

MST3K Returns: The Not-Too-Distant-Future is Here



Mystery Science Theater 3000: Experiment 1101

Written by Joel Hodgson et al

Directed by Joel Hodgson and Robert Cohen

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*Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale,
From the not-too-distant past:
There was a cow-town puppet show
That nobody thought would last (lalala)...*

It's been almost 30 years since the first MST3K experiment ("Invaders from the Deep") flashed on Minnesota TV screens as a way to kill a couple of hours on local channel KTMA. From November 1988 to August of 1999, Mystery Science Theater 3000 bounced from local UHF to basic cable, from comedy to sci-fi. It introduced "riffing" to the popular lexicon and as a pastime of choice for media-weary viewers tired of a landscape saturated by mediocrity. Nearly everyone involved with the show has carried on riffing duty in one form or another, but no one ever really expected the show that started it all would come back.

But come back it did, and hard. On the back of one of the most successful Kickstarter campaigns ever, fourteen new episodes were filmed and subsequently snapped up by Netflix, who knew a good thing when they saw it. So now, a new generation gets to strap in and enjoy bad movies turned into genuine entertainment.

If you are reading this, the entire season of MST3K, Season 11, has been released *en masse* by Netflix. However, your faithful reviewer remembers a time when Saturday was MST3K night, gathering with the other oddball students in the senior dorm to catch the new episode. For that reason, we'll be watching-and recapping-one episode per week. As somebody once said, it's too nice a job to rush.

So let's get started: Gizmonics employee Jonah Heston (comedian Jonah Ray following the tradition of keeping his first name) is hauling some meteors back to earth when he gets a distress call from the dark side of the moon. It quickly turns out the call was a trap: he is captured and

promptly bundled into a tube which deposits him unceremoniously on the Satellite of Love, still amazingly intact. This is all done to a new, rather jazzy rendition of the classic theme, giving us our first look at the new villains and the rather elaborate sets that have been put together.

The same old 'bots are still on board: Crow (Hampton Yount), Tom Servo (Baron Vaughn), and Gypsy (Rebecca Hanson). The latter has had the biggest change: apart from anything else she's now voiced by an actual female, and is much more lucid. Also, she lives in the ceiling, so that's cool.

The villains this time around are eerily familiar: Kinga Forrester (Felicia Day) is apparently the daughter of original "mad" Dr. Clayton Forrester (Trace Beaulieu), determined to restart her father's (and grandmother's) experiment in search of selling the brand to Disney for scads of money. At her side is Max, aka "TV's Son of TV's Frank" (Patton Oswalt), who looks just too much like Frank Conniff to be believed.

One surprise this viewer was not expecting was the resurrection of the invention exchange. In fact, the first one out of the gate is something that's not only quite doable, but looks to be really neat. This reviewer expects to see 3-D printer/CNC plans for it on Thingiverse and elsewhere in very short order, in fact. Since the inventions were always Joel Hodgson's "thing", we're likely in for more of the same.

The first movie out of the gate is *Reptilicus* (1961), a Danish-American production in the Giant-Monster-Tromps-All-Over-Everything-While-Scientists-Flail-Around-Helplessly genre, an old favorite. After going through a door sequence that is extremely impressive (they really have upped their model game), we come out into the theater for the movie, and the riffing begins.

The title monster is discovered when an oil drilling team accidentally pulls up a section of the beast's tail. When typically careless movie scientists allow the specimen to thaw, they find to their shock it regenerates itself entirely. They waste a lot of time shambling around stumbling into failure after failure before determining their best bet is to kill it with poison. Unfortunately, there is one loose bit left behind that begins to regenerate, because of course there is.

The riffing is about par for the course, with the riffs being more or less interchangeable between the characters. One feels they will find their comic voices as the season progresses. There seems to be a lot more in the way of music-based riffs, short bursts of lyrics and so forth. This is by no means a bad thing, just one of the few things that struck this viewer as distinct from the previous iterations.

Despite the online, commercial-free venue of the new season, Hodgson put in "bumpers" where the commercial breaks would normally go. These feature the "Skeleton Crew", the live-ish band that are seen at the opening of the show as well. Hodgson has explained that he has a certain affection for those moments, and feels they help retain the feel of the original shows.

Also true to the original series, there are three "host segments" interspersed throughout the

movie. In the first one, Jonah explains (by means of a rather catchy rap number) how the idea of giant and/or scary monsters can be found all over the world. Some very clever lyrics here, and it fits very well with the tradition of creative and funny songs in the history of the show.

In the second segment, Crow takes one of Tom's arms and regenerates a bunch more Toms (all one-armed themselves, natch). It's a bit of a running gag across the series that Tom keeps duplicating himself, so this would appear to be a nod to that. It's short, but amusing, though a couple more of the "mutant" versions would have been nice.

The third segment has the crew reading viewer letters. This is interesting, as that was generally saved for after the movie up til now. Only a couple of notes this time around, understandably, but no doubt there will be more to follow.

Post-movie, Gypsy goes Kaiju on a model Copenhagen while Kinga & Max plot the future.

So, off to an interesting start. It feels very much like coming home for this longtime viewer, though there are some serious questions about continuity. First of all, we have the Satellite of Love, bots included, but the last we heard the SOL had crashed and the robots had settled on Earth. Also, if Kinga and Max are both descended from the original villains Dr. Clay & Frank, then that raises all kinds of questions, particularly since Frank ascended to Second Banana Heaven before taking a job as a Soultaker (it's a long story). Hodgson & co are being extremely coy about how they intend to resolve the various continuity questions, or whether they intend to address them at all. We'll just have to see.

There are some nice surprises among the cast and crew. Trek fans will be delighted at the beginning by a familiar face among the Gizmonics personnel. Longtime Best Brains wardrobe mistress Beez McKeever is back on the crew, doing what she does best. Series veterans Paul Chaplin & Mary Jo Pehl are also involved, with rumors of other MST3K alumni to follow. And then there's that "Movie in the hole!" guy...doesn't his voice sound *familiar*?

Altogether, it's a pretty strong start to a new generation of the show. As I mentioned in **my previous writeup**, MST3K has always been a show that adapted over time, and because of this managed to stay enjoyable and entertaining for a very long time indeed. There's a lot new here (Tom's voice particularly is rather different to this old fan's ears), but it is in the main familiar enough that it should take longtime fans back with relative ease, as well as introducing a whole generation of new ones.

Kelly Luck is old enough to remember when "Keep Circulating the Tapes" was still a thing. As indeed were tapes. Her other SciFi4Me work can be read [here](#).

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