

Television. One DVD at a Time.



tvddvdreviews.com

- > [Home](#)
- > [Reviews](#)
 - [Alphabetical](#)
 - [By Category](#)
 - [50 Most Recent](#)
- > [New Releases](#)
- > [Essentials](#)
- > [TV Bookshelf](#)
- > [Links](#)
- > [Contact Us](#)

firefly

Google™

Search

Web tvddvdreviews.com

:: Features ::

- Four Discs
- Fourteen Episodes (675 mins)
- Scene Selection
- Commentary Tracks on Seven Episodes
- Deleted Scenes from Three Episodes
- "Here's How it Was: The Making of *Firefly*," "*Serenity*: The 10th Character," and "Joss Tours the Set" Featurettes
- Alan Tudyk's Audition
- Gag Reel
- Joss Sings the *Firefly* Theme
- Easter Egg: Adam Baldwin Sings "Hero of Canton"

"Yep, a real beauty, ain't she? A right smart purchase. I tell you what – you buy this ship, treat her proper, she'll be with you for the rest of your life." – Salesman in "Out of Gas"

Firefly: The Complete Series DVD Review

Reviewed by Kay Daly



What do you get when you cross sci-fi with the old West, inject it all with the slangy wit of [Buffy the Vampire Slayer](#), and people its moonscapes with a charming, intriguing and skilled cast of actors? The answer is one of the most brilliantly inventive and artfully executed series ever to grace the airways. Sadly, it's also one of the most noodle-scratchingly premature cancellations in television history.

Fans of Joss Whedon, the creator of [Buffy](#) and [Angel](#), already know what I'm talking about. In the fall of 2002, Fox Network aired a mere 11 episodes of Whedon's *Firefly* before pulling the plug (an additional three episodes were filmed but not aired). The official word was that the series 'failed to find an audience' – a foregone conclusion, considering the target audience literally couldn't *find* the show as it shifted timeslots virtually week to week.

That's a pity, considering how beautifully the 11 episodes succeeded in evoking a fully imagined sci-fi universe, peopled with robust, engaging characters who demonstrate an interpersonal chemistry that usually takes seasons to develop. And that's despite the fact that, for reasons that are unfathomable, Fox chose not to air Whedon's meticulously crafted series pilot until *after* the series was yanked.

Grafting a sci-fi universe onto the world of the western, *Firefly* imagines a distant future in which spaceship pilots coexist with pistol-totin', bronco-bustin' ranchers. And as if that's not enough, Whedon adds an overarching influence of Chinese culture, from Asian-influenced styles of dress to the habitual use of Mandarin curses and swearwords.

Believe it or not, this odd mélange works – partly due to a full commitment to the concept, but also because of the artful way in which the series' creators exploit the thematic resonance of the various genres to support and flesh out the overarching plot.

Drawing from the granddaddy of all TV science fiction, [Star Trek](#), *Firefly* is set in a universe ruled by a single centralized government, here called The Alliance. But unlike Roddenberry, who envisioned a



[Firefly - The Complete Series](#)

Nathan Fillion

Best Price \$27.00

or Buy New \$34.99



[Privacy Information](#)

glossy, noble, peaceable totalitarianism, Whedon uses this premise to ask dark questions: What happened to those who did not wish to join the Alliance? What is the price of unification?

The response is a complex inquiry into the nature of imperialism in which the clash of genres serves to characterize the elements of this new universe. The Alliance, the dominant force in this new empire, is presented as pure sci-fi: clean, sleek, and mechanized. But as one leaves the heart of Alliance's territory, mechanization gives way to the pioneer spirit that inhabits all frontiers, and this is where the Old West comes into the mix. The far-flung planets on the outskirts of the 'verse (Whedon's ellipsis for "universe") are home to ranches, mining towns, and other fringe outposts. (To underscore the stylistic metaphor, Whedon incorporates imperialist underdogs drawn from diverse cultures, including slave economies, Robin Hood-esque folk heroes, and the Australian aboriginal didgeridoo). These settlements, far outside The Alliance's reach, harbor the cast-offs of this new order, the defeated rebels who fought to resist full-scale unification and lost.

Enter our hero, Malcolm "Mal" Reynolds (played by Nathan Fillion of *Two Guys and a Girl*). In the opening sequence of the pilot, we witness his crushing defeat during a key battle between the forces of unification and the rebel resistors. As Whedon explains in the fantastic audio commentary, his intention was to paint a portrait of a man after the moment in which everything he believes in crumbles. Yeah, that's the *starting* point.

After establishing that back story in the pilot, the series goes on to portray Mal in his latter-day occupation, as captain of *Serenity*, a "firefly" spaceship (hence, the title of the series). He's an embittered realist, deeply suspicious of the new Alliance government and wary of crossing old, possibly vindictive enemies. Aboard *Serenity*, he has built a new life, transporting goods and passengers, all the time trying to squelch his nobler impulse to fight for the underdog.

Mal is joined by his ass-kicking second-in-command and former army buddy, Zoë (the stunningly beautiful Gina Torres) and her comical husband, Wash (Alan Tudyk, the voice of the Robot in "I, Robot"), who serves as the ship's pilot. Rounding out the crew are the ship's mechanic, the warm and perky Kaylee (Jewel Staite) and the craven, libidinous mercenary Jayne (Adam Baldwin).

The series pilot also introduces the rest of the main characters, passengers who essentially live aboard *Serenity*. Obviously, these aren't your garden-variety travelers: each has a reason for staying aboard the ship indefinitely, thus making them plausible long-term characters and ensuring a motley mix of people beyond the run-of-the-mill ship's crew line-up. They include: Inara (Morrena Baccarin), a state-certified courtesan who uses *Serenity* as her home base and mobile liaison headquarters; Shepherd Book (Ron Glass of *Barney Miller* fame), an itinerant pastor with a mysterious past; and Simon Tam (Sean Maher), a young doctor fighting to protect his eerily clairvoyant sister River (Summer Glau) whom he has rescued from the clutches of the Alliance.

But the main character, as Whedon and others note in the audio commentary, the ship itself, and the creative team lavished no small amount of attention on rendering her as fully as possible. The exterior shots are dazzling; no wobbling Chroma-Key *Enterprise* clone, *Serenity* is nimble and lifelike. (It's no surprise that despite its short run, *Firefly* won an Emmy for Outstanding Special Visual Effects). And the interiors are just as impressive. To ensure a sense of geography, Whedon insisted on a fully articulated set of the ship's interior in which the various chambers of the ship are connected by corridors.

Perhaps it's this attention to creating a real space that helped foster such a sense of community among the cast members. Watching this ensemble, it's hard to believe they filmed a mere 14 episodes together. The relationships, whether newly born in the pilot or established in the series back story, are warm and vital. The dialogue, laden with Whedon's typical quirky slangyness, sounds fresh and authentic. And while action frequently takes center stage, it nearly always exists to illuminate some point about the characters and the relationships they're building.

Take, for instance, "War Stories," in which Mal and Wash are captured by Adelai Niska (Michael Fairman), a former client and nemesis (the "bad blood" between them is established in "The Train Job"). While action abounds in the depiction of the crew's rescue efforts, the focus of the story isn't shoot-'em-up thrills. Instead, Whedon uses the plot to explore the relationship between Wash and his wife Zoë and his insecurity about her wartime bond with Mal. In a classically Whedonesque juxtaposition, during a brutal torture scene in which Niska, a connoisseur of pain, applies all his skills to his two captives, the two victims continue to bicker about Zoë, only pausing to acknowledge their agony.

The emphasis on relationships is not surprising to any Whedon fan. As he mentions in the audio commentary, his shows are all about building families. Fittingly, many of the episodes begin or end in the ship's mess hall; and despite the importance of action and sci-fi chase scenes, stories frequently climax with a decision about the group's relationship to one of its members.

Setting the stage for many of these crises is one of the series major story arcs, that of Simon and River. In the series pilot, Simon explains how River – a brilliant prodigy – had been enrolled in a state-run school for the gifted. Later, he came to discover that she has been subjected to horrifying tortures – presumably experiments to explore how her gifts could be enhanced and exploited by The Alliance. He arranged for her rescue, and now he and his sister – disoriented and eerily subject to psychic flashes and psychotic breaks – are fugitives from the law.

As the series progresses, the *Serenity* gang is forced to contend with the siblings' dilemma and decide whether they stand as neutral observers, enemies, or protectors against impending threat. Sometimes the threat comes from without, as when a bounty hunter (brilliantly played by a comically sinister Richard Brooks in "Objects in Space") boards the ship looking to seize the fugitive; sometimes, from within, as when Jayne considers selling out River and Simon to the authorities (as in "Ariel"). And sometimes, River herself is the threat. Rather than playing the obvious sympathy card, Whedon makes it clear that this unbalanced genius is a potent and potentially destructive force. The ominous question that hovers over this story arc is resonant one: to what extent can and should the *Serenity* gang imperil themselves to protect her?

But it's not all psychotic teenagers and sticky ethical dilemmas. The 14 episodes that make up the series cover a lot of ground, establishing several long-term story arcs and pleasant star turns for each of the main cast members. In "Shindig," we get a nice taste of the sexual tension building between Mal and the courtesan Inara, as well as a charming portrait of the naïve Kaylee as the three attend a fancy dress ball that ends in a duel (don't worry, all the good guys survive). "Jaynestown" takes the crew to planet where Jayne has mistakenly been made a folk hero as a result of botched heist he pulled years before. Simon takes center stage in "Safe," when he's kidnapped to provide medical services to a group of backwater settlers.

It's particularly a pleasure to see the unaired episodes in this collection. In "The Message," Zoë and Mal receive a strange war memento, while in "Trash," we see the return of a particularly amusing recurring character, the vixen Saffron, who first appeared in "Our Miss Mal." Whedon's predilection for presenting exploited women triumphing over their male aggressors appears in the unaired "Heart of Gold," in which the *Serenity* crew helps defend the tenants of a bordello. I'm guessing there are a few scenes from this episode that wouldn't have made it past the censors if the series had lasted.

Tying it all together is "Out of Gas," an adept and gripping tale of the ship in peril. *Serenity* has been disabled by an explosion and, as oxygen supplies dwindle, Mal sends the crew and passengers away on the ship's shuttles while he tries to repair the damage. The story is told in three time frames simultaneously, crosscutting among scenes of the current crisis, the events that led to that crisis, and flashbacks to how each crew member came to be part of the *Serenity* team. The tri-partite time scheme is anchored by the ship's geography: as Mal moves through the ship, we see events at each location that occur in the various time-frames. The episode is suspenseful, rich, and remarkably well-crafted.

The weakest episode of the bunch is undoubtedly "The Train Job." The first of the post-pilot episodes, "The Train Job" seems hurried and a bit wooden, cramming too much exposition into too little plot. This dramaturgical stumble a mystery, until you listen to the audio commentary and learn the script was written over the course of one weekend. According to the creators, the two-hour pilot had already been shot, but Fox decided it wanted "more action" in the first episode, and asked Whedon to produce a new first-show script instead. By Monday.

Oh, Joss. Exactly who did you piss off at Fox?

The 14 episodes of *Firefly* are housed in a four-disc box set, and each disc cover is decorated with a lovely portrait of one of the main characters (Mal, Jayne, Zoë, and Book). The menus are straightforward and easy to use. My only complaint is that each menu is prefaced by a small animated interlude of graphics and stills. It's stylish, but takes just a smidge too long to get to the menu items. This can quickly get irritating when you're trying to surf quickly through the options.

Each episode also has a scene selection option, which is very handy (especially for DVD reviewers).

Video and Audio

Both video and audio are excellent. The visual effects are really lovely, so it's nice to be able to view them properly. And the DVD retains the wide-screen format, which enhances the cinematic quality. Sound is also good. Really, no complaints.

English (Dolby Digital 2.0 Surround), French (Dolby Digital 2.0 Surround), Spanish (Dolby Digital 2.0 Surround) are available on all episodes, as well as English and Spanish subtitles.

Extras

For such a short-lived series, the extras are bountiful and act as a sort of "in memoriam" to a fallen monument. First, there are the audio commentaries which appear on seven of the episodes. Commentators include show creator Joss Whedon, producer/writer/director Tim Minear, director David Solomon, writer Jane Espenson, costume designer Shawna Trpcic, and actors Nathan Fillion, Morena Baccarin, Alan Tudyk, and Jewel Staite. The comments are wide-ranging, from amusing production anecdotes, to insights into the meaning of the show, to good-natured ribbing

The other features are housed on the fourth disc under the clever heading, "Special Features." They include three featurettes, deleted scenes, the audition tape for cast member Alan Tudyk, a gag reel, an audio of Whedon singing the show's theme song, and an easter egg of Adam Baldwin singing "The Hero of Canton" (a musical tribute sung in his character's honor in "Jaynestown").

The first featurette, "Here's How It Was: The Making of *Firefly*," is a 28-minute "making of" documentary, with interviews from the creator, producers, crew members, and cast. It's an intriguing blow-by-blow anecdotal account of the process of how this show made it to the airwaves – and how it died on the vine. God is in the details here: the participants provide fascinating insights into all aspects of the production, from casting choices to camera styles to the process of Chinese translation. Definitely give it a watch: it really enriches the experience.

"*Serenity*: The 10th Character," a 9-minute featurette, focuses on *Serenity* itself. Through crew and cast interviews, the symbolic significance and technical details of the firefly is revealed. Visuals include a schematic diagram, shots of the various sets, and a peek at some of the computer animation used to render external shots of the ship. Again, the attention to detail behind the show's creation is staggering.

"Joss Tours the Set" is a short, homegrown featurette, an "impromptu" tour of the set, filmed while the show was still in production. It's a quickie, and you'll get better insights from "*Serenity*: The 10th Character." Still, it's only about a minute long, so it can't hurt to watch it.

Then there's the gag reel, a collection of bloopers compiled for the series' wrap party. Very amusing, and it ends with a bare bottom. But so many swears ...

Throughout all the features, what's palpable is the deep love for the material the cast and crew share. During the audio commentaries, there are frequently moments of hushed silence, followed by a gleeful, "Oh, that was so good!" There's also a jokey quality to the commentaries and various of the features – the gag reels, Tudyk's audition tape, the easter egg – that really conveys how much the cast and crew genuinely liked each other. It's just another reason the show gels so quickly on-screen.

As a final coda, a feature film based on the series entitled *Serenity* is planned for release in September 2005, and all the main cast members and nearly all the production team re-upped for the production.

The logistics of reassembling a cast and crew after a series' cancellation is no mean feat. It's a testament to the passion this group of people shared for the material that nearly everyone signed on.

Summary

For diehard Whedon fans, it goes without saying that *Firefly* is a must-see. But even for those not bitten by the [Buffy](#) bug, this show is worth a viewing. The mix of genres can seem a little jarring at first (spacemen in cowboy hats? Whatever!), but strong story telling, great ensemble action, and fantastic dialogue win the day. This is a slickly produced and packaged box-set, both a worthy reward to the show's devoted fan base and an engaging introduction to the series for Whedon newbies.

2/25/05

© 2003-2005 tvdvdreviews.com - All rights reserved.