After two and a half seasons, is THE WALKING DEAD in its best place? Is that best place good enough?

Many, as in the millions who watch the zombie survival horror serial weekly, would most likely argue it's rarely been off-track. In the two years since its premiere, THE WALKING DEAD has utilized top talent—in its performances, its directing, its producing, its FX—to craft what a good portion of the nation is finding to be an engaging, bloody apocalypse drama, one whose hard ties to genre and stunning contributions from Greg Nicotero is leaving some (like myself) who aren't as enthusiastic, nonsensically feeling a bit guilty and unappreciative.

At its midseason break, it's worth surveying how far the show has come since last year's. It also may be worth surveying the series not as delineated by air-schedule, but these breaks. The back half of season two seems to be where current showrunner Glen Mazzara was able to wholly implement his vision of THE WALKING DEAD, and let go of whatever remained of Frank Darabont's run. This leaves the six-episode season one—which fell hard from the highs of its first two installments—and the dud of season two's front half a mess of a season in itself; one where the organic process of a series finding its footing was met with a rocky relationship to its source material (something that continues to inform the show's problems) and behind-the-scenes shakeups.

And the series *has* come far since, if best evidenced by the last two episodes. "When the Dead come Knocking" was largely filler, an hour meant to put characters where they need to be, poised to act in a manner worthy of some sort of finale. It was energetic filler, though, that embraced the inherently pulpy nature of THE WALKING DEAD, instead of positing that gripping, grim drama and being a genre tale are mutually exclusive. "Made to Suffer" had similar intent (it was putting people in place for the show's return), and was often tense and successful in doing so.

On a larger level, "Made to Suffer" was emblematic of THE WALKING DEAD as a whole. Most indicative of the show's strength was a cliffhanger largely concerned with the fates of two

original characters, Merle Dixon and Daryl Dixon, in the hands of a villain at his best when differentiated from his cartoonishly evil comic counterpart. But while the Dixon brothers are lucky enough to come without baggage, The Governor teeters because of his, as did the sadly missed Shane, *as does* this season's other major introduction, Michonne.

Since seasons one and two had attempted to take themselves so very seriously (note: this is not decrying a lack of humor, but being po-faced to the point of detriment), Michonne's entrance in "Beside the Dying Fire" felt incongruous to the established world. It was as if she had stepped straight out of the comics to rescue Andrea. Mostly a brief moment of playing to the fans (Danai Gurira had yet to be cast), the clunky introduction could be ignored if the production had attempted to round out and develop a Michonne for the series, just as it is trying with The Governor. Instead, the Michonne of the comics finds herself in new scenarios, but is unwavering in comic characterization. This led to Michonne's slightly baffling detour in "Made to Suffer."

By all accounts, The Governor is twisted, with morally questionable giving way to especially evil as season three progresses. Comparatively though, he wasn't all that awful to Michonne. In courting Andrea, he played to her companion and while they certainly butted heads and she saw through his veneer, there was nothing close to the repeated rape and beatings of the comics. The Governor may have sicced Merle on her, but her jaunt to his quarters, with plan to wait alone in the dark felt of a personal vendetta unseen, as if Michonne of the page was acting on her interests/experiences. The endgame was to have Michonne take his eye, much like in the comics. It's this unnecessary holding on to the source (like Rick's brief dead telephone correspondence) that's holding back a show otherwise improving vastly.