

Agents of SHIELD meets its "End"

It took only a week for me to catch the Season 5 finale of [Agents of SHIELD](#), fittingly called "The End". It was pretty fantastic, actually, even if it barely tied into the Avengers flick. *Agents of SHIELD* has been the little show that could, toiling away while the MCU bounces from spectacle to spectacle.

Spoilers, of course.

The finale -- which was intended as the series finale, before a last-minute reprieve for a shortened Season 6 -- works really well. There have been several arcs throughout the five seasons, and most are paid off. Phil Coulson's entire mission has been to assemble teams; it's what he does. After several detours and missteps, he's finally done it: Brought into being a core, reliable team. Having done that, he can step off into the sunset, knowing he's safeguarded SHIELD's mission for the foreseeable future.

And that mission? Saving people. From the first episode, the show has been

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consistent that SHIELD's first, best purpose is protecting the ordinary people from extraordinary threats. In a nice nod to [Avengers: Age of Ultron](#) (where SHIELD arrives to rescue the people of Sokovia), when the agents arrive in Chicago (currently suffering the rampage of Graviton), their first instinct is to rescue the ordinaries stranded in the crossfire. It is, after, an organization named SHIELD, not "sword" or "gun". There have been times when that mission got fuzzy or even lost, but at the end, the writers pull it back together.

It wouldn't be a Whedon show without a sudden, irksome, random death of a sympathetic main character, of course, and in this one, it's Fitz who gets the axe. After conclusively turning his back on the darker edges he'd grown this season and last (including an ends-justify-the-means philosophy that matches the Big Bad's), Fitz is unceremoniously crushed and chopped in half by random debris. Given the final blooming of the slow-burn romance between him and Simmons, it was particularly Whedon-esque. But this show was directed by **Jed** Whedon, not **Joss** Whedon, so there's an out: We know there's a version of Fitz in stasis on the long orbit, taking the slow path to the future that's now been obviated. So though one dies, the first mission of the new SHIELD will be to find and rescue the remaining Fitz. (This possibly explains why the writers put Fitz on the slow path to begin with, rather than have him catapulted to the future with the rest of the team. That would be a long game indeed.)

This timey-wimey stuff gives the writers an irresistible opportunity to pull a fake-out, leading the audience to imagine that we're seeing Fitz's wake when in fact they're showing us Coulson's retirement. It's a good scene, that ties up the themes of the series in a neat bow and leaves just enough wiggle room for the next season. Coulson delivers a moving speech, and then Simmons gets to upstage him. (Elizabeth [Henstridge](#) has really grown into an excellent actor, who sells the deep pain and loss Simmons has suffered without coming off as weepy or weak.)

The actual final battle with Talbot/Graviton is a bit underplayed, owing (I'm sure) to the very reduced budget of any TV show compared to a feature film. Nonetheless, this episode felt organic to the MCU. This was like a small-screen *Avengers* flick: Superpowered threat (Graviton) to a major American city (Chicago), with the requisite damage to the local infrastructure. Off-handed references to the "trouble in New York" and (last week) to Thanos helps make clear why the actual Avengers

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don't show up to handle this threat. After building up Graviton into a truly world-ending threat, they do a good job resolving the plotline without it feeling cheap or deus ex machinistic.

I like that, although the final fight is fought and won by Daisy/Quake, it's really Phil J. Coulson whose foresight and intelligence win the day. In a world of superbeings, it's easy to wonder what the ordinary humans bring to the table -- and Coulson, for me, has always been the shining example. He can't outfly or outpunch all the threats, but he can out-think and out-heart them, and I like that. When the show started, five years ago, Daisy threatened to descend into Mary Suedom, where every episode told us how smart and brave and important she was. Her transformation into Quake upped the stakes and made it seem even more forced. But this season, and this episode in particular, pay off all that investment. She began as an author's-favorite but she grew into a multidimensional and effective character.

I also have to say, the relationship between Coulson and May. It was an even slower burn than the Fitz/Simmons one, but it felt like it developed naturally. Both characters have hardened exteriors and both slowly (very slowly!) let down their guard enough to let the other in. Each of them saves the other, not just from physical danger but from the emotional isolation each has chosen for protection.

Although the movies and the show tie in only very loosely, I also like how this season and this episode refract one of the main themes of [Avengers Infinity War](#): Should you sacrifice the one for the many? Who gets to decide? What lives are too important? Or do you hold the line at the risk of everyone and everything? On multiple times in Infinity War, characters realize they can't make that sacrifice, and it costs them. "The End" wrestles with the same issue, on a more immediate scale -- and it avoids the easy answer.

I'll certainly keep watching, once Agents of SHIELD returns. But I also can enjoy this as a send-off of high calibre and a fitting cap to an excellent series.