Better late than never for "Firefly" bandwagon

By Tom Giffey
Leader Telegram staff

I arrived a bit late for the “Firefly” bandwagon.

About 10 years late, actually, which means the bandwagon has been gathering dust in the horse stable for a while. Or perhaps gathering dust in the spaceship scrapyard.


“Firefly” was a “space Western” about the exploits of a gang of thieves who live on the frontier of civilization after a civil war and stage train robberies (yes, there are trains in space) and other deeds of derring-do. As in Westerns, they pack six-shooters, (sometimes) ride on horses and survive on the rough edges of society. Led by their captain, Mal (Nathan Fillion, who now stars in the ABC mystery series “Castle”), they follow a moral code that puts them somewhere between Robin Hood and the James Gang. They generally aim to fill their own pockets from smuggling or theft at the expense of the oppressive central government, known as the Alliance, but in doing so they often end up helping other people, typically the poor or downtrodden.

As you might expect from a science fiction program, however, all of this occurs in the far future on unfamiliar plants and moons separated by the blackness of space, through which the crew travels in a battered Firefly-class spaceship called Serenity. Unlike most sci-fi, there aren’t aliens in “Firefly” -- everyone is human, in one form or another -- although there are psychics, laser guns and houses that float in the sky.

“Firefly” was created by Joss Whedon, one of the most revered contemporary writers and directors in what might be broadly described as “genre” fiction: His work has, among other things, encompassed fantasy, sci-fi, horror and comic books. Whedon is probably best known as creator of the long-running cult TV series “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” and most recently as director of this year’s highest-grossing film, “The Avengers.”

Sadly, “Firefly” didn’t even survive a full season. Only 11 of the 14 produced episodes were aired by Fox, and even then some of them were broadcast out of order, which undoubtedly confused casual viewers. Such network bungling, combined with the show’s mash-up of genres, might explain the low ratings that led to its untimely cancellation.
Perhaps “Firefly” is simply a victim of bad network decision-making. (I’ll admit that I’m still a bit sore at Fox for cancelling “Arrested Development,” one of the most brilliantly comedies in the history of television, after only three too-short seasons.) Over the past decade or so, the broadcast TV networks have increasingly fed audiences a diet of horrible, formulaic reality shows and talent competitions at the expense of investing in quality scripted programs. Or perhaps “Firefly” just came at slightly the wrong time. Another of my all-time favorite TV series, “Lost” -- which also bent genres and continually surprised and fascinated viewers -- premiered just two years later and became a big hit. Whatever the case, if you want to see what might have been, I’d recommend checking out “Firefly” and “Serenity,” which are readily available on DVD and Netflix.

Now that I’ve recently finished watched the entire series as well as the feature film, I can mourn with the rest of the show’s devoted fan base. Like many sci-fi series, “Firefly” developed a cult-like following of fans who made up in devotion what they lacked in numbers. (While they weren’t able to save the series, their fervor was enough to convince Universal Pictures to make a movie based on the show.)

To watch “Firefly” is to see the infancy of what could have been a great TV series had it been given time to grow. The characters are rich and their interactions are subtle and often comic, and the show had two genres full of ideas to draw on. Mal, in particular, is a complex character who, despite ostensibly being a crook, follows a strict moral code. (In that way, he reminds me of the fabled inner-city gunslinger Omar from HBO’s “The Wire.”) In the first episode, his life is complicated when he provides safe passage to two fugitives: A young doctor, Simon (Sean Maher), and his teenage sister, River (Summer Glau), a prodigy who was the victim of unspeakable experiments at the hands of the powers-that-be. At the end of the first episode, an exchange between Mal and Simon sums up much of the spirit of the show.

**Simon:** I'm trying to put this as delicately as I can. How do I know you won't kill me in my sleep?

**Mal:** You don't know me, son, so let me explain this to you once: If I ever kill you, you'll be awake, you'll be facing me, and you'll be armed.

The captain may be a frontier criminal in the eyes of the law, but he’s actually a man of honor who doesn’t relish violence. (As it happens, it was a controversy surrounding this quote that got me interested in the series in the first place: Last fall, a UW-Stout professor got into a First Amendment dispute with university officials after they removed a poster bearing the quote from his office door.)

Just as “Firefly” was cancelled, it seemed to be hitting its stride with a winning blend of action, drama and humor. The show may have died young, but at least it died with its boots on.

- Tom Giffey, editorial page editor