

The Good Place lands a punch to the gut in S3 finale with yet another reset

Enlarge / Kristen Bell plays Eleanor Shellstrop, a former “Arizona trash bag” of a human being trying to become a better person in the afterlife.

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After wowing audiences for two pitch-perfect seasons, season 3 of *The Good Place* got off to an uncharacteristically bumpy start. But even a less-than-perfect *The Good Place* is still a delight, and later episodes recaptured the magic that earned the series a spot on the Ars list of our favorite TV shows of 2018. The season 3 finale gave us yet another reboot to the basic premise, and it broke a few hearts in the process.

(Spoilers for first three seasons of *The Good Place* below.)

The Good Place has always kept us guessing, from the pilot episode in which Eleanor (Kristen Bell) realizes she’s been admitted to paradise by mistake, to that shocking twist in the Season 1 finale that turned the original premise on its head.

Amid the usual hilarious hijinks—can we ever forget Michael’s (Ted Danson) brilliant-but-bloody simulation of the Trolley Problem?—season 2 dug deep into the question of whether it is possible for a damned soul to become a better person after death, via the study of moral philosophy. Name one other

sitcom that features classroom lectures on Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, Aristotle, Kierkegaard, and T.M. Scanlon's seminal text *What We Owe Each Other*.

That season ended with another radical reset: Judge Gen (Maya Rudolph) gives Eleanor, Chidi (William Jackson Harper), Tahani (Jameela Jamil), and Jason (Manny Jacinto) one more chance to become better people on Earth.

So demon-turned-human-ally Michael is allowed to head to Earth and save Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani, and Jason from their ignominious original deaths. Eleanor and the others all really did *try* to become better people at first, but 21st century life is complicated and humans are fallible. A frustrated Michael broke the Judge's rules and intervened again, orchestrating events to bring the Fab Four back together in Sydney, Australia—ostensibly to study how a brush with death can change someone's behavior and thought processes. (Shout-out to Danson's many terrible disguises and bad accents to keep from being found out.)

- Back on Earth, Chidi (William Jackson Harper) forms a romantic attachment to his research partner, Simone (Kirby Howell-Baptiste).
Justin Lubin/NBC
- The demon Trevor (Adam Scott) infiltrates the research group to sabotage the experiment and ensure the four humans end up in the Bad Place.
Ron Batzdorff/NBC
- Tahani (Jameela Jamil) gets engaged to her former flame, the “lesser” Hemsworth brother, Larry (Ben Lawson).
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Chidi has a meltdown and turns \$880 worth of candy into “chili” in his classroom.
Colleen Hayes/NBC
- Eleanor finds out her mother Donna (Leslie Grossman) is still alive and living in suburbia under an assumed

name.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Tahani confronts her sister Kamilah (Rebecca Hazlewood) about their fractured, competitive relationship.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Jason (Manny Jacinto) tries to save his father, Donkey Doug (Mitch Narito), and BFF Pilboi (Eugene Cordero).

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Michael (Ted Danson) and Janet (D'Arcy Carden) visit Doug Forcett (Michael McKean), who has lived his entire life by the afterlife's points system.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Jason teaches Chidi how to play "Jacksonville"-style pool.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Janet takes out the horde of demons come to kidnap the humans.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- The Soul Squad finally makes it to the Good Place—or at least the mailroom.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Stephen Merchant guest-stars as Head Accountant Neil.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- The humans are whisked off to Janet's void, where they all take on the form of Janet.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Judge Gen (Maya Rudolph) hashes out a compromise solution with Michael.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- The demon Shawn (Marc Evan Jackson) and Michael tell the Soul Squad about their new compromise.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- The gang decides to recreate the original experiment in Mindy St. Clair's (Maribeth Monroe) Medium Place.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Janet's former boyfriend that she created on the rebound, Derek (Jason Mantzoukas) has come a long way

under Mindy's tutelage.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Michael prepares to welcome four new residents.

Colleen Hayes/NBC

- Soulmates across multiple timelines: can Eleanor and Chidi find each other one more time?

Colleen Hayes/NBC

Bringing its main characters back to Earth was a bold move by the writers, and I initially had doubts the gamble would pay off. The first few episodes were a bit lackluster; Earth just isn't as interesting as the crazy surreal illogic of the show's brilliant conception of the afterlife. But I should have trusted there was a bigger plan. The "Soul Squad" (as they later dub themselves) soon learns the truth of their predicament, and the Earthbound experiment is technically over. They are doomed to go to the Bad Place when they die (again), per the Judge's terms. (Chidi's response is to have a meltdown in front of his class by making "chili" out of Peeps and candy, while summarizing virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontology, and nihilism.)

Since they are doomed, the Soul Squad decides to try and save their wayward friends and families instead, helping them earn enough points to get to the Good Place. Along the way, Michael learns that no human has earned enough points to get into the Good Place for over 500 years and suspects the system is rigged. (As always with *The Good Place*, the truth is a bit more complicated—and far more intriguing.)

In negotiations at the neutral Interdimensional Hole of Pancakes (IHOP), Michael convinces the Judge to repeat the original experiment of season 1 with four new mediocre humans, chosen by the Bad Place. The Soul Squad (now dead again and back in the afterlife) will be on hand to assist. But there's always a catch when the Bad Place gets involved, and this one is particularly heartbreaking for fans of the Eleanor-Chidi soulmate coupling. Chidi must be rebooted along with

everything else, which will remove his memories of Eleanor.

It remains to be seen how much further the writers can take the show's premise.

As always, there were several instant-classic moments, like Eleanor and Michael debating determinism and free will. When Janet (D'Arcy Carden) whisks everyone off to her void, they all take on her appearance, causing Eleanor to have an identity crisis and giving Chidi the perfect opportunity to pontificate on the philosophy of the self. (It's quite a performance from Carden, who must mimic each character's idiosyncrasies.) And how could we forget Michael's mind-bending mini-tutorial about how time isn't linear in the afterlife? Apparently it "doubles back and loops around," and the resulting timeline just happens to look like the signature of the name "Jeremy Bearimy." (The dot over the "i" is Tuesdays. And also July. And occasionally never.) "I don't know what to tell you," Michael says to the bemused crew. "That's the easiest way to describe it."

I'm 100 percent on board for season 4 now that the Soul Squad is back in the afterlife and we can get back to all the cheesy puns and comic absurdity of that eternal realm. (As a promo for the season's last few episodes, the show's YouTube channel live-streamed five hours of Janet in her Void, occasionally poofing away to do a task before returning.)

It remains to be seen how much further the writers can take the show's premise. There's only so many times you can reboot everything until it stops feeling fresh and daring and starts to feel ho-hum. But the writing is so fresh and the philosophical rumination so sharp and witty that I don't foresee *The Good Place* losing any fans in the near future.

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