Marvel’s Runaways might get good once its heroes actually run away

Spoilers for Marvel’s Runaways follow.

Hulu’s 10-episode opening season of *Runaways* has been a bit of a drag. In the original Marvel *Runaways* comic, launched by writer Brian K. Vaughan and artist Adrian Alphona in 2003, six kids learn that their parents are secretly supervillains who run Los Angeles through a powerful and malevolent organization called The Pride. The kids run away, learn that most of them have some form of superhuman ability, and wind up fighting their parents in the lead-up to an event that’s supposed to destroy the world.

The Hulu series, created by Stephanie Savage and Josh Schwartz, complicated this plot with a major narrative shift: instead of taking off when they learn the shocking truth about their families, the Runaways… don’t run away, at least until the final moments of the recent series finale. Instead, the they stick around at home to investigate their parents and argue with them. Was this a good move or bad one? Where is the show headed in its recently confirmed second season? Film and TV editor Tasha Robinson and culture editor Laura Hudson discuss.

Laura Hudson: In the comics, the parents often seem more two-dimensional, and we don’t get the same sort of insight into each family or parent-child relationship, and I enjoyed digging deeper into those dynamics. But by narratively grounding the kids and forcing them to stick around at home, it also robbed the show of a lot of its momentum and left them running around in circles.

Tasha Robinson: Around episode six or so, the way the show

stretched out its initial premise started to feel like a joke to me. Like the *Simpsons* bit about "When will they get to the fireworks factory?" Once it finally sunk in that the kids really weren't going to run away until the final episode, it was a little easier to let the show unfold at its own pace. But there was certainly a mid-season slump where instead of dealing with excitable, angry teenagers with superpowers, the show focused on a bland affair between Nico's dad and Chase's mom, the two most underdeveloped of the parents. Their personalities are basically "we're having an affair," and their sex lives couldn't be more unengaging or unimportant.

By the end, the shift did pay off somewhat for me. Re-reading Vaughan and Alphona's original comics arc, the parents all came across as a sort of unrelieved blank evil mass where everyone had the same voice. I appreciated the effort by the show to give the parents different agendas and intentions, and set up conflicts between them. Most of them still strike me as pretty bland; I wish more of them were as distinctive as mad scientists Stacey and Dale Yorkes. But when they fight among themselves, there are actual currents of personal struggles and desires, instead of a cartoonish "Now we all betray each other, because Evil!" How'd you take the shift?

Laura Hudson: I was struck by how complicated and genuinely loving most of the parents are towards their children despite their villainy, particularly the Wilders. And when they aren't great parents – notably Chase's abusive father – you really feel the pain that estrangement causes within the family unit. Lots of bad people (or people who do bad things) still love their kids, and I like that we get to see the supervillain families up and down the spectrum of both evil and parental love. That's only possible because we get to spend so much time with the families, though as you note it also leads to some boring b-plots; in another frustrating moment the kids spend episode after episode trying to get a hold of an incriminating video of their parents – only for Chase to

destroy it for Reasons because the plot wasn't ready to move forward.

I suspect that there will be plenty of flashbacks to the families in season two and it's good to have that grounding, but I still wish they'd made the jump sooner – I often felt like the kids were just treading water and waiting for the finale to act on their motivations, and thus so was I.

I often felt like the kids were just treading water and waiting for the finale to act on their motivations, and thus so was I.

Tasha Robinson: Chase destroying the decoded video to protect his dad didn't bother me. If anything, I appreciate how *Runaways* is dealing with the struggle of having a parents who is a charismatic, respected abuser, especially when you've been groomed to want their approval. Chase whipsawing between hating his dad and defending him seems more plausible than a lot of the relationships on this show. What bothered me was how quickly that plotline blew over. Chase physically assaults Alex, destroys his computer, and eradicates Nico's chance of avenging her sister. Then he offers an unconvincing "sorry," and it's forgotten a minute later. Come on. Real teenagers hold grudges, and this kind of physical and emotional abuse lingers. My best friend in high school once didn't speak to me for a week because a comment I made about one of his test scores hurt his feelings.

If nothing else, the group should have shut Chase out for a while, given the high likelihood of him sabotaging anything else they were working on. If the show has time to watch Gert play a video game with a bodyguard, or fuss over her not making enough time for the feminist student group she started, it has time to deal with a major breach of trust between its protagonists. That sums up a lot of my problem with the early going of the show – it puts too much focus on trivial details, and not enough time on its own major plot movements, like making the Robert / Janet affair interesting.

Laura Hudson: Yeah, a lot of things were presented or teased as major developments, only to fizzle out or disappear as if they'd never happened. But there were also new additions to the story that I found compelling, like the murder mysteries around Molly's parents and Nico's sister. I suspect they were added to give us more to chew on in the stay-at-home setting, but they worked. On the other hand, I didn't really buy the romance between Chase and Gert, I like the idea of it – why can't the nerdy girl get the hot guy after 50 billion stories where it works the other way around – but in execution it felt kind of forced. In general, I agree that they pushed too hard in too many directions romantically, too fast. Although these kids talk constantly about how they've known each other forever, it doesn't feel that way to us, and the show burns through so many potential romances before we can build up any real investment. I did like, instead of the rejection she got in the comics, Karolina began to explore a romance with Nico, which felt like a resolution for all of her anxieties about being her authentic self – queer, some kind of alien, not a Scientologist anymore.

Tasha Robinson: I'm just not feeling any of the teen romance on this show, personally. There's a little too much incestuous intra-group longing, especially given that at the start of the series, these guys mostly hate each other, or seem to have forgotten each other. I'm all for acknowledging that the high school years are a sexually and romantically hungry and confusing time, and that a bunch of teenagers pressed together under stressful circumstances might see it turning hormonal. But most of the romantic writing here seems really clumsy and bald to me – particularly Gert's one-note, repetitive pursuit of Chase, who as far as I can tell has no positive attributes whatsoever except a strong jawline. She's meant to be a smart, expressive, verbal character – is it too much to ask for the show to take a moment to ask *why* she likes him? At least with Karolina and Nico, we get a few seconds of them bonding over makeup. But even so. To invest in an on-screen relationship,

especially a problematic and complicated one, I've got to have some idea of what these characters see in each other, apart from "this show needs makeouts."

I'm just not feeling any of the teen romance on this show
The Amy suicide / murder plotline, that may be my favorite invention of the series. It sets the stakes for the other kids — their own parents might stand up for them no matter what, but other Pride members don't value them the same way. It creates a sharp and obvious reason for the Pride kids to have splintered and started avoiding each other. It creates an early mystery and drives a compelling wedge between the Runaways and their parents. Then there's Jonah, this series' very own John Locke, or possibly its Secret Satan. I'm mostly in favor of him because he's one more level up in the Continuity of Evil the show is establishing. He gets to an almost cartoonish level, because he's not human, and odds are that he serves something even less human.

Laura Hudson: But even he seems to have real affection for his daughter (though that doesn't stop him from blasting her with his alien powers in that final confrontation). I think the relationship between him and Karolina's mom is also really interesting — initially we see real love between them, but by the finale she seems actively afraid of him and what he might do. Also curious to see how the Stein family handle the aftermath of the physical abuse by Professor Spike once he wakes up — will his wife take him back? Will Chase give him another chance? And how much of his horrible behavior was him or the brain tumor (and does it matter)?

Tasha Robinson: Chase will keep giving him chances as long as that provokes drama, but I'm more curious how human Professor Spike (heh) is going to be after the experience. (I'm picturing something like The Mountain finally coming back on *Game of Thrones*.) Also, what Jonah needs him for, since he was pretty specific about Victor being necessary for the next step. I'm also curious whether Frank Dean has any redeeming

value. Could he be playing a deep game in getting close to Jonah, in order to betray him later? (He’s an actor, after all. We’ve all seen *Team America: World Police.*)

But more than any specific leftover plot thread, I’m curious whether *Runaways* can keep up the stride it finally hits by the last two episodes. What I’m hoping for in the second season is really less of the parents, less of the church, less of the romance, and more of the Runaways. (Even if they rejected that name for themselves, as a big, glaring meta in-joke.) I’m ready for them to make their clumsy forays into fighting crime, to meet Topher (or have equivalent defining adventures), and to become the superheroes they are. Basically, I’m ready for less talk and more action.

Laura Hudson: Amen.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/11/16879936/marvel-runaways-finale-season-2