

Season 3 of Netflix's *BoJack Horseman*: Hollywoo(d) and mental illness

Josh Varlin
15 August 2016

Netflix released season 3 of its original animated series *BoJack Horseman* on July 22 to considerable critical acclaim. The streaming service immediately renewed the irreverent comedy-drama about a washed-up actor and his milieu for a fourth season.

Showmaker Raphael Bob-Waksberg (*The Exquisite Corpse Project* [2012]) deserves credit for inventing a show that manages to alternate between humor and gravity while thoughtfully exploring both. Occasionally the show gets mired in its protagonist's cynicism, yet *BoJack Horseman* offers dramatic insight into fame, depression and celebrity culture.

Approximately half the show's characters are highly anthropomorphized animals, which leads to interesting and genuinely amusing moments that, thankfully, the writers do not overuse. The implications of having anthropomorphized cats, rats, horses, cows and dogs interacting with humans and each other are gradually developed and the creators manage to root them in the show's premise without its feeling too outlandish.

BoJack Horseman follows the exploits of BoJack (Will Arnett, as a horse), a depressed alcoholic actor whose greatest success, until recently, was the mediocre '90s sitcom *Horsin' Around*. Other major characters include BoJack's agent and sometime-girlfriend, Princess Carolyn (Amy Sedaris, a cat); the author of a deeply personal "tell-all" book on BoJack, Diane Nguyen (Alison Brie, a human); BoJack's live-in roommate, Todd Chavez (Aaron Paul, also human); and actor and Diane's husband, Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Tompkins, a dog).

Minor characters worth mentioning include Sarah Lynn (Kristen Schaal, a human), a child actor on *Horsin' Around* and current major pop star with addiction issues paralleling BoJack's; character actress and fugitive Margo Martindale (herself, another

human); and MSNBSea anchor Tom Jumbo-Grumbo (Keith Olbermann, a whale).

The voice actors are talented and well-cast. Arnett plays BoJack with great aplomb, capturing his sarcasm, self-deprecating wit and personal demons in a performance that surpasses his role as GOB. in *Arrested Development*. The rest of the cast, including guest performances from Patton Oswalt, Angela Bassett, J. K. Simmons, Wyatt Cenac, Jeffrey Wright and "Weird Al" Yankovic, is likewise excellent.

The show's animation is attractive, colorful and occasionally beautiful. The episode "Fish Out of Water," in which BoJack visits an underwater film festival, is almost entirely dialogue-free and visually stunning while still advancing the plot.

Season 3 focuses on BoJack promoting his starring role in *Secretariat* in the race for an Academy Award. His quest for a Oscar nomination, in the vain hope it will make him happy, even for a night, leads to new lows for the character while he brings everyone else in his life down. In a series marked by BoJack's emotional and moral valleys, the character reaches new depths.

Along the way there are comedic moments, many of which are at the expense of the entertainment industry and the media. According to the series, Hollywoo—or "Hollywoo" in the show—is full of self-absorbed people at best and self-destructive, damaged people at worst. Characters named "A Ryan Seacrest Type" and "Some Lady" preside over vacuous entertainment "news" programs and the culture is so debased that novelist J. D. Salinger (Alan Arkin) presides over a program entitled "Hollywoo Stars and Celebrities: What Do They Know? Do They Know Things?? Let's Find Out!"

Sight gags are perhaps the show's greatest strength.

In addition to the obvious animal-related jokes—for example, BoJack attends a bat mitzvah in honor of a bat—*BoJack Horseman* is rich with strange and funny details. In order to hobnob with Academy voters and boost his Oscar chances, BoJack attends a non-denominational winter pageant at Rounded Corners Prep: A Gluten-Free Learning Experience.

Other comedic targets include New York-based playwrights (one of whom asks that her omelet have the chef's dreams whispered into it), the Transportation Security Administration (which finds small bottles of liquid but not a human body in luggage) and the year 2007 (generic pop songs and John Edwards are dredged up).

There is a nice moment in season 2 when BoJack is introduced to Wanda Pierce (Lisa Kudrow, an owl), who becomes his girlfriend. “Do you know Wanda Pierce? Wanda just got named head of programming at MBN. We’re here to celebrate. Well, that and she just woke up from a 30-year coma.” BoJack responds, “Wait, she just got out of a 30-year coma and she’s the head of programming at a major broadcast network?” “She’s been with the company 30 years. Everyone above her kept getting fired.”

In general, most of the jokes work, although a few feel unnatural or otherwise fall flat. The comic bits are often quite biting and routinely expose the hypocrisy and emptiness of much of official cultural life in America. Although one could argue about how deeply *BoJack Horseman* penetrates into the entertainment industry as a whole.

Its exploration of mental illness, on the other hand, is one of the most compelling on television today. BoJack, despite his wealth, is utterly incapable of happiness. He constantly drinks and takes drugs, periodically going on week-long self-destructive benders. He watches old episodes of *Horsin’ Around* and seems to derive sexual pleasure from his former fame. He tries desperately to do good, to *be* good, yet always fails or sabotages himself. He is a narcissistic, depressed and deeply lonely creature. *BoJack Horseman* tends to examine these issues thoughtfully while bringing comedy even to the tragic aspects of life—it sympathizes with BoJack without glorifying his behavior.

Periodically, *BoJack Horseman* seems to adopt the cynical outlook of its protagonist. The characters often

remark that “we are responsible for our own happiness,” something which rings false even within the confines of the show. The series vacillates in this regard: is BoJack’s own worst enemy himself, his environment or his past? In what proportion? Because of the ambiguous ending of the third season—one that is thematically and metaphorically related to the second season’s conclusion—it seems only time will tell as to whether *BoJack Horseman* continues to explore this question or if it gets stuck in a rut.

The show’s biggest strength is its ensemble of characters and the way they are brought to quick-witted life by the voice actors. However *BoJack Horseman* develops, the first three seasons have been intriguing, comic and oddly moving.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact