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Review of *Los Espookys* by Barnaby Falck

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A EULOGY FOR LOS ESPOOKYS

Review by Barnaby Falck

Armisen, Fred. Fabrega, Ana and Torres, Julio, creators. *Los Espookys*. Performances by Bernardo Velasco, Cassandra Ciangherotti, Ana Fabrega, Julio Torres and Fred Armisen, HBO Entertainment, 2019-2022. Television.

Originally this was supposed to be a review focused only on the second season of *Los Espookys* (2019-2022). It was going to largely focus on how the show started to evolve a much abrasive political and socially-minded tone in its second season, all while managing to stay true to its very light-hearted and wholesome premise. Some criticism of this second season would also be discussed, but generally the review was going to be a very positive one.

This plan changed completely after discovering that as of December 2022 the show has been cancelled. Low viewership was cited by the series' distribution network HBO as the main reason (Cordero, np). HBO's decision to cancel the show due to a 'lack' of viewership is not exactly a surprising one. In the last decade we've seen a disappointingly large amount of shows being renewed because of positive reception by fans, only to be cancelled when they do not meet the viewership expectations of the studios who commissioned them. It seems that the realms of traditional television entertainment, as well as that of streaming services, have entered into an extremely negative cycle of fan demand for and loyalty towards a wide range of shows not being able to match the budgets or sales projections of the studios producing this content. This is a reality that leaves creators feeling left out in the dust, fans disappointed, and studios constantly searching for the next 'big hit.' *Los Espookys* has unfortunately just been one of dozens of niche shows to be stopped in its tracks because of this cycle.

Because of this cancellation, the idea of crafting a review focused only on the second season of *Los Espookys* began to feel like a fruitless endeavour. Why review the second season of a show that had just been stopped dead in its tracks? This question was central to the decision to instead focus this review into being a glowing retrospective of the series as a whole – a eulogy of sorts. A somewhat melancholic attempt at potentially sparking interest in the show for those who had not seen it to solidify this wonderfully bizarre production's place in television history.

Los Espookys is delightfully absurd. The show follows the titular 'Espookys' a group of four young adults (Renaldo, Andres, Ursula, and Titi) attempting to start their own 'scaring' business, which exists to help facilitate their customer's outlandish goals of tricking or scaring people. These

range from faking an exorcism to help boost the popularity of an aging priest to setting up a haunted mansion that will whittle down the candidate of a large inheritance.

Describing the overall feeling of the show is hard to pin down into exact words, but perhaps it is best described as just being plain 'silly.' And it truly is – characters make friends with the moon, get stuck in cursed mirrors, and engage in plots to bring down corrupt national leaders. All of this is treated as being just 'matter of fact' and almost not worth paying attention to. Yet despite this surface-level indifference to its own material, the show manages to maintain an extremely solid emotional core. The central characters all look after each other in genuine ways; offering kind words of advice while also calling each other out on unjustified behaviour. Crucially, every character is treated with dignity and respect when the moment calls for it, no matter what their past actions have been.

A major reason for this strong emotional core comes from the three main creative figures behind the show (Julio Torres, Ana Fabrega, and Fred Armisen), who are all long-time friends and collaborators. Despite only running for twelve episodes in total, everything in the show feels extremely well thought out and executed, with every character undergoing a touching and believable arc. Helping to sell this impact is the central creative figures also portraying major characters within the show, lending even more credibility to the sense of familiarity and companionship that exists between various characters.

One of the most memorable parts of *Los Espookys* is Bernardo Velasco as Renaldo, the 'leader' of the 'Espookys.' Velasco portrays Renaldo as a naively idealistic person, one who always tried to see only the good in other people and who genuinely believes that all you need to succeed in life is hard work. Throughout the entire show, no matter what happens or what stresses he gets put under, Renaldo remains a beacon of sunshine. It is perhaps the little touches that Velasco adds to his performance that really help to sell this character – little 'fist-pumps' in private when something goes his way, or an enormous grin when trying to convince one of his friends to do something that they normally would not want to do. These all feed into Velasco's overall performances and in turn helps to lend a sense of lightness to the show.

Another interesting aspect of the show is its bilingualism. For the most part, the main cast speak entirely in Spanish, with English speaking characters generally being delegated to side character status. Hopefully at some point in the future, the fact that a show taking up a prime-time slot on a major United States (US) based network being aired in a language spoken as a mother tongue by thirteen percent of the country's population will not feel as remarkable as it currently does. If (or perhaps when) that does happen, *Los Espookys* should be remembered as a major stepping-stone towards such normalisation. This bilingualism seems to be an extremely important element for many people who *have* watched the show. One touching review states "It's funny how it (*Los Espookys*) accurately represents bilingualism – as Hispanics we are comfortable predominantly speaking Spanish in our daily lives, yet when it comes to business matters – we will switch to English. It is what it is" (Villalon, 2022). This use of bilingualism is not just a move towards pure linguistic representation, but rather a bold assertion of an identity that is very rarely the main focus in a

mainstream piece of media. A large amount of the show's media coverage focuses on this, with reviewer Isabella Grullon Paz stating that the show "Doesn't explain Latinx Culture to a White audience," essentially flipping the traditional relationship that English and Spanish have in North American culture (n.p.).

This unexpected switch helps to solidify *Los Espookys* as a show that is definitely American, but one that challenges existing narratives around the current 'dominant' culture of the country. A particularly hilarious example of this subversion is the depiction of the US' embassy to the unnamed country of our protagonists. This embassy is both extremely camp and bright, with an extremely diverse group of staffers who on the surface seem to promote acceptance of everybody, no matter their religion, sexuality, or economic status. While the rest of show is shot in a more down-to-earth fashion, with the characters homers looking realistic and lived in, the embassy is presented as being an extremely spacious, luxurious, and garishly coloured environment that is kept inexplicably clean. Everything shot in this embassy is orchestrated to show just how well off and rich these people are, yet also their relatively 'harmless' and harmonious nature. However, despite all this, the embassy is still dominated by a white person who is working solely to further her own interests and the interests of a capitalistic superpower that interferes in the politics of other sovereign nations.

In addition to its inherent bilingualism, the show is also extremely queer. Out of the five main characters, three of them are queer. Aside from these basic numbers, the show also actually engages with this queerness in extremely creative and funny ways. Each of these characters are given extremely well-executed and thought-provoking story beats (or indeed entire arcs) representing their various sexualities in ways that manage to both highlight these aspects of their lives, while also not making every facet of their personality linked to them. Perhaps the best example of this is the character Andres' (played by co-creator of the show Julio Torres) prospective marriage to Juan Carlos (José Pablo Minor). Both characters are heirs to incredibly wealthy family fortunes and are deeply engrained into the upper-class of their unnamed country. The relationship is portrayed as a mimicking of a traditional cis-gendered-heterosexual couple, with Juan Carlos being a traditionally 'masculine,' bread-winning figure and Andres, willingly and enthusiastically, taking on the role of the 'trophy wife (husband).' What makes this exploration of Andres' sexuality so interesting is both characters' insistence on remaining part of the cultural status quo by upkeeping 'respectable' ideals like having a traditional catholic wedding. In our real world, unfortunately, the idea of a 'traditional' catholic wedding and a homosexual wedding co-existing is an oxymoron, largely speaking. Therefore, one would assume that when this is set up at the beginning of the show that the very fact these characters want to have this kind of wedding would be used as some sort of joke. Yet this is far from the truth – this aspect of the show, unlike so many others, is played (almost) entirely straight. The resulting effect is one that is remarkably hopeful for a world in which people can practice their faith while still being true to themselves at the same time. It is a comfortingly utopian perspective and a perfect example of the show's irreverent, yet still warm, nature.

In terms of representation, *Los Espookys* is also notable for its asexual representation. Not only does *Los Espookys* include a heart-warming and non-condescending depiction of asexuality,

but it puts this front and centre, with the main character, Renaldo, being portrayed as explicitly asexual. While it is a bit disappointing to see other characters not fully accepting his sexuality (with his own mother trying to 'set him up' with women throughout the show), there are moments in the show that playfully explore his asexuality. Most memorably, there is a wonderfully performed and executed sequence in the second season which lampoons clichés that exist in pornography, while also being a moment of personal growth and discovery for Renaldo, as he comes to terms with his sexuality.

A final aspect of the show that is worth mentioning is its socially minded and politically toned, something that develops and becomes much more important in its second season. This is not to say that the first season was not political, far from it in fact. It is more that the politics of the first season are a lot more subtle, existing mostly in the background as world building (such as, as mentioned above, creating a world in which sexual minorities are allowed to practice their faith and personal values openly in tandem). However, the second season very overtly tackles such issues as US interference with other countries' domestic politics, the exploitation of the working class, the objectification of women and the corruptible nature of democratic politics. Despite this large scope of issues tackled, the show never loses its overall sense of optimism and kindness, nor does it undermine the wonderful work it does in setting up the radically tolerant world presented in its first season. Rather, it seems to be stating that society must always continue to tackle harmful elements while still celebrating the good to keep transforming the world into a more comfortable and accepting place for everyone to live in.

With its deft handling of hopeful, yet critical, representation of a much more tolerant society than our own, tongue-in-cheek presentation and irreverent yet kind storylines, *Los Espookys* feels truly like a one-of-a-kind show. While its cancellation is frustrating, hopefully, it can serve as proof that representation matters to those who experience media, while also being a beacon of hope to a diverse set of creative people – those wanting to represent their own hopes and dreams in ways that more resemble themselves rather than to any seemingly 'dominant' culture.

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BIONOTE

Barnaby Falck is a PhD researcher at the University of Lincoln, United Kingdom, within the School of Media and Cultural Studies. Their project focuses on notions of what is deemed as 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' for public viewership in modern British viewing culture. More broadly, their interests lay in discussing Horror in its many forms, transgressive, low budget and online cinema, and government intervention in national film industries. When not engaging in academic work, they take part in queer community projects in Leeds, where they live.