Review: Snowpiercer starts slow and builds to intense cliffhanger finale

reader comments

24 with 23 posters participating

Share this story

- Daveed Diggs co-stars as Andre Layton, with Jennifer Connelly as Melanie Cavill.
- The titular *Snowpiercer* is a giant train carrying the survivors of a climate apocalypse.
  YouTube/TNT
- Melanie is the Voice of the Train.
  YouTube/TNT
- Sending messages through pneumatic tubes!
  YouTube/TNT
- Layton is asked to investigate a murder.
  YouTube/TNT

- The first-class passengers live in luxury.
  YouTube/TNT
- Indoctrinating kids into the train's social hierarchy starts early.
  YouTube/TNT
- The cold can be deadly.
  YouTube/TNT
- Melanie checks in with the "nightclub" car.
  YouTube/TNT
- Fighting for freedom.
  YouTube/TNT
- A shadowy figure in the snow flurries.
  YouTube/TNT
- The train goes on. And on.
  YouTube/TNT

Snowpiercer debuted Sunday night on TNT, and Deadline reports more than 3 million viewers tuned in, making it the cable network's best showing since its adaptation of *The Alienist* in 2018. Whether those viewers will stick around for all 10 episodes of this first season remains to be seen. This is one of those slow-burn shows that takes a while to build, which could try viewers' patience. But that patience is rewarded when everything kicks into high gear for the final few episodes, ending on one last cliffhanger twist.

(Mild spoilers below, but no major reveals.)

Snowpiercer is essentially a reboot of the critically acclaimed 2013 film by Oscar-winning director Bong Joon-ho (*Parasite*), fleshed out into a full-length series. Bong's film itself was an adaptation of a 1982 French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige*, about remnants of humanity trying to survive an ice age inside a 1,001-car train. The train is run by a reclusive transportation magnate named Mr. Wilford, who has separated the passengers according to class and has a nefarious plan to ensure life on the train remains sustainable.

The film starred Chris Evans as revolutionary leader Curtis, with Tilda Swinton as second-in-command Minister Mason. Bong shot much of it on a specially constructed set: a train mounted on a giant gyroscopic gimbal, the better to mimic the movements of an actual train. *Snowpiercer* earned critical raves and went on to gross $86 million worldwide against a roughly $40 million production budget.

TNT's series is set seven years after the climate catastrophe that produced the ice age. Daveed Diggs (*Hamilton, Blindspotting*) plays Andre Layton, a prisoner at the tail end of the train who gets caught up in a revolutionary struggle against the imposed social hierarchy abroad *Snowpiercer*. Jennifer Connelly (*Alita: Battle Angel*) co-stars as first-class passenger Melanie Cavill, who is the Voice of the Train, responsible for daily public announcements and the train's smooth operation (both mechanically and socially). The show's large ensemble cast also includes Alison Wright (*The Americans, Castle Rock*) as Lilah Anderson, who works in the train's spa, and Mickey Sumner (*The Borgias*, and daughter of musician Sting) as brakeman Bess Till, whose recent move to second class to be with her romantic partner is threatened when she starts to question the train's status quo.

Bong Joon-ho's film is a juggernaut of almost nonstop action, as the lowest-class passengers revolt and fight their way to the head of the train, with Curtis leading the way. The TV adaptation necessarily takes a more leisurely approach, given S1's 10 episodes, fleshing out the details of life aboard the train, along with bits of expository backstory. And it introduces an onboard mystery: Layton is tapped to investigate a brutal murder that just might be the work of a serial killer—like a dystopian version of *Murder on the Orient Express*.

- A new day dawns abroad *Snowpiercer*.
- Rise and shine!

YouTube/TNT

- Work is one of Mr. Wilford’s three principles (along with honor and order).
  YouTube/TNT
- Onboard evening entertainment.
  YouTube/TNT
- Alison Wright plays Lilah Anderson, who has higher aspirations
  YouTube/TNT
- Meanwhile, rebellion is brewing.
  YouTube/TNT
- Preparing for an attack.
  YouTube/TNT
- Mickey Sumner plays Bess Till, a brakeman and part of the train’s security force.
  YouTube/TNT
- Layton finds his inner rebel.
- A scene of carnage.
  YouTube/TNT

I enjoyed how the series spent time on many of the day-to-day details of life aboard *Snowpiercer* in all the classes, from dealing with energy limitations and unexpected constraints on food sources to the black-market bartering and drug trade and various interpersonal conflicts among passengers. So-called “Tailies”—the unticketed refugees in the tail of the train—are punished for insubordination by having an arm stuck through a portal into the cold outside until it freezes solid and is shattered off. There’s also a prison car whose occupants are kept in suspension, although the drug used to maintain that state has some serious side effects.

It’s the cast that ultimately makes *Snowpiercer* work, most notably Jennifer Connelly as Melanie, whose brisk, professional, tightly controlled veneer is gradually stripped away to reveal a woman haunted by personal loss and the hard decisions she’s had to make to keep the train running for

seven years. *Snowpiercer* presents one continuous Trolley Problem, where those in charge must regularly consider sacrificing a few—sometimes quite a few—lives to save everyone else. Needless to say, the first-class passengers rarely have to make those sacrifices.

Equally compelling is Wright's scheming, manipulative Lilah, who has an unhealthy obsession with the mythic Mr. Wilford and a chilling ruthlessness when it comes to maintaining order. She would like nothing more than to replace Melanie as the Voice of the Train, and she isn't above exploiting the building unrest to achieve that goal. Summer brings just the right blend of toughness and vulnerability to Bess Till. Diggs has a tougher job making Layton likeable; he's a bit preachy and self-righteous. But his affection for a young boy named Miles (Jaylin Fletcher), and Miles' foster mother Josie (Katie McGuinness), softens the character considerably.

The show has a few cons. The obligatory voiceovers before each episode can get annoying, and the dialogue is a bit hackneyed in places. Plus, the murder-mystery subplot isn't particularly compelling and is mostly an excuse to get Layton out of the tail so he can do a bit of reconnaissance on behalf of the brewing rebellion.

On the whole, however, this is a solid, entertaining series that sets the stage for an even stronger second season. TNT greenlighted a second season before the pilot premiered, hence the cliffhanger finale, although it might be a while before we can continue the story. Production of S2 began last October, and principal photography was nearly complete when the production was forced to shut down in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

New episodes of *Snowpiercer* will air Sunday nights at 9pm ET on TNT.

Listing image by TNT

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1676632