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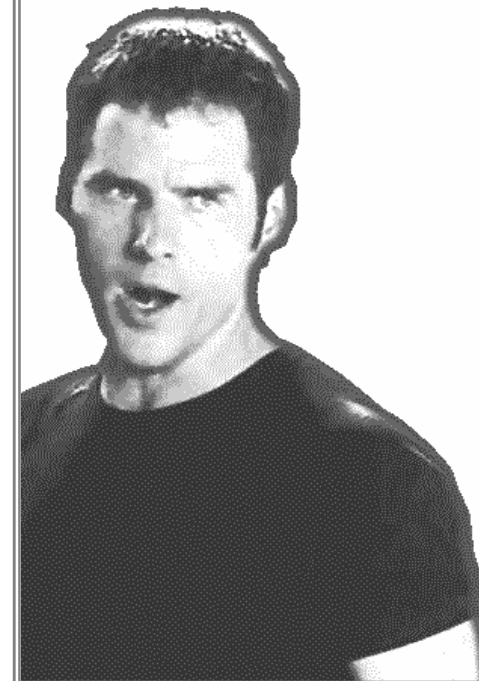
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**I GOT YOUR
WARP
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A FARSCAPE PRIMER

The latest version of the venerable starship Enterprise, on the show that bears its name, maxes out at Warp 5. That's a fraction of the speed of its predecessors, and it's no surprise. *Enterprise* has to lug around the entire crushing weight of the Star Trek franchise. After five TV series and nine, soon to be ten movies (four, if you only count the good ones), *Star Trek* has history. It has tradition. The good guys all get along, make the right choices in the end, and always walk away from their adventures none the worse for wear. It's dependable. Even comforting. But when's the last time Star Trek made you laugh out loud, or stand up and cheer like a maniac?

Rockne S. O'Bannon and David Kemper, the creator and executive producer of Sci-Fi's *Farscape*, don't have a franchise to protect. They're not bound by thirty-five years of ironclad fandom-- they're just out to have fun. *Farscape* is what *Trek* could be if it loosened its collar, let its hair down, and knocked back a couple of tequila shots. In the sterile, stately world of TV science fiction, it's gloriously messy.



There is no captain on *Farscape*'s ship -- Moya is a living creature with a mind of its own, and a symbiotic pilot creature to relay its opinions to its crew. The heroes aren't a close-knit military team; they're a mishmash of rogues and fugitives who would probably end up killing each other if they didn't need to cooperate to survive. We see them engaged in the unglamorous realities of space travel: cleaning their teeth (with a living toothbrush), cooking, even doing laundry. Their sex lives, neither ignored nor turned into sweeps fodder, are passionate, messy and fraught with consequences. Status quo for Moya and her crew is to be damaged, hungry, and on the run.



The Jim Henson Company produces *Farscape*, and the legacy of *The Muppet Show* is happily apparent in the show's loony, anything-goes spirit. Each episode is breathlessly paced, crammed with rapid-fire dialogue and subtle details that reward multiple



viewings. At least once every act, the plot or the characters take a hard left turn into the unexpected. Trying to guess how any given episode will end-- even at the end of the third act-- is an easy way to lose a bet. And every now and then, the producers will take their nicely working formula and give it a good hard shake, peppering an episode with hallucinatory jump cuts and flash-forwards, or illustrating the main character's inner turmoil as a fully animated Roadrunner-style cartoon.



All the show's stars are gifted, none more so than leads Ben Browder and Claudia Black. As lost astronaut John Crichton, Browder is the antidote to every starched-collar all-American space hero from Kirk onward. Marooned amidst unimaginable weirdness, he's making everything up as he goes along, and half the time he just doesn't give a damn. Since the show began, he's grown darker and more aggressive, moving ever further from his initially peaceful values. His rapid-fire pop culture references come across as the attempts of a desperately lonely man to hang on to his sanity.



If Browder is all manic energy, Black's ex-soldier Aeryn Sun is cool reserve, a little bit sad even when she's smiling. Hard as nails on the outside, an open emotional wound on the inside, Aeryn is one of the most marvelously complex female characters on TV. If Crichton has gotten meaner to survive, his influence has helped Aeryn discover compassion for the first time in her highly regimented life, and it frightens and confuses her. Black's marvelously expressive face, like the great Emma Thompson's, allows her to say more with one longing glance than she could with a whole monologue.



I'd be remiss not to mention the Muppets. Two of the show's regular characters, six-armed Pilot and Rygel, the tiny slug emperor, are made of foam rubber and animatronics. It's to the writers' great credit that the

show's Henson contingent isn't thrown any softballs, character-wise. They have backstories, regrets, and character flaws, all performed with a skill and subtlety most human actors would kill for. Rygel in particular behaves like the unholy anti-Kermit: he steals, he bites, he boasts about his sexual prowess, and he's not above selling out his crewmates to get what he wants. Despite that, he's a brilliant diplomat and negotiator who earns what little respect he deserves. His selfish advice usually turns out to be the wisest course of action.



The series' Biggest Bad to date is Scorpius (Wayne Pygram), the most deliciously wicked TV villain in years. He wants the interstellar secrets that friendly aliens lodged in Crichton's brain, and he'll stop at nothing-- torture, madness, mind control-- to get them. He has Mr. Spock's implacable logic, the Terminator's refusal to die, Pinhead's tailor, and Ernst Blofeld's sinister charm. Scorpius doesn't rant or bluster like most sci-fi heavies. He's polite, soft-spoken, always smiling with those little needle teeth-- and scary as hell. And just when you think you hate him, the producers reveal some noble twist to his personality that almost makes him sympathetic. Almost.



By breaking all the rules, the producers and cast of *Farscape* have given television a new kind of space opera. It's more honest, more emotional, and a lot more exciting. The sort of risks *Farscape* takes are exactly what *Star Trek* needs to produce a great series again-- and exactly what *Trek*'s carefully guarded cash-cow status will never permit. Which makes John Crichton and company the only TV space crew boldly going where no one has gone before.

