

Season 5 of animated series *BoJack Horseman* addresses #MeToo campaign, with mixed results

By Josh Varlin
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BoJack Horseman, the animated comedy-drama series, returned to Netflix for its fifth season in September 2018.

The show continues to investigate the entertainment industry and its “side effects” in a novel manner, deftly combining comedy and tragedy in a parallel universe full of anthropomorphic animals. The *World Socialist Web Site* has reviewed Seasons 3 and 4; these reviews provide a more general overview of the show. (Readers who have not seen Season 5 and are concerned about spoilers are advised to stop here.)

Perhaps inevitably, the #MeToo campaign finds reflection in *BoJack Horseman*’s latest season. Despite initial concerns that #MeToo would be treated uncritically, the show does not adopt or endorse wholesale its methods and views: the junking of fundamental democratic principles such as the presumption of innocence; a Manichean worldview of villainous, monstrous abusers (generally male) and saintly victims (generally female); the use of unsubstantiated allegations of a wide variety of behavior, ranging from the boorish to the possibly criminal, to remove people from the public spotlight. Not entirely, at least.

Despite the general support for #MeToo from showrunner Raphael Bob-Waksberg, reality is more complicated than that, and *BoJack Horseman*, despite its fantastical elements, attempts to speak to reality. The show is too intelligent to be simply a #MeToo parable about its protagonist’s fall from grace.

The season opens with BoJack (Will Arnett) in the eponymous role in *Philbert*, a “gritty” television drama about a violent cop who may have killed his partner. (*Philbert*, the show-within-a-show, is awful, an

appropriate satire of the genre.) He quickly begins an ill-fated relationship with his costar Gina (Stephanie Beatriz), who dreams that *Philbert* is her big break.

The imperious and pretentious Flip McVickers (a well-cast Rami Malek) directs and writes *Philbert* for WhatTimeIsItRightNow.com, a Netflix semi-parody. When BoJack tries to convince Flip to dial back on the gratuitous sexualization of Gina, Flip forces BoJack to do a contrived and unnecessary nude scene himself. When BoJack is initially reluctant, Flip attempts forcibly to disrobe him, an intense moment that isn’t revisited or discussed, despite—or perhaps because—it shows BoJack as a victim of sexual misconduct.

When BoJack is initially slated to work with Mel Gibson-like actor Vance Waggoner early in the season, he ends up accidentally becoming a “woke” “male feminist” cultural icon by saying that men shouldn’t choke women while on television. To its credit, the episode hints at the reality that profit determines everything under capitalism, including whether or not someone is “rehabilitated.” Princess Carolyn says, “Now that Vance can’t help me succeed, I realize the more feminist thing to do is to make sure he doesn’t succeed either.”

However, the episode ends with Diane (Alison Brie) acquiring an audio tape where BoJack admits he came very close to sleeping with a teenager in New Mexico (in a previous season), and would have done so had he not been interrupted by her mother. The audience knows that this was the teenaged daughter of his old friend, and although it would not have been rape, statutory or otherwise, it also clearly would have crossed some boundaries even BoJack hadn’t crossed before. The recording makes it sound even worse than

it was, and hangs over the head of the show like the Sword of Damocles for the rest of the season.

Meanwhile, BoJack descends further into the depths of a severe opioid addiction after a stunt accident (and then an intentional car crash to secure more pills).

BoJack and Diane eventually have it out at the premiere of *Philbert*, after BoJack hazily explains to the premier's audience that the message of the show is, "We're all terrible, but we're all okay, and that's a pretty powerful message."

At this point, BoJack's opioid addiction combined with the demanding shooting schedule for *Philbert's* second season result in reality, the show and BoJack's own paranoia becoming blurred. While initially played for laughs, this culminates in BoJack choking Gina on set to the point where he needs to be pulled off her. The incident is covered up because Gina doesn't want to be forever known as "the actress choked by BoJack Horseman" rather than for her own career, which is just beginning to take off.

Despite his pleas for Diane to destroy him with a "takedown" piece, she takes him to a rehabilitation center to get sober, although substance abuse is far from BoJack's only problem.

To a certain extent, *BoJack Horseman* tries to have it both ways. At its best, it provides insight into the social and psychological causes of interpersonal brutality, of which BoJack is both a victim and perpetrator. The best episode of the season, "Free Churro," which is almost entirely BoJack's eulogy at his mother's funeral, explores these themes, which were the highlight of season four.

The shutting down of production companies and television shows on the basis of sexual misconduct allegations also isn't portrayed as an unalloyed victory for women.

However, *BoJack Horseman* also seems to hint at a kind of "darkness" inside us all—or at least sexually active men. Diane's ex, Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Tompkins), who seemed to be sweet and caring, turns out to date younger women until he gets bored with them. He then cheats on his new girlfriend with Diane. BoJack hints at even more unsavory—and possibly criminal—acts against women in a confrontation with Diane.

There are two final features of the season worth noting, which hint that the artists are grappling, albeit

incompletely, with important issues. One is the musical sequence before BoJack chokes Gina, "Don't Stop Dancing 'til the Curtains Fall," which alludes strongly to *Cabaret*, the 1972 anti-Nazi film starring Liza Minnelli. It also addresses the rottenness of the American entertainment industry, with Gina singing to BoJack:

You are a rotten little cog, *mon frère*
Spun by forces you don't understand
Living is a bitter nasty slog, *mein herr*
Why not sell your sadness as a brand
Paint your face and brush your mane
And find some place to cut your pain
Into portions we can buy at the mall
And don't stop dancing, no, you can't stop
dancing 'til the curtains fall

There is also a sequence hinting at the reactionary, self-obsessed character of the various entertainment blogs and news sources that have been at the center of the #MeToo campaign, when Diane and her boss discuss how they write vicious "takedown" pieces of famous actors but should be forgiving of themselves and each other. This is, unfortunately, left unexplored.

BoJack Horseman has been renewed for a sixth season.

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