

VARIETY

TV Review: ' Fargo' Season 3 on FX

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“Fargo” is a pointillist’s dream. In the third season of the anthology series, so many tiny details stand out: There are the perfectly mussed curls of a self-important executive’s hair, which is either inartfully permed or naturally sports a douche-y bounce. The impressive brushiness of the mustache worn by his business partner is almost inspirational; the thick, hairy mass is perfectly suited to sitting over a mouth that often frowns suspiciously and dutifully drags out key vowels. Then there’s the perfectly faded paint job of one character’s vintage Corvette. Not much has to be done to establish the guy’s down-on-his-luck

status, not when the formerly glorious, now-tired red of the car's exterior says so much about the small humiliations and disappointing setbacks that have accrued in his paunchy middle age.

It's when you expand outward from those grace notes that the show's grasp on one's attention begins to shake and wobble. Sure, it's a hoot to see Mary Elizabeth Winstead exude rocker-chick attitude as a character named Nikki Swango, a TV name so memorable it's hard to believe that a hard-boiled detective in the '70s didn't already make it iconic. Scoot McNairy, so great as a romantic geek on "Halt and Catch Fire," has a lot of fun playing a very dumb stoner who is extremely bad at the life of crime he's chosen. Michael Stuhlbarg, who sports the brushy 'stache mentioned above, is able to make the word "jeez" mean so many different things, which is one of the job requirements for actors in the "Fargo" franchise. These gem-like pleasures are not to be denied.

But there's a chill in the early installments of the third edition of "Fargo," a coolness that's only vaguely related to the windswept and snow-covered Minnesota terrain the show once again traverses.

The second — and, so far, the best — season of the show, supplied a surfeit of actors who could bridge the gap between the show's distancing, clinical aesthetic and its core dramatic concerns. Though every edition of "Fargo" is chockablock with top talent — and this one is no exception — in the series' second outing, Ted Danson, Patrick Wilson, Cristin Milioti, and Kirsten Dunst, in particular, lent a warmth and vulnerability to the proceedings. The humane qualities of their characters made it relatively easy to buy into the events that transpired, despite the show's tendency to prize formal experimentation and arch symbolism over emotional immediacy and the messiness of compassion.

“ Fargo ” is a show that often holds its characters at arm’s length, but when that rigorous and sometimes off-putting quality is balanced with moments of goofy aspiration, serious connection, or passionate strangeness, the drama coheres into more than the sum of its meticulously created parts. Peggy Blumquist and the second-season UFO storyline were welcome not in spite of their weirdness, but because of their shaggy, inexplicable and irrational qualities. They loosened up a show that sometimes can be a little too calculating and self-conscious for its own good.

In the early going, the third season of “ Fargo ,” which is set in 2010, offers a sprinkling of skillful characterization, dialogue, and production design without providing enough psychologically compelling components to balance out the largely dry and even perfunctory aspects of the drama. The elements viewers have come to expect are accounted for, as if by checklist: There are middle-class white businessmen in over their heads; lower-class gangsters with and without much in the way of smarts; plainspoken, trustworthy cops who just want to do their jobs; bad guys who speak with elaborate politeness and deploy casual brutality without conscience; themes of change and a corrupting loss of innocence. There’s even a slight whiff of topicality, in the form of financially shady types who seem to have Eastern European connections and use an American businessman as a dupe in their far-reaching schemes. And of course, there’s a poor sap who dies early on, more to set various plots in motion than to serve as an opportunity to reflect on mortality or loss.

Carrie Coon’s character, the quietly dedicated Gloria Burgle, is probably meant to bring the requisite warmth to the new season, and Coon is, of course, wonderfully wry and subtle in the role. She’s a treasure, in both this show and “ The Leftovers .” But in the first two episodes of the FX drama, much more screen time is devoted to the season’s party trick: Ewan McGregor plays two brothers who’ve ended up on different rungs of the Midwestern middle-class ladder.

Ray Stussy is a striving parole officer who possesses little aside from his vintage 'Vette and the love of Nikki Swango, a tough, slightly New Age-y bridge player. He's determined to get her an expensive engagement ring, and neither he nor Nikki is averse to committing crimes in order to realize their modest dreams. (Nikki, who's served time in prison, hates the word "con" because it's "so negative.").

Emmit Stussy is "the parking lot king of Minnesota," a phrase that comes up a fair bit, and his relationship with his grasping brother is strained at best. The details of each man's mannerisms, hair, and wardrobe sell the ways in which their lives and tastes diverge, but there's little about either Stussy brother that's especially fascinating or, well, different. Widen the scope out from "Fargo," and it's not hard to perceive that both Emmit and Ray are common TV types: men whose greed, self-interest and willful delusion put them at the center of ever-greater circles of violence, transgression and misery. We've seen these guys before.

Even as one appreciates McGregor's game and largely successful attempts to master the twangy vowels of the Upper Midwest, around the margins, "Fargo" supplies more interesting types and troublemakers. David Thewlis' sallow, well-spoken gangster, for instance, is one of the most menacing men to ever wear a sack-like, forgettable bargain suit. And Winstead supplies supple joy and charismatic selfishness as Swango; her swaggering walk into a Midwestern bridge tournament is one of the season's liveliest moments.

And yet. It's possible to respect the accomplishment of McGregor's performance, and "Fargo" as a whole, while also feeling detached from various aspects of what occurs on screen. The show has a tendency to hammer home the fact that stories are contrived, artificial things, and that people are likely to serve their own self-interest, except on those rare occasions when they don't. These truths are commonplace, but when "Fargo" works, it

puts the kind of wry, electric spin on them that makes sticking with these stalwart Midwesterners worthwhile and even exciting. And this season, there are miles to go on that Minnesota prairie. Ah jeez, Emmet and Ray may yet wind up somewhere strange, turbulent, and delightful.