

Star Trek: Picard—The prospects of an aging icon

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Set late in the 24th century, the eighth series in the *Star Trek* franchise, *Star Trek: Picard*, concluded its 10-episode season in March to generally favourable reviews, if a mixed reception from the faithful.

Whatever the new series' immediate appeal, and despite hopes that may have been raised by its title, this incarnation resists any return to the more utopian and exploratory themes of the franchise. Some languorous and contemplative scenes may challenge audience expectations, but this darker series, unfortunately, does *not* boldly go where others have gone before.

British actor Patrick Stewart, 79, has returned as Jean-Luc Picard after a nearly 20-year hiatus, in his words, “to research and experience what comforting and reforming light he [Picard] might shine on these often very dark times.” The classically trained performer brings an intelligence and refinement to a production that at moments touches on real-world problems. This opportunity for Mr. Stewart, approaching the end of a successful career, came with what might charitably be described as discomfiting compromises.

The considerable talent invested in *Star Trek: Picard* is ultimately dissipated or wasted through arcane plot lines and a general resorting to extravagant visual effects, formulaic action and flashy combat to dazzle the viewer.

Familiarity with the *Star Trek* universe and its characters is assumed and even indispensable in following developments in *Picard*. In addition to the various subplots, antecedent elements and tangents, there are also too many unlikely coincidences, and no one seems too bothered about all the loose threads left hanging.

Retired Admiral Picard wakes from a dream at his estate and vineyard in the south of France when he gets a visit from a young woman who turns out to be anything but ordinary. We learn that Dahj, ingeniously portrayed by Isa Briones, is connected to his past through his long-dead android friend Data (Brent Spiner). Her plight and more

general concerns draw Picard out of his 14-year retirement. That story spans the entire series in what is essentially a 10-hour movie—a format becoming more common in the era of streaming and binge-watching “peak TV.”

In the series, in an obvious parallel to the present world situation, the galaxy has entered ominous times with mounting dangers and intrigue. The Romulan people, traditional enemies of the United Federation of Planets, were made into galactic refugees that the Federation (read USA) ultimately turned its back on. This colossal crime by his own government sent an embittered Picard into retirement—and in the present, our hero now sets out to rectify this historical wrong.

Enforcement of a universal ban on artificial life forms was taken up by a secret sect of Romulans who are determined to track down and destroy all synthetics. It is they who are after the young heroines, Dahj and her sister Soji (both played by Briones), and their creator Dr. Bruce Maddox (John Ales), who has been in hiding.

These various narrative strands intersect in the present as Picard attempts to rescue Maddox, solve the mystery of Soji's origins, reconcile the synths with Romulans and the Romulans with the Federation, all while saving the galaxy from annihilation. Even for Picard, and even for *Star Trek*, it's a bit far-fetched.

The series introduces some new characters, promotes previously supplementary ones and also resurrects fan favorites from past shows who pop up far too implausibly, but in this galaxy of the unlikely, one barely blinks.

One of the more engaging additions is Michelle Hurd who appears as Picard's old friend and former first officer, Rafaella “Raffi” Musiker. She brings needed warmth to the cast. Drawn out of her drug-addled isolation, Raffi anchors Picard's team aboard *La Sirena*, the unregistered Starship of pilot “Chris” Rios (Santiago Cabrera) a “broody, existentialist,” Che Guevara-inspired

adventurer. The bad guys, by and large, are flatly two-dimensional, although Harry Treadaway as nefarious Romulan spy Narek gives a more nuanced performance in a slightly more nuanced role.

From out of the past and out of the blue, Seven of Nine (Jeri Ryan) has been remade as leader of the Fenris Rangers, a group of vigilantes who roam the galaxy rescuing the vulnerable. She begrudgingly joins Picard when she learns they are on the same side. Some have suggested her new bourbon-swilling swashbuckler role warrants its own spin-off, but so far, her range of emotions has been restricted to cynical and threatening.

Given the limitations of the often clichéd and campy writing, the actors work well with their material and with each other. The conspicuously hip and cool patter panders to prospective new and younger fans and makes this 24th century culture feel remarkably like our own—complete with rampant substance abuse, profiteering and corruption—and, like a night of excess, the fun is regrettable.

Time will tell how well the producers have judged their audience, but the *Star Trek* universe they portray bears only a skeletal resemblance to the original. The pioneering *Star Trek* productions of Gene Roddenberry—the initial 1960s series or *The Next Generation (TNG)*—won a dedicated following for their confidence in science and reason underpinning an optimism about a progressive future and for some audacious multi-ethnic casting at the height of the Civil Rights battles. Over time, the egalitarian inroads made in the originals have given way to a conformism that displays “inclusiveness” as a smug badge of honour.

The future portrayed in film and television these days is often grim, and irony is the order of the day. The notion of a world free from social inequality and the struggle to survive that was once the hallmark of the *Star Trek* universe is out of fashion. In an oft-quoted speech from *TNG*, then-Captain Picard proclaimed, “People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We’ve eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions. We’ve grown out of our infancy.” These ideas are mostly gone from *Star Trek: Picard*. By way of explanation, Mr. Stewart argues that the world has changed a good deal in the interim.

As to why he decided to reprise the role of Picard after years of turning down a sequel, the actor explained, “I wanted a different man in a different world with a different set of values perhaps. ... This is a disturbing and frightening and sad time for many thousands of people,”

Asked if he thought the pandemic would be the subject of further episodes, he said, “It is too sensitive, too upsetting, too frightening, I think.”

There is nonetheless some reference to the criminal policies that have victimised millions of refugees fleeing imperialist wars in recent years. One senses as well a yearning for a return to a largely fictitious golden age. Stewart, also an executive producer on the series and a social democrat in his views, asserts that the writers have hewn closely to burning contemporary issues, but even the implied criticism of Donald Trump’s xenophobic policies are useful devices meant largely to ennoble our hero.

With a per-episode budget exceeding \$9 million, *Picard* is being positioned to reap big rewards if it can continue to expand its audience. Following the success of *Star Trek: Discovery*, CBS All Access has staked a great deal on *Picard*, which has become its frontline production, serving over 6 million subscribers. That, however, puts CBS well behind rivals in the fiercely competitive video streaming market such as Netflix with its 60 million subscribers and Hulu with some 30 million. With so much riding on the series, “creative choices” are calculated above all from the point of view of increasing audience share and the bottom line.

Season Two of *Picard* was scheduled to start filming earlier this year, but with the shutdown of the entire industry due to the COVID-19 pandemic, production has been suspended indefinitely. The first season has been made available free of charge to non-subscribers during the outbreak.

Science fiction has often been well employed to illuminate our world—by way of warning, as social criticism or even in projecting a better social order. The *Star Trek* franchise has a long and uneven lineage, but it would not be demanding too much from it at this point to say that *Star Trek: Picard* has missed a valuable opportunity.



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