

~~*Firefly's "The Train Job": Whedon's Most Unfairly Underrated Work*~~ Why "The Train Job" Is Not a Train Wreck [change requested by MAM 1.28.14]

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Joss Whedon's network-imposed, jury-rigged faux pilot "The Train Job" has long been denigrated as one of the worst episodes of *Firefly*, in sources from DeCandido's full-bore attack in Espenson's *Finding Serenity* to dozens of other critics' casual sneers, and defended by few beyond Ericson in "Humanity in a 'Place of Nothin'" in Wilcox and Cochran's *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*. Yes, it is a relatively weak episode, a mere sketch from the master. On the other hand, when the master is Joss Whedon, even a mere sketch proves worthy. In 45 minutes "The Train Job" succeeds in doing simply what the network demanded and it is greatly underrated as an introduction to this new world of science fiction television.

For several reasons, the episode deserves reconsideration. One, it contains two iconic moments of the *Firefly* 'verse: the ship rising seemingly from nowhere to rescue our sort-of heroes after the neo-Western saloon brawl, and Mal's famous disposal of a villain by shoving him through an engine. Two, it manages to connect the series to many Western tropes and traditions (see my article on "War Stories" in *Investigating* and Holder's article "I Want Your Sex" in *Finding*) to set the stage for, Three, the reconstruction of those very elements to reveal The Black as a different 'verse from that of the romantic Old Westerns and that of *Star Trek*'s scifi universe. Four, despite the simplicities of plot and exposition, the episode does quickly sketch the characters and themes of the coming episodes. For these and many other reasons, "The Train Job" is much better and less simplistic than its reputation suggests.