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Firefly fans aglow after finding Serenity in doing good works

Elizabeth Withey, Edmonton Journal
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On Sunday, a mob of space cowboy junkies clad in long, brown coats will gather in this fine Prairie city. Their mission is twofold: one, to fete the genius of Joss Whedon, and two, to raise money for people in need.

Whedon is the creator of the short-lived TV series Firefly, a space western that starred Edmonton's own Nathan Fillion as Captain Malcolm Reynolds. The show, which aired on Fox in 2002-03, was prematurely cancelled, much to the dismay of its fans. Seven years later, Firefly fans (also known as "fans," thanks to a Fillion slip of the tongue) keep the memory alive under the auspices of the Browncoats, a charitable fan club.

"Sci-geeks are people, too," says Sheelagh Semper, founder of the Alberta Browncoats Society. "Sometimes we look at people who are really into something and think those people aren't normal, they're weird, over-passionate." But over-passionate sci-geeks do more than dress up and revel in their own their nerdiness; they give back to the community, Semper says.

Charity wasn't the Browncoats' original raison d'être. The group, named after the independent faction in Firefly whose uniforms are long, loose-fitting brown coats, established itself to try to save the TV series. The disgruntled fans even took out an ad in Variety magazine. Their hopes were dashed, but from the ashes rose a nobler cause, thanks to Whedon, who suggested Firefly lovers funnel their frustrations into something philanthropic.

This weekend, Semper and her gang will play host to a Can't Stop the Serenity shindig at the Stanley A. Milner Library Theatre. CSTS events happen all over the world as an annual Whedon Whoop-up. Browncoats gear up in garb and gather to watch Serenity, the film Whedon created in 2005 based on the axed TV series. "The fact that a movie got made a year and a half later is a testament to how whiny the fans can be," Semper says.

She likens the event to a screening of The Rocky Horror Picture Show, the cult '70s musical film that has spawned screenings the world over with enthusiastic (and messy) audience participation.

"There isn't the toast-and-ribe-throwing, but there is the boing and hissing, and people dress up in costumes." CSTS events have occurred in Edmonton in the past, but this one's the first organized by a proper Browncoats society. Semper established the non-profit with her husband, Drew, in 2009 to save them a trip to Vancouver to attend a CSTS there.

The amount it cost to put on the event here was about the same as a weekend in Vancouver, they calculated. So the Semper's got busy organizing.

Edmonton's CSTS 2010 has a special bonus that only seven cities in the world will enjoy: a screening of Browncoats: Redemption. The movie, created by Firefly fans, is a sequel to Serenity, with a completely different cast and crew, and a new ship. Firefly's creators have given the flick the green light, since all profits go to charity.

"Nobody has seen anything other than the preview trailer clips, and it looks pretty good," Semper says. "This is extremely special for Edmonton."

Alberta's Browncoats managed to snag a cut of the film by playing the Fillion card (i. e. we're his hometown, we deserve it). Semper would love if Captain Tightpants himself showed up, but it's unlikely (Fillion's fee is beyond their budget). Still, it's "exciting and nerve-racking" hosting CSTS in E-town. "If something goes horribly wrong, there's tons of people who know Nathan."

Can't Stop the Serenity starts at noon Sunday with a costume contest and silent auction followed by a double screening: Serenity at 1:30 p.m., followed by Browncoats: Redemption. Admission is \$15. Tickets are available in advance at Happy Harbour Comics, online ([visit catsedmonton.org](http://visit.catsedmonton.org) for more information) or at the door. Funds raised will be divided between Equality Now, an international women's rights advocacy group, and the Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre in Edmonton.

Semper knows Browncoats are coming from all over the province, and she's got her fingers crossed the 450-seat theatre will fill up. "When a show goes under, you can sit back and complain and whine, or you can try to do something good for the world."

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