

## ICYMI: TBS's Underrated Dark Comedy of *The Detour* Deserves Its Due

**A spoiler-free case for making time for a little *Detour***

By LaToya Ferguson | July 2, 2019 |

*Photo Courtesy of TBS*



Since its premiere in the spring of 2016, *The Detour* has been one of the most fascinating comedies (dark or otherwise) on television. Co-created by real-life husband and wife Jason Jones and Samantha Bee—after their tenure on *The Daily Show*—the series originally followed the Parker family foursome as they embark on the worst family vacation known to man. At the time, the show was compared to the *Vacation* movie series, a point that was only amplified by the 2015 soft reboot starring fellow *Daily Show* alum Ed Helms. It's also a point that Jason Jones has since stated that was never his personal intention for the series. In fact, while the series was billed as somewhat based on Jones and Bee's real-life experiences with family vacations—which certainly makes sense for the first season, all things considered—by the end of the pilot, it was apparent that the series had loftier goals than just a family vacation story.

Jones stars as Parker patriarch Nate Parker Jr., alongside Natalie Zea as his “wife” (it’s a whole thing) Robin Randall, and the twin children who they ruin more and more with every passing episode: weirdo Delilah (Ashley Gerasimovich) and idiot Jared/Jareb (Liam Carroll). (Based on four seasons of getting to know these characters, I can say with complete certainty that “weirdo” and “idiot” have been the most sensitive ways to describe them.) The series begins with the Parkers on their way from Syracuse, NY to Fort Lauderdale, FL for a family vacation/work retreat for Nate, with a rather early reveal (at least to the audience) that Nate hasn’t been completely honest about the trip or the status of career. In his defense, his actions were based on what he thought was right (because “What’s right is right.”); in fact, he got fired because he challenged his boss Gene (Phil Reeves) and plans to blow the whistle on the company. But his actions are still fueled by lies, hotheaded decision making and a tendency to make the wrong choice at every turn, even when he’s technically in the right.

To say *The Detour* goes off the rails immediately is honestly redundant, given the series’ title. It’s not just in the case of the road trip’s unforeseen circumstances but the early reveal (this is a series of reveals, even though they can often be lost on the characters themselves) that whatever happened on the Parker family’s trip and beyond somehow led them down the path of multiple criminal and federal investigations. *The Detour* is fun for the whole family, depending on how old your family is. But it’s also kind of difficult to explain what the show really is past that first season, especially if you want to keep the twists a surprise. A raunchy family vacation is easy to explain, but the investigation is also a major part of the series—and where most of the series’ meta jokes come from, especially in terms of what may seem like plot holes or stretches in disbelief.

*The Detour* has never really been just about a family vacation (or other travels) as much as it has been the constant circumstances (usually of their own making, even when they try to avoid conflict) that cause the Parkers’ lives to drift so far off course, as well as the big question of whether or not Nate and Robin are bad parents. The latter is arguably the biggest point of the series and one that’s asked constantly from the pilot on. In the first season, there’s still an argument to be made that they are good-ish (albeit frank and blunt) parents, but the further the show goes along, there’s a more definitive answer: “bad parents” is a relative term. This is especially true when compared to Nate’s emotionally and verbally abusive mother (which translates to his own issues with handling emotions, as he is prone to crying all the time and denying it’s happening) or Robin’s criminal father.

In fact, *The Detour* essentially believes in the saying “the road to Hell is paved with good intentions,” even though if a character were to ever say that on a show, it would spark a debate from Robin (about how Hell isn’t real) until she “won.” While there are plenty of reasons why everything goes downhill for the Parkers, the biggest one is how both Nate and Robin have a compulsive need to be right, no matter how bad they look as a result or how much it just makes things worse for them and their family. That could easily get annoying to watch, but to keep it fresh, both characters latch onto different types of things when it comes to their rightness, which allows them to perfectly complement each other and the show by creating a balancing act of sorts. (They essentially never go overboard on the same issue at the same time, with the rare exceptions leading to reconciliatory, romantic moments.) Nate’s desire to be right and do the right thing is what drives the series at first, and in his case, he faces the brunt of the physical

punishment when it comes to this. Jason Jones is absolutely unafraid to be the beaten-up butt of many a joke in the series, to sometimes uncomfortable levels. (This fourth season really ramps that up.) But it's Robin's soul—not that she believes souls exist—and emotional strength that are chipped away at, as she's the one who is faced the most with questions of them (and her, specifically) being bad parents.

Ratings-wise, the show has a steady viewership for TBS, usually ranging anywhere from 750,000 to a little over 1,000,000 viewers, typically leaning closer to the latter (at least for the first three seasons). Its viewership is much higher than TBS' critically-acclaimed *Search Party* and the recently-canceled *Angie Tribeca* (which always seemed destined to fail ratings-wise, with the marathon and binge full-season strategy for its premieres). And while it's slightly lower than newer series like *Miracle Workers*, *The Last O.G.*—both of which also hit the critically-acclaimed mark for TBS—and *The Guest Book*, its ratings consistency is actually impressive considering it's just begun its fourth season. TBS obviously isn't a ratings juggernaut of a network (basic cable or otherwise), so while these numbers aren't big compared to other networks, it's all about perspective. And with this perspective, while *The Detour* might have possibly gotten bigger numbers on other networks, on TBS, it has the numbers to continue on—and to remain as weird as it is because of its TBS bubble.

Still, in discussing comedy on TBS, it's worth noting how its “Very Funny”/“veryfunny” brand identity has had a hand in overshadowing its solid—and markedly different—original offerings. In fact, I imagine most people associate the tagline with *Friends* or *Seinfeld* reruns more than the channel's originals. Especially since—and considering the joke, it doesn't seem to be common knowledge—that tagline has been defunct for the network since 2015. (Despite it still fitting the bill for TBS' brand, especially compared to its more serious sister network TNT, which similarly killed its own memorable tagline, “We Know Drama”... in favor of “Boom.”)

While Samantha Bee, of course, enlightens TBS viewers with *Full Frontal*, enlightenment is far from the goal of *The Detour*. Intelligent idiocy is a very specific art form that rarely gets its due. Adult Swim's *Childrens Hospital* took it to a whole other level in its seven seasons, but a large part of the joke was how much it spit in the face of any sense of continuity while doing so. *The Detour*, on the other hand, is all about continuity; It's an intricately told story that relies heavily on being able to properly trace the tangled web it weaved. Even bits that don't seem to make sense at first—like an obvious recasting choice between the first two seasons—end up having a point. At the same time, while *The Detour* is a tightly-plotted series with callbacks to the tiniest bits and made-for-show music numbers and quotes, etc., it's also never bet on a tasteless bit or dumb joke it didn't love: Vomit humor, poop humor, pedophilia (although, to be clear, the pedophile ends up suffering), sex jokes, even just something as simple as pratfalls and nut shots. *The Detour* is a smartly-written show and knows it has to be for all the dumb jokes to land as well as they do. The darkness is lightened but that sophomoric humor just how messed up pretty much everything in the Parkers' lives is. Case in point: Season Three ends with Delilah running away from this trainwreck of a family, with Season Four focused on the hunt to find her. Not exactly light fare, even though Jason Jones still has Nate fall down a very big mountain for an extremely long time in the process.

And in a time where television viewers scour their favorite shows—usually “serious” shows like *Black Mirror* or *Westworld*—for Easter Eggs or hints and clues foreshadowing certain storylines, it’s fascinating that a series like *The Detour* (which has been tailor-made for that) is never discussed in such a context. As stupid (a term I truly mean as a compliment) as the show can be, every single bit or character, no matter how small has a purpose or can be called back on this show, and there’s an attention to detail you might not even notice until multiple rewatches of the show. All of that is in service of the show’s humor. In fact, Towards the end of the second season, *The Detour* has fun with this, when an impromptu trip from New York to Florida (again) leads to Nate constantly asking Robin if she remembers certain major bits from the first season, while she couldn’t care less to think about them in this particular context. It’s the type of episode that where you would expect callbacks and possibly even flashbacks in, but the show isn’t having it, despite its love of both.

The biggest thing that gets lost in *The Detour*, though, are the performances. Natalie Zea is easily the MVP of the series. For a show at least originally based somewhat on Jason Jones and Samantha Bee’s real life, Zea had the hardest task to begin with, filling the role of Jones’ fake wife for an audience very aware of his real wife. Zea has been deserving of appreciation since ABC’s *Dirty Sexy Money*—she also never got it during *Justified* or *The Following*—but the most frustrating part about how out of the critical consciousness this series is is that Zea doesn’t get that much-deserved recognition on a bigger level. Robin has all the makings of an obnoxious character, but Zea wears her acerbic nature with pride in a way that makes the character so fun, you’re on her side when she becomes an ordained minister online just to prove a point, or gets super high on her vacation when her husband is lying to her, or reveals she’s been lying about much bigger (and more illegal) things for an even longer time.

In fact, the series ultimately belongs to the women, whether it’s Zea’s Robin, her “shit show” half-sister Vanessa (Daniella Pineda), or USPIS agent Edie (Laura Benanti). Laura fricken Benanti has legitimately given one of the funniest, next-level bonkers performances on television for two straight seasons, and you would honestly have no idea outside of the bubble that contains *The Detour*. And *The Detour* also proves that it can also succeed when it comes what may not necessarily be completely planned, as Ashley Gerasimovich has grown into such a talented young actress since the beginning of the series that it allowed the Season Three conclusion to work as well as it did.

*The Detour*—like other TBS sitcoms, even those more acclaimed ones—is a niche show, even with recognizable names and faces like Jones, Zea, and supporting cast members like Benanti, James Cromwell (who contributes to what is surprisingly only the second best *Babe* joke of the series), and even Samantha Bee. (In an Oedipal twist, an out-of-focus Bee played Nate’s mother for a number of episodes in flashbacks.) The series quietly exists, despite the show itself never doing anything “quietly,” and has evolved so far past those original *Vacation* comparisons (even as far back as in the first season) that it’s worth wondering if it’ll ever break be able to break out of its bubble and become something of a cult hit or a late-season discovery.

Ultimately, with its mystery aspect, the way it plays with story structure, the risks it’s willing to take narratively—the best episodes of the series are when Nate and Robin tell stories of their past, on top of the stories they’re technically already telling the feds—and even the way it

changes up the living/traveling situation from season-to-season, *The Detour* is a very smart, dark series that masks itself a high-concept comedy. Yet, since its series premiere—as a show that was even renewed for Season Two before Season One even premiered—*The Detour* has never exactly been a major critical talking point when it comes to television discourse, even when the topic is underrated series. And it should be.

*The Detour* Season Four is currently airing on TBS.