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How genre shows like ‘Stranger Things’ are shaping TV



Kayvan Novak as Nandor in “What We Do in the Shadows.” (Pari Dukovic/FX)

By RANDEE DAWN

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No question: Genre shows have been having a banner decade. “Game of Thrones” won Emmys for top drama series four times. “[Mr. Robot](#),” “[The Handmaid’s Tale](#)” and “[American Horror Story](#)” are regular nominees. Amid peak TV’s ongoing moment, on every platform, science fiction, fantasy and horror regularly get the prestige treatment.

But there's something ... lacking. And if you ask Seth MacFarlane, creator and star of Hulu's "[The Orville](#)," it can be summed up in one word: pies.

"There were brief moments of levity from [Peter] Dinklage in 'Game of Thrones,' but something like 'The Handmaid's Tale' — that's more the norm," he says. "I love it, but every once in a while I think, 'Could someone just throw a pie?'"

Of course, it's not really about hurled baked desserts; what he's talking about are laughs. Truly effective storytelling — particularly when it's futuristic, scary or violent — benefits from moments of absurdity or self-reflective guffaws. And the good news for those who've found genre TV becoming a little too self-important is that we are increasingly seeing a few metaphorical pies being thrown, thanks to shows like "Orville," HBO's "[Avenue 5](#)," Netflix's "[Stranger Things](#)," FX's "[What We Do in the Shadows](#)" and even in some respects, IFC's "[Sherman's Showcase](#)." And for many viewers, including genre-loving geeks, it's about time.

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"Some of this stuff is inherently silly if you think about it," says [Jemaine Clement](#), executive producer of "What We Do in the Shadows," a spoofy docu-horror series expanded from the 2014 feature of the same name he made with executive producer [Taika Waititi](#). "There's all these rules, and they don't make much sense. One early idea we had was about ghosts. Like, why do they even have clothes?"

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Funny business has more than one job in truly scary supernatural situations, says [Ross Duffer](#), who with his brother Matt created and executive produces "Stranger Things."

The show's third season in particular dialed up the humorous elements, he noted in an email.

"Humor has always worked really well with horror," he writes. "The audience can become so scared that they laugh to relieve the tension. So it's nice to offer them that relief, to give them permission to laugh and have fun in the midst of all that darkness."

It's telling that after concluding "Veep," creator-executive producer [Armando Iannucci](#) pivoted into space with "Avenue 5." "I wanted to look at serious issues, but by using the metaphor of a cruise ship in space," he says. "That meant it would have to be bitterly funny. Comedy gives you a freedom to come at a subject from an unexpected angle. Most anything dealing with science fiction and the future is about the present anyway, and how we behave."

MacFarlane suggests that while directors like Steven Spielberg nailed the combination of humor and genre in films like "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" in the 1980s, the most recent trend into the funny genre picked up after the 2014 feature "[Guardians of the Galaxy](#)" became such a big hit. "People wanted to figure out what the television manifestation of that would be," he says. "People were ready for something that was a little more balanced."

On "Sherman's Showcase," genre and comedy are woven together in subtle but persistent ways. The series, which presents as an infomercial for a "[Soul Train](#)"-esque variety series, takes repeated detours into every genre possible, but most especially into science fiction, fantasy and horror (creators-stars-executive producers Bashir Salahuddin and Diallo Riddle are big fans).

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But they couldn't have gotten a green light for the concept 10 years ago, says Salahuddin. "We got resistance for black ideas of all kinds, much less science fiction and fantasy," he says. "We'd take things around town and they'd say, 'Do something like [Friday](#).'" With 'Sherman's,' we have a back door where we can put in science-fiction elements without pitching a science-fiction show. The goal was always to go beyond expectations of what a black sketch show could be."

So while pies aren't getting thrown yet, it does appear that the comedy genre is having its own moment on TV. "The massive success of genre shows in general seems to have opened the door for writers to try all sorts of things in the genre space," writes Matt Duffer.

And it's a long way from when he and Ross were getting turned down all over town while pitching "Things." "Other companies didn't understand the tone," writes Ross. "In their minds, it either had to be a straight-up sci-fi detective show starring Police Chief Jim Hopper — or a kids' adventure show targeted at preteens. But what we love about writing this show is that it can juggle many genres at the same time."

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