

# *The Pitt* Season 2 and the challenges facing a serious television drama

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The second season of *The Pitt* is being aired in the midst of explosive events that have thrust healthcare workers into the spotlight in an unprecedented manner.

The New York nurses' strike involving 15,000 nurses is now entering its third week. Strikers are demanding safe staffing, fully funded healthcare benefits and protection against workplace violence. Some 31,000 registered nurses and other specialty healthcare professionals at Kaiser Permanente are on strike across more than 200 hospitals and clinics in California and Hawaii.

On January 22, the Trump administration completed its withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), which will have disastrous consequences for public health, already under sustained attack. And, most dramatically and shockingly, on January 24, ICE agents assaulted and then executed intensive care nurse Alex Jeffrey Pretti while he was recording an ICE operation and attempting to help a woman up from the ground.

The continuing success of *The Pitt* is unquestionably bound up, along with the series' own dramatic or artistic merits, with a growing mood of dissatisfaction and discontent, with a hunger for something "hard-hitting" and realistic about life in the US. The powerful response has something of a semi-oppositional character.

The second season premiere January 8 drew 5.4 million viewers in its first three days, a 200 percent increase compared to Season 1. *The Pitt* is currently the #1 show on HBO Max worldwide. Its popularity was bolstered by its win as Best TV Drama Series at the 2026 Golden Globes held January 12, along with Noah Wyle's honor as Best Lead Actor. The show runs weekly and its last episode will be aired April 16.

The first season followed senior attending physician Dr. Michael "Robby" Robinavitch (Wyle) and his team at the Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Hospital's emergency room, known as "The Pitt." Each episode chronicled one hour of a 15-hour shift in the understaffed and underfunded ER.

The second season continues with the one hour per episode format and is set in the future, significantly, on July 4, 2026,

the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" as "unalienable Rights." Implicitly, the series poses the question, even if it doesn't attempt to answer it directly: what is the current state of that "pursuit"?

As of January 22, three episodes have aired.

In Season 2, Episode 1, Dr. Robby is seen riding to work on a motorcycle without a helmet at 7:00 A.M., indicating that his reckless or even suicidal tendencies, hinted at previously, have not abated. As he enters the ER, he pauses to look at a plaque installed by the city of Pittsburgh commemorating the mass shooting that occurred in the first season and praising the hospital staff's response.

He is disgruntled to find that Dr. Baran Al-Hashimi (Sepideh Moafi), who will replace him during his upcoming three-month sabbatical, has arrived early and begun instructing the medical students. Throughout the next three episodes, Robby and Al-Hashimi butt heads over her by-the-book approach and her plans to implement changes in the ER, most notably the use of AI for note-taking.

Dr. Frank Langdon (Patrick Ball), a principal character who was obliged to deal with addiction issues and left for rehab after being caught stealing drugs from a patient, returns for his first day after the scandal. Langdon is anxious about possible rumors during his absence. He also realizes that his friendship with Dr. Robby seems irreparably damaged and he will be assigned to lower-level duties.

Dr. Mel King (Taylor Dearden), the empathetic and neurodivergent resident, is unusually anxious and distracted. We find out she is attending her deposition for a malpractice lawsuit the same day. Dr. Trinity Santos (Isa Briones), in her usual nonchalant and abrasive manner, dismisses Mel's anxiety and explains that malpractice lawsuits are to be expected for emergency doctors.

Santos, with her own history of being abused as a child, suspects a father of having done the same to his daughter, when she shows up in the ER with numerous bruises. However, Dana Evans (Katherine LaNasa), the charge nurse, intervenes as the father erupts after Santos' accusations. It

turns out that the girl has Immune Thrombocytopenia (a disease that causes major bruising). Santos's impulsivity and confidence are becoming more of a problem.

Another notable moment occurs when Dana drills a new nurse on recognizing potentially violent patients and alerting staff with a safe word. Dana was badly assaulted by an unhappy patient in the last season and had declared that she was done with her job. But she seems unable to stay away and her compassion remains unchanged, as is her "gallows humor" coping mechanism. She demonstrates how to act with kindness toward a homeless man who had been unable to wash himself or remove his arm cast for a considerable period of time, causing maggots to infect his wound.

The writers clearly intended the treatment of Yana Kovalenko (Irina Dubova) to be a central emotional moment of the first three episodes. The Ukrainian-Jewish woman is treated by Dr. Robby for a severe leg burn. She explains that the fireworks on July 4th triggered her PTSD that caused the accident. After bonding with Robby over their shared Jewish heritage, she reveals she is a survivor of the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue shooting, a real-life event that happened in Pittsburgh. She asks the headscarf-wearing nurse Perlah Alawi (Amielynn Abellera) whether she is Muslim. When Perlah confirms she is, Yana thanks her, recounting that the Muslim community was among the first to show up and raise money for the funerals of the victims.

*The Pitt* is facing the inevitable difficulties and "growing pains" that all breakout hit television shows have to contend with in their second season and beyond. Many exhaust themselves and remain on the air through a certain kind of inertia, largely spinning their wheels. Series that have something to say, and continue to deepen and develop their themes are rare. It is too early to tell whether *The Pitt* will be among the ones that do.

With the one-hour-per-episode format having lost its novelty, some of the flaws, including some theatrical, punchline-heavy dialogue, make themselves felt. There is also a legitimate pressure for believable character progression. The first sharp impression that characters may make, sometimes quite forcefully, needs to be followed up by real-life complexity and greater depth. If the protagonists simply carry on despite their obvious internal contradictions, they risk becoming semi-parodies or figures implausibly frozen in place.

Robby cannot, for example, indefinitely be suicidal while remaining the head of ER. Dana can only recover from so many traumatizing incidents.

Arguably the biggest source of *The Pitt*'s popular appeal is that it highlights both the difficult conditions in the ER and, within those conditions, empathy, cooperation and the defense of science—in other words, some of the best of

humanity. These general elements remain.

At the same time, the series offers healthcare workers (as well as patients) the feeling of being "seen," because it depicts the backwardness and irrationality of the social circumstances in which they live. Unfortunately, this is not usually what gets emphasized during this season's promotional tour, which often focuses on romantic dynamics within the cast and other superficial aspects of the series. Will the series veer toward "medical melodrama" or will it "stay the course" and stick to its original and compelling compassion and concern for suffering humanity? We will see.

On social media, *The Pitt* has been described as "comforting."

The following comments are examples:

"Tough clinical day today. Our system is broken. But all day, all I could think is I can go home, watch episodes from season 2, and leave behind all the crap that makes doing our jobs so damned hard, even if only for a little bit. So grateful for a show that reflects who we are in healthcare."

"These past two days have been draining (I'm in Minneapolis so it's been very traumatic to see what happened yesterday and the fact that ICE is still here). I need *The Pitt* tonight."

One of the weaknesses of *The Pitt* continues to be its silence in regard to the increasingly combative character of healthcare workers, who are not surrendering peacefully to the mad, destructive policies of the ruling elite. Long bitter strikes in Rhode Island and Michigan, and now massive walkouts on both US coasts demonstrate that healthcare workers are anything but passive or submissive. The various union leaderships are the principal roadblocks in each of these struggles.

Doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers are not martyrs who either stay and suffer or ultimately break down. They take part in strikes and protests with other workers. They discuss politics with one another. Some even get shot in broad daylight by armed thugs and then slandered by fascist government officials. The comfort the show might provide will become a little hollow if it falls too far behind this reality.



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