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TNT

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“Off Duty”

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A “Off Duty” [Southland]

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Southland is a rolling boulder: it’s been slowly gaining momentum since 2009, going faster as faster, getting better and better. It has hit a few peaks in its run—“The Winds” showed that it could thrive on TNT, “Legacy” was the most compelling character study of John Cooper—but the first half of the fifth season shows a police drama in full control of what it wants to say. “Off Duty” is the pinnacle of *Southland*’s abilities, a flawless hour of television that doesn’t waste a single scene, constantly advancing a theme through plot and characterization. This is the single greatest episode that *Southland* has ever produced, and it’s fitting that Regina King directed it. (It’s just a bonus that this is the first of two episodes written by Zack Whedon this season.)

King, Whedon, Director of Photography Dana Gonzales, and Editor Russell Denove all deserve the highest praise for constructing an episode this airtight, one that spares no extra material. Take two nondescript scenes in the episode with no obvious connection. Ben sees his old “friend” Drew outside a restaurant, and has to awkwardly decide how to introduce Brooke. At first, Ben calling Brooke his girlfriend seems like the significant detail, not that Drew used to sell pot, and implies he’s upgraded since the old days. Later, Sammy gets called to talk with the captain, and Ben stays with an arrest for booking, and an officer in a white shirt wearing his badge around his neck walks by. The two scenes come together as Sammy and Ben bring in their gear for the day, and the officer from the latter shot brings Drew into the station wearing handcuffs—a major drug bust.

King’s direction, combined with Denove’s editing and Gonzales’ cinematography, highlights minute and seemingly insignificant details, and uses them for foreshadowing. It’s a hint, a tap on the shoulder that tells the viewer, “Remember this for later.” It doesn’t spell anything out or hit viewers over the head, merely suggests possibilities the episode later fulfills.

Everything that happens to John Cooper in this episode points him toward retirement. At the beginning of the episode, trading stories with his old TO played by Gerald McRaney (who’s just about perfect for that grizzled bit part), Cooper has something on

his mind. Why else would he blow off an invitation to a Lakers game or another round of beers, then linger just past the doorway, looking at his friend. When he and Lucero respond to a call of a disoriented elderly woman crying by the street, Cooper finds her husband, dead, decomposing for nine months, in the bathroom: The woman has dementia, thought her husband was an intruder, and hit him with a hammer. The idea that a man can be missing for nine months troubles Cooper, and it sticks in his brain.

But it's the action centerpiece of the episode that really sends Cooper into a tailspin of introspection. Dewey calls for backup in a high-speed chase, and Cooper helps to corner the guy. While chasing him down on foot, we arrive at the most haunting shot of the episode: Cooper in silhouette, running down a dark and silent tunnel, yelling after Dewey, and finding him prone on a pedestrian bridge, suffering a heart attack. Cooper performs CPR and gets him to the hospital, but he's so shaken that all he can say to Lucero is, "I've known Dewey a long time." His clouded mind leads to an unusually haphazard altercation at a money exchange, where Lucero pushes a large man, knocking him over on top of Cooper, who reinjures his back.

Dewey functions as a release valve for tension on *Southland*, and nothing exemplifies that better than the scene in the hospital where Cooper check in on him. Dewey, surrounded by his wife and two daughters, juxtaposed against Cooper, who gingerly touches his ex-wife's cheek, wondering what could have been between them, and whether he'll leave a legacy behind, someone to check on him if he goes missing for nine months. And then Dewey makes a joke about Cooper slipping him tongue during CPR, and poof, a laugh dissipates the tension.

I don't normally advocate like this, but Michael Cudlitz deserves Emmy recognition for his work over the past two seasons. Regina King carried this series when it had a bigger cast, but pared down, Cudlitz towers over everyone else with his performance.

In an episode that packs so many standout scenes together it's hard to distinguish between them, my favorite might be the unexpected and unfettered reunion of Cooper and Sherman. Sammy blows off the bar celebration, and Cooper merely wants to wind down after a tough day, and for some reason, Ben goes over to chat with his old TO. They don't talk much anymore, that much is clear, and they both approach the conversation tentatively because of their history. It starts out genially, but they pick away at each other, Cooper trying to give advice, which frustrates Ben, who retaliates by bringing up the question of whether Cooper should be drinking. There's no big confrontation, no yelling match, and no significant reconciliation. These men didn't get along when working together in a TO-trainee environment, and they still view each other with a certain amount of contempt. But what sticks with me about that scene is just how similar Cooper and Sherman are to each other. They both have innate self-destructive tendencies. Cooper may be holding his demons at bay, but he's starting to wonder whether he can really press his luck any longer, and thinking about just how empty his life is around the job. Sherman, on the other hand, can't resist tempting fate and ruining a fledgling successful relationship. When he answers a phone call in the bar and smiles, we think it's Brooke, from the familiarity in his voice. He leaves, and the camera lingers on Cooper, picking at his beer bottle, utterly alone in the world, and Sherman passes out the door, echoing the first scene between John and his old TO. But in the final montage, Ben meets up with the painter girl, the sister of the guy he and Sammy caught early on in the episode, the girl he watched changing. Old habits die hard, and Ben is nothing if not a womanizing prick with a god complex. One day that's going to catch up to him, and dating two women will accelerate that date.

Ben is so wrapped up in his own world, in his own invincibility and arrogance that he hardly notices Sammy is on the verge of drowning. Now moonlighting as a bodyguard for the extra money, he's not all together in his right mind. Though he does heroically tackle a manic shooter walking down a busy street—reminiscent of the [2011 incident on Sunset](#)—Sammy spurns the spotlight, sticking to the idea he's just doing his job, basically the exact opposite of Ben's lap-it-up reaction to a small bit of fame.

In another brilliant moment of direction and cinematography, Ben and Sammy chide each other about media attention, and the

camera rack focuses to the car trailing behind them, a paparazzi, while Sammy and Ben both say the word “focus” over and over. A few minutes later, that car nearly runs them over as they pursue a suspect on foot. Though Ben insists on laughing about the altercation with Tami, Sammy’s ex-wife won’t let the assault charges go—he needs a union rep to deal with Internal Affairs. Ben doesn’t take any of this seriously, he just wants to celebrate the drug bust, Sammy’s flash-in-the-pan tabloid celebrity. Sammy’s tearful phone call, pleading with Victor to let him apologize to Tami, goes nowhere. He ends the episode standing on the roof, surrounded by police cars, looking at the Los Angeles skyline. It’s foreboding, and eerily suicidal.

Finally, there’s Lydia and Ruben. Thought they don’t get any big cases to investigate, Lydia has a flight to Arizona for a final meeting with a death row inmate, a serial killer she captured by sheer luck in Los Angeles as a P1. Throughout the day she and Ruben basically just talk—which turns out to be a good mode for Ruben. Lydia and Cooper are alike in that they can be so dominating that they’re best when supported and occasionally challenged by a partner, not dividing authority equally. Their conversations meander throughout the day, from the cops coming up to congratulate her on the inmate’s impending execution (one of his victims was an off-duty cop), to the death penalty in the abstract, to Lydia’s pen-pal relationship to the inmate.

The plot isn’t rumination on the morality of the death penalty. Both Ruben and Lydia support it when a line has been crossed. It’s about Lydia’s inability to open up, to connect, to trust anyone around her. She puts more information into letters sent to a serial killer, a man with no future, than she tells to anyone with stability in her life. Though she says her goal is to extract the location of other victims’ bodies from the inmate, he wants something more: confirmation of their connection. When she cedes that, by saying her son’s name in close-up, staring directly into the camera, it’s heartbreaking. Sure, it’s a bit self-indulgent of King to use not one, but two lengthy close-ups of her own face, but she plays Lydia so stoically, so unflinchingly, that it’s nearly impossible to know just what she’s thinking. The final shot of the episode shows her success, but sooner or later, Lydia has to confront the fears she won’t share with anyone else.

I love *Southland* for a lot of reasons, but personally, the most important is that I can talk about it with my father, who grew up in Burbank. He watches *Breaking Bad*, *Justified*, and *Downton Abbey* (with some encouragement from my mother), but I get the most enjoyment out of talking to him about *Southland* a show that depicts the city where he grew up, where he can observe the changes on screen. While talking to him about “Off Duty,” he opined that the reason he likes *Southland* so much is that the show goes to great lengths to humanize every officer, to depict them as psychologically capable of the same kinds of things as the people they’re chasing every day. The line between cop and criminal may be presented as thick, but they’re still right next to each other.

Late in the episode, Sammy tells a story about a case he worked where an 80-year-old woman was found with a bullet through her head, and no leads at all. The case kept him up for a year and a half. “The nice think about patrol: when the day is over, it’s over. Clean slate every day.” But as the opening voiceover recounts the LAPD saying, “Leave the job in the locker with your uniform. It’s easier said than done.” The most memorable sequences in *Southland* are often the big, flashy, violent action scenes, with edge-of-your-seat tension. But that’s almost impossible to maintain for an entire episode. “Off Duty” strings together the strongest, most consistent episode of *Southland* ever, and one that gets to the core of its main characters. Michael Cudlitz, Shawn Hatosay, C. Thomas Howell, Regina King, and Ben McKenzie are the top-billed actors in every episode, and Whedon’s script gives each of them a harrowing moment, one that challenges them, breaks them open. In this hour, they are more than up to the challenge. They excel.

Stray observations:

- More evidence of Ben Sherman being a dick: bitching to Sammy to get the paparazzi to lay off when they’re almost run over by a tailing car; insulting Sammy’s decision to move back to patrol officer after making detective.
- Dewey doesn’t get more emotionally affecting than when he says, “How many do I owe you now, man?” to Cooper. He’s got brass balls and acts like a clown most of the time, but he’s human, just like the rest of them.
- Would Sherman be more of a pain-in-the-ass, arrogant prick as a detective or as a patrol officer?