Cloak & Dagger's power creep is a problem for season 2

Spoilers ahead for season 1 of *Cloak & Dagger*.

Most superhero shows falter in their second season. First seasons are driven by origin stories, letting writers introduce the heroes and signature villains, and exploring the pleasures and perils that come from their power. But once evil has been punished and a crisis averted, the question is "What's next?" Should the showrunners bring back the same threat and escalate it, or introduce a new one? Do the stakes need to be increased now that the heroes are no longer novices? And if so, will the good guys need to become even more powerful to face what's next?

Every potential answer to those questions has its own pitfalls, and unfortunately, *Cloak & Dagger* seems to be struggling with how to navigate them. The Freeform show, which kicks off its new 10-episode season with two episodes airing back to back on Thursday, April 4th at 8PM ET, is struggling to balance the intimate character studies that made season 1 strong, while finding a challenge worthy of its heroes' growing powers. That conflict has only highlighted the relatively subtle problems that were already present in season 1.

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The premiere season ended with Tyrone Johnson (aka Cloak, played by Aubrey Joseph) and Tandy Bowen (aka Dagger, played by Olivia Holt) embracing their roles as the latest incarnation of the "Divine Pairing," a duo that has saved New Orleans from past crises including war, plague, and famine. The latest conflict was particularly apocalyptic, with the release of a mysterious energy being drilled up by the

nefarious Roxxon Energy Corporation sending a huge portion of the city into a fear-driven psychosis. The same energy gave Tyrone and Tandy their abilities to teleport and manifest energy daggers, and somehow, holding hands let the two of them undo the damage it did to everyone else.

Fighting supernatural threats with the power to level a city is nothing new for superhero shows like *Runaways* or *The Defenders*, but it marked a radical shift in scale for *Cloak & Dagger*. Showrunner Joe Pokaski decided to avoid supervillains in season 1, and instead confront systemic problems like police corruption and corporate greed. That made *Cloak & Dagger* feel fresh and relevant within an entertainment landscape crowded with world-shaking threats. Season 2 seems to be losing ground on that front, by using a ridiculous, well-worn supervillain trope in a plot centering around Detective Brigid O'Reilly (Emma Lahana), who was exposed to a particularly strong blast of the mysterious energy in the season 1 finale.

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Brigid has long been the show's weakest character. Aside from the pretty funny joke that she's okay working with Cloak and Dagger because she's from New York, where superheroics are more common, she's just been a poorly defined archetype: the hard-drinking, slow-to-trust good cop. Her police officer boyfriend was literally fridged last season, which was meant to be a subversion of a tired trope, but still came across as a lazy, cheap way to raise the stakes of Brigid's conflict with the corrupt Detective Connors (J.D. Evermore). Having her process her trauma through binge drinking and a supernatural threat just makes her feel more like a cliché.

Cloak & Dagger is strongest when it focuses on its main characters, and their charm and chemistry still deliver the best moments of the beginning of season 2. Their fortunes have

been largely reversed since last season, with the exposure of Roxxon's misdoings finally giving Tandy and her mother Melissa Bowen (Andrea Roth) the closure they'd been seeking since Tandy's father, Nathan Bowen (Andy Dylan), died and became a scapegoat for a deadly explosion on an offshore rig. Tandy is trying to help her formerly drug-addicted and abused mother through a fragile recovery, while working through her own unresolved issues by pushing herself to the limit in ballet practice and threatening perpetrators of domestic violence. Meanwhile, the charges that Tyrone murdered Brigid's fridged boyfriend still haven't been addressed, so he's holed up in the same abandoned church Tandy once called home. He's splitting his time between staying caught up on schoolwork, hoping he can restart his normal life, and practicing his powers by stealing from drug dealers.

The flipped dynamic gets back to the roots of the show by having Tandy and Tyrone struggle to make a difference when it comes to facing societal problems. Their heroic efforts have unforeseen consequences that lead to even more damage, exacerbated by their unwillingness to talk to each other about how they're struggling. There's one perfect distillation of the way perceptions of privilege and fear of judgment can get in the way of asking for help. In a frank conversation, Tyrone admits he didn't want to complain to Tandy about living alone in a church because she did it for so long, while Tandy admits how much she struggled during that time. When the two team up to monitor a gang summit being held at a club, their charming dynamic is perfectly summed up by Tandy ignoring the crowd and walking right in, to Tyrone's amazement. "Lines are for losers. Are you a loser, Tyrone Johnson?" she asks. "I mean, I've waited in, like, a bunch of lines before," he responds with nervous confusion.

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But their tenderness is short-lived, as a series of mysterious events start coalescing into the season's plot. More disheartening is a mini training montage where Tyrone and Tandy work to further develop their powers. Tyrone follows a path laid out by the *Cloak & Dagger* comics, and starts learning how to take people with him when he teleports. That's a particularly useful ability when fighting with a partner. But Tandy manifests the ability to channel her light into a Hadouken-style energy blast which diminishes the power that gives the character her superhero name. Letting her singlehandedly take out a rogue ambulance is evidence that the show's writers are falling into the same power-creep trap that afflicts so many superhero shows.

And that level of power escalation is likely to mar *Cloak & Dagger*'s previous appealing low-stakes style. Superhero shows can often recover from a sophomore slump, but only if their fundamentals are strong enough to keep fans on board. The fact that *Cloak & Dagger* is making the same mistake as its peers is a big problem for a show that was built on standing apart. The series started off memorably, thanks to beautiful performances by its leads, and its willingness to dig deep into big issues that even people with superpowers aren't equipped to solve. Its first-season villains were barely characters – they mostly served as figureheads for organizations that are much scarier to a pair of teens than to a character that solves problems with superpowered brawls. Teleportation and light daggers are certainly showier than emotional conversations, but Tyrone and Tandy's greatest powers so far have been their abilities to see the other people's fears and hopes. In the show's early going, that was a clever narrative device that produced powerful character development.

Even as things spiraled out of control at the end of season 1, *Cloak & Dagger*'s writers were able to deliver some surprises, like a funny and ultimately moving spin on *Groundhog Day*. The fear-zombies felt wildly out of place when they showed up, but

even they couldn’t kill the show’s creative and emotional spark. But the light that tender scenes between Tandy and Tyrone bring to the show seems dimmed this season, and the shadows of injustice just don’t seem as dark. *Cloak & Dagger* will need to get both of those powerful strengths in balance if it really wants to be able to defeat its competition.

Cloak & Dagger *returns to the Freeform network on Thursday, April 4th at 8PM ET.*

https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/27/18284279/cloak-and-dagger-season-2-review-marvel-superheroes-aubrey-joseph-olivia-holt