

Star Trek – The Next Generation

“New Ground”

US TV series : 19 : dir. : : 40 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:

Patrick Stewart; Jonathan Frakes; Brent Spiner; LeVar Burton

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∄ M ∅	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Radio Times listing:

“Worf learns lessons about parenthood when his son arrives on the Enterprise.”

A perfect illustration of what was so basically wrong with this sequel to the original Gene Roddenberry series. The cast are OK (Worf, as the focal character in this episode, cannot be faulted), the hardware respectable, the CGI effects superior to anything the previous series could hope for, but the starship is now riddled with a putrefying disease called political correctness. Despite a subplot concerning the test of a revolutionary new drive system to supercede in-ship warp engines, the series has lost all interest in science fiction, in space travel, in the conundrums of alien life. It is wholly, sickeningly, preoccupied with the problems of 1980s (American) family life – school, parenthood, divorce, personal loss.

It's quite true, the original 1960s series also leant heavily on supposed “universal” themes – usually Kirk finding romance at every turn – to soften the bitter pill of science, but at its core it remained an SF programme for a general audience, from an age when space exploration was still a going concern. “**The New Generation**” has only the outer trappings of SF, at its core it is pure soap opera in funny masks, and the Federation exploration ship Enterprise is now, preposterously enough, teeming with civilians and schoolchildren as it “boldly goes” where no social worker has gone before.

In this instalment, good Klingon staff officer Worf (a black man with a crinkly forehead) is disconcerted when his mother arrives bringing his young son Alexander (+/-10) in tow. Alexander has been playing up at school (on Earth) and is in desperate need of – ahem – a father's hand. Mother beams off leaving widower Worf to his parental obligations. Alexander has been thieving, lying to his teachers, bullying classmates, denying all his faults, and continues this line of behaviour when he joins the Enterprise shipboard school. His teacher (female, of course) gently draws this problem to his father's attention, and Worf has a stern word with the lad, reminding him of his Klingon honour. The resident ship counsellor (female, of course) questions whether this will wholly do the trick, and wheedles on and on at Worf about how the boy perhaps felt abandoned at being left behind on Earth. Despite promises from Alexander, his bad behaviour only escalates (we get it all by description, we do not see any of it) and father finally resolves to send the boy away to a Klingon school – read military school – where the discipline can be counted on to be more effective.

The new drive system goes awry (of course), Alexander places himself in jeopardy, and Worf must rescue him From Certain Death. The boy emerges unscathed, so that the ship's doctor

(female, of course) can simper at him “You’re a very fortunate little boy!”, and then Worf offers the kid a choice between that tough Klingon school or – so very much tougher! – remaining aboard the Enterprise to work through their *ishooz* as father and son. The boy, naturally, chooses the softer option, and all live happily ever after.

The Klingons were originally conceived as a parody of the perfidious Soviets (despite the presence in the crew of resident Russkie Chekov) but in “**The New Generation**” all of that well-established background is jettisoned, and casting a black actor in the role of Worf raises the obvious suspicion (again despite the presence in the crew of resident black officer Geordie) that many of his adjustment problems are those of black people in US culture, a suspicion reinforced by son Alexander’s well-attested “bad attitude” to school and authority. The contemporary resonances in this sort of plotting are by no stretch subtle or oblique, but ponderous, laboured and in-your-face. Here it is the phasers and transporters and Star Fleet directives which are background clutter to the vexed question of How to Be a Good Parent.

Kirk and co in the 23rd century had the guardedly progressive outlook of middle-class 60s parents (the ultimate weapon of a good spanking always kept in reserve). Captain Picard and co in the 24th century are guided by all the lunatic received wisdoms of the 1980s. Alexander may lie and steal, provoke fights with his classmates and insult his teachers, but at no cost must the boy be punished for it, even by a stern Klingon dad. No, he must be *understood*, sympathised with, coaxed round by leniency and indulgence, all his misdemeanours waved away as the cries of a soul in pain. And then he must be returned to the same class where he has been bullying and stealing already, because *their* need not to be bullied and stolen from comes secondary to *his* need for acceptance. Geez, haven’t they learned **anything** by the 24th century about the fallacies of that whole approach? Just wait till they see what the 25th century has in store for them, then they’ll be sorry!

The boy guesting as Alexander is unidentified in the titles, and largely unrecognisable beneath his heavy Klingon facial prosthetics, but since he’s cast in the role of Victim (of unconscious parental rejection) he is not shown misbehaving egregiously, and has plenty of lines like “help me father, I’m scared!” or “I won’t do it again father, I promise” just so that we get the message he’s really a good kid, even if he wouldn’t win any popularity votes with his classmates – sorry, his “fellow students”. One can’t help wondering what Spock would have made of it all. He had little time for human emotions at best, and would have resigned his commission to see the Enterprise as sodden with them as a rum baba with extra syrup.

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