with Harley Quinn's character. It all goes back to the core of her relationship with the Joker, which has always come across as toxic and abusive, even in less adult-orientated *Batman* media. But the *Harley Quinn* animated show on DC Universe is very cognizant of this, taking inspiration from the recent comics to turn this relationship on its head.

What results is one of the funniest shows I've seen this year, and perhaps not only the best original program on DC Universe but one of my favorite DC animated shows ever. And in a pantheon that includes the entirety of the DC animated universe from the 90s and 2000s, that is saying quite a lot.



Harley Quinn (Season 1)

Showrunners: Justin Halpern, Patrick Schumacker, and Dean Lorey

Rating: TV-MA

Release Date: November 29, 2019 (DC Universe)

Joker's sidekick and muse Harley Quinn (voiced by Kaley Cuoco) has found herself in a loop. The show begins with Joker (Alan Tudyk) abandoning her as a distraction to escape Batman (Diedrich Bader), landing Harley in Arkham Asylum. It's clear that this is far from the first time an incident like this has occurred, yet Harley always ends back up in Joker's arms.

But after being left in Arkham for exactly a year, Harley has to be convinced that Joker is simply no good for her. It takes her best friend, Poison Ivy (Lake Bell), who stages a breakout and allows her to crash in her apartment, to get any sense in her. It takes a bit of work, but Harley snaps out of this loop, declaring her independence from the Clown Prince of Crime.

In a not so-subtle way, most of this 13-episode first season is like a traditional sitcom, with Harley facing a different challenge and lesson every episode. And while it may take place in the familiar world of DC, everyone is characterized (or caricatured, more like) in a comedic fashion to make them somewhat relatable and entertaining, with stellar results.



Harley Quinn has one of the funniest and most well-rounded supporting sitcom casts in recent memory. Poison Ivy is perfect as the supportive best friend, giving sage advice about healthy habits and relationships while also dealing with her own insecurities, particularly with her unexpected romance with the second rate villain Kite-Man.

And then there's Harley Quinn's colorful crew: the disgraced and misogynistic Doctor Psycho (Tony Hale), the aspiring and overdramatic thespian Clayface (also Alan Tudyk), tech expert King Shark (Ron Funches), talking plant Frank (J.B. Smoove), and an eccentric wheelchair-bound cyborg with a shady CIA past, Sy Borgman (Jason Alexander). All are hilarious in their own respective ways, with no weak points in this very-much-so-motley crew.

And then there's the Legion of Doom, the organization that Harley is obsessed about making it into out of a need to prove herself and her independence. The usuals such as Lex Luthor (Giancarlo Esposito), Scarecrow, the Penguin, and others are all present, but Bane (James Adomian) is the highlight, acting as the Zoidberg-esque punching bag for all, and speaking in an uncanny Tom Hardy-in-*The Dark Knight Rises* cadence. And then there's Commissioner James Gordon with weary eyes and five-o'clock shadow, who can't go through a few seconds without somehow mentioning how troubled his marriage is to Batman.



The humor is fast and frenetic, with nearly every scene beat and line containing some sort of verbal or visual gag. It's all supported by distinct characterizations and mostly-successful running jokes; Harley always regresses to old behavior, Ivy identifies as an ecoterrorist rather than a villain, Doctor Psycho constantly missteps in his attempts to rehabilitate his image, Clayface overdoes his disguise backstories, and King Shark is frustrated that he's only used for brute force rather than his brain.

Even in this fantastical comic book world, these characters all experience the same neuroses and anxieties that we do. An episode about finding a nemesis being analogous to any standard sitcom episode about the perils of dating is a fine example of how this show grounds the outlandish scenarios to something relatable and hilarious. And although pop culture references may date some television shows, *Harley Quinn* is able to make use of pop culture organically in a way that makes the cadence and delivery of the jokes in context funny, not just the references themselves.

But it is worth a warning that this show can get dark. Like other programs in the DC Universe service, Harley Quinn makes full use of swear words and violence, but it goes significantly farther than its live-action siblings on the network. Heads will be torn off, bodies will explode, innocent civilians ripped in half, faces dissolved in acid, and so on. And usually, all of this is played as a joke—and that might not be for everyone, even though the show's brand of dark humor certainly worked for yours truly.



The *Harley Quinn* animated sitcom works best when it's more of a traditional sitcom and less of a serialized story, which is why the last few episodes of the season felt less effective to me. While there is indeed a good story to tell regarding Harley's full liberation from the Joker, the show had gotten too dense, frantic, and contrived as it reached the finish line for season one.

But there's comedy gold to be mined from this first season, because even with a disappointing final arc, I found myself laughing harder at this show than many others that came and went this year. The characters may not be exactly what you remember them being in the comics and the old television shows, but they still remain intact even after taking a totally cartoonish turn.

It's a wonderful way to reclaim such a troubling character in *Harley Quinn*, and beneath and between all of the jokes and f-bombs and extreme bloody violence, there are important messages here about friendship, trust, and healthy lifestyles. Who knew that it would be from a *Harley Quinn* show, of all things?

And now after seeing how high the bar can be set for the character, I now fully expect to be disappointed by the *Birds of Prey* movie.



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I don't have many regrets, but if I had one that's been kicking me for the past few months, it would be my review for *Parasite*. When I first saw the movie I enjoyed it, but didn't love it like most other critics, but the longer I've spent away from

the movie, the more and more I enjoy it. *Parasite* is a brilliant satire and the fact that it's been able to earn heaps of critical praise despite a very real language barrier is incredibly impressive. Consider this me formally saying that my opinion has changed on it and that now I'm a Bong fan for life. After all, it's not often that a foreign language picture is able to make history in the way that *Parasite* is currently doing.

Adding on to its historical importance, Bong Joon-Ho's thriller made history last night at the Screen Actor's Guild Awards not once, but twice. First, *Parasite* has become the first foreign language feature to be nominated for its most prized award, Best Ensemble Cast. Not only that, but *Parasite* was able to take that award, becoming not only the first South Korean movie to win a SAG award, but also the first foreign language movie ever to win the Best Ensemble Cast in the award's 26 year history. And like a

great dad, Bong Joon-Ho sat in the crowd with recording his cast accept the award with a smile beaming across his face.

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