

Gillan also proves to be a less solid anchor for the plot's twists and turns. Playing your own double is harder than it looks; Anna Torv made it look easy in *Fringe* (2008-13). Gillan's affect as the original Sarah tends to be indistinguishable from Sarah's cloned double (which might be the point). Her deadpan delivery fuels the film's funnier moments, as when she explains her financial troubles to her fight trainer: 'Between the personal combat training, clone support, and hip-hop dance classes, money has been a little tight recently.' But when Gillan attempts to express the fuller emotional range of Sarah's story – her grief at her diagnosis, her rage at her boyfriend and mother who adapt all too quickly to the prospect of her replacement, her growing motivation to fight for the life she has – the seams in Sarah's character development emerge. Arguably, *Dual* is about Sarah cultivating meaning and, perhaps, even joy from the most ordinary and unpromising circumstances, not because of their hidden richness but because there is no other choice. Gillan is most compelling when dramatizing Sarah's tenuous sense of purpose, as when she shows off her moves in a dance class taken as part of her training. And as Sarah's double, Gillan rises to the occasion in the concluding scene, when the double breaks down, realizing all she has actually won in defeating her original. Gillan's subtle closing performance grounds either the most depressing ending yet for a Stearns film (which is saying something) or the most life-affirming (which is also saying something).

Even viewed as an episodic *mélange*, *Dual* is doubtless one of the more interesting dystopian films to come out recently, more Terry Gilliam than Suzanne Collins. It's an entertaining and ethically provocative gateway into the worlds of Riley Stearns – though it should not be your final destination.



***The Expanse* Season 6**
(creators: Naren Shankar,
Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck,
Amazon Prime Video, 2021-2)

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In a colonized future, humans have settled the Moon, Mars, the asteroid belt and some of the outer moons. Earthers are an entitled welfare-state populace; Martians are a militarized, sovereign republic; and Belters are an oppressed working class. A discovered alien artefact is exploited and weaponized, triggering conflict that disrupts the solar system's fraught and fragile political economy, opening an interstellar crossroads to other worlds, which the factions vie to exploit and control.

This is the setting for the sixth and final instalment of *The Expanse*, 'Babylon's Ashes', an adaptation of the last book from the middle trilogy of the original novel series. It explores the fallout of the opening of these ring gates, focusing on the race to colonize the alien worlds and a consequent Belter insurrection by the dispossessed. Insurrectionist Marco Inaros (Keon Alexander) orchestrates a catastrophic attack on Earth and a corresponding takeover of Belt and outer moon territories in the name of his 'Free Navy'; his campaign is supported and encouraged by rogue Martian military interests for their own ambitions and machinations.

Season 6 consists of six episodes and five vignettes. Shorter than previous *Expanse* seasons, the sprawling, kaleidoscopic novel is now a taut war story that takes some creative liberties with the source materia to make the story sing for the screen. A standalone series novella, *Strange Dogs*, is integrated and minor novel characters, such as Drummer (Cara Gee), are elevated to the delight of fans. Season 6 also adapts the polyvocal source novel by bringing back previous protagonists for cameos: pastor Anna Volovodov (Elizabeth Mitchell) and scientists Prax (Terry Chen) and Elvi Okoye (Lyndie Greenwood). Important new characters are introduced like the non-binary Nico Sanjrani (Joanne Vannicola).

Audiences wondered whether Amazon would countenance or cancel a series whose sixth instalment culminates in collective, decolonizing action to organize labour as a means to peace. Although the cancellation of a popular and acclaimed series invites speculation, the sixth book is a natural port to dock the series – and six seasons is a stellar run. Season 6 maintains the novel's immersion in nuanced, non-stereotypical imagery of labour, in details like Amos (Wes Chatham) praising the unionized working conditions on Ceres, including the brothels. Many non-action, character-deepening scenes are in everyday work settings that valorise both labour and education, as when Amos tells Clarissa (Nadine Nicole) 'Good work,' to which she replies, 'good teacher' ('Strange Dogs').

The Expanse's future setting is characterized by capitalist-realist and neo-colonial contradictions, working class ingenuity, and welfare- and police-state institutions. This setting fuels a riveting story of liberationist struggle. Based on novels published in 2015 and 2016, this season critiques the seeming hopelessness of authoritarian rule, allegorized mainly in the Belter experience, which gives voice to the real crises of colonial oppression and capitalist exploitation.

It's hard not to view this season through a pandemic lens, flavoured with the smoky air of climate emergency. Characters are visibly exhausted in a kind of bone-weary, grief-stricken fatigue that recalls the faces of medical and

frontline workers in those first, devastating waves of COVID-19. In an opening scene with Holden (Steven Strait), dark circles under his eyes accompany his hoarse voice to shocking effect. Avarasala (Shohreh Agdashloo) is likewise transformed. 'Too little, too late,' she laments in episode 6, 'the sad story of our species.' Heavy is the burden carried by the series' leaders. Reluctant, ambivalent or maniacal, there is a gnawing sense that everybody in power won't hold on to it for long, or well. Devastating attacks wreak havoc on natural and artificial environments, leaving people to perish in the cold or breathing contaminated air. There is a haunting, prescient sense that this story anticipates our current situation as excellent science fiction does.

'Peace is not won in battles,' Avarasala says at one point, 'but rather, at the negotiating table.' It's a poignant remark that speaks both to themes of labour and precarity, but also to the endless negotiation between give and take. What will I risk? Who will I protect? What price peace? With the show filmed and produced in pre-vaccine January to May 2021, it's important to recognize the risks cast and crew took. Small wonder that there is an echo of the burden of collective responsibility and vigilance present in the show. Or perhaps it's because we instinctively look for it, much in the way that media after 9/11 or literature after World War I carries extra significance. Jacques Rancière, in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008) comments that theatre audiences invoke their own translation of a performance to make meaning. The emancipated audience is, he says, 'a community of narrators and translators.' As Franck comments in his and Chatham's podcast about episode 5, science fiction is a genre that gives permission to talk about real issues 'like racism and economic disparity' without stealing from real peoples' experiences. And what *The Expanse* brings to such talk is a welcome story of open-spirited humanism, enacted by a diverse and equitably cast team of actors that embodies (as Gee comments in the same podcast) different kinds of families, leaders and futures radiant with hope.

Season 6 manages to continue *The Expanse*'s main plot, transform its source texts, and deliver an admirably apt and satisfying ending. As a narrative about the power of good people making good decisions, even at great cost to themselves, and as an allegory in search of solidarity, of 'commitment to collective action' (as Avarasala affirms), Season 6 refracts and resonates with our collective experience during a period of historic upheaval. We wonder how *The Expanse* will be reinterpreted by scholars and fans in the decades to come – but we know it will endure esteemed as classic and celebrated as canon.