

“SANCTUARY”: The Complete Second Season (DVD Review)

Written by Jack Bennett
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It must be difficult to launch an original genre TV show these days, after LOST and the reboots of BATTLESTAR GALATICA and DOCTOR WHO set the bars for production quality and rabid popularity so high. The circumstances by which SANCTUARY evolved from webisodes to Syfy series has threatened to overshadow the actual show, and fans of comparatively fascinating programs like CARNIVÀLE and DOLLHOUSE might catch a SANCTUARY episode and wonder why it's the one still running.

After leaping from web browsers to TV screens, SANCTUARY premiered to 6.6 million viewers, and after two seasons it draws a regular audience a third that size to consistently mediocre reviews. How does SANCTUARY, whose second season recently hit DVD, endure? Simply put: It's fast-paced, it's fan-bait and it's cheap to produce.



SANCTUARY's ongoing story of the possibly immortal Dr. Helen Magnus (STARGATE's Amanda Tapping) and her benevolent team that seeks to recruit or suppress Abnormals (intelligent monsters of various species) ended the first season with an emotionally loaded betrayal, and begins the second with raised stakes and multiple challenges for our protagonists. The shows aren't rote formula, and this collection does feature an extensive grab bag of mythical monsters (Vampire blood! Werewolf! Bigfoot!) with sci-fi origins—but when watched back to back all at once, the overall effect comes dangerously close to an FX-glossed soap-opera. Partly to blame is the much-publicized exclusivity of virtual locations, drawing attention to the greenscreen work and pulling focus from the increasingly melodramatic foreground. That process, however, holds the key to the show's success; previous generations of equivalent TV fans were required to ignore that vast alien worlds always resembled the same three sets. If you relax your higher storytelling requirements, SACTUARY provides the entertainment value of an immersive fantasy creatively unrestrained by the low budget.

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The features on the four-disc Second Season set delve comprehensively into both the technical and creative processes of the show, revealing the cast and crew to be committed and enthusiastic professionals. Every single episode includes a commentary track with even-keeled director Martin Wood, with most also featuring dry-humored and pleasant-tempered star Tapping and energetically articulate creator Damian Kindler, who keeps the chatter lively with an assortment of self-congratulatory jokes and honestly fascinating technical anecdotes. Featured actor Ryan Robbins and guest actor Christopher Gauthier also turn up among these tracks, and all involved express pride in what they’ve accomplished and affection for the actors and production team. They are typical commentaries in that everybody’s a big fan of their own work, but it’s difficult to not be charmed by their zeal.

The fourth disc comes packed with further extras, including handsomely produced behind-the-scenes featurettes detailing the arc of season two, the visual FX, Tapping’s turn at directing an episode and a full deconstruction of the conception and creation of “Next Tuesday,” a bottle episode that takes place almost entirely on one location. Contrasting the featurettes are videos collectively titled “Will Vision,” with castmember Robin Dunne giving us a candid view of the SANCTUARY set and reinforcing the notion that TV acting is a lot of waiting around until you’re needed (the videos might have been more interesting had the camera been given to a less insistently ingratiating actor). There’s also an eight-minute home video of the cast and crew at the San Diego Comic-Con, and a five-minute bloopers reel that you should probably skip unless you count the SANCTUARY cast among your loved ones.

Fans of the show will be more than satisfied with the DVDs’ well-stocked bonus features, and non-fans are likely to find these information-packed extras more interesting than the episodes themselves. Produced in Vancouver by a team of seemingly tireless technicians and low-budget innovators, SANCTUARY is not a great show, but the people behind the scenes are clearly great at what they do.

OVERALL RATING: 

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