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COMIC BY CONNOR SZREJNA, STAFF ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS

'The Pitt' is a masterclass in how to develop characters

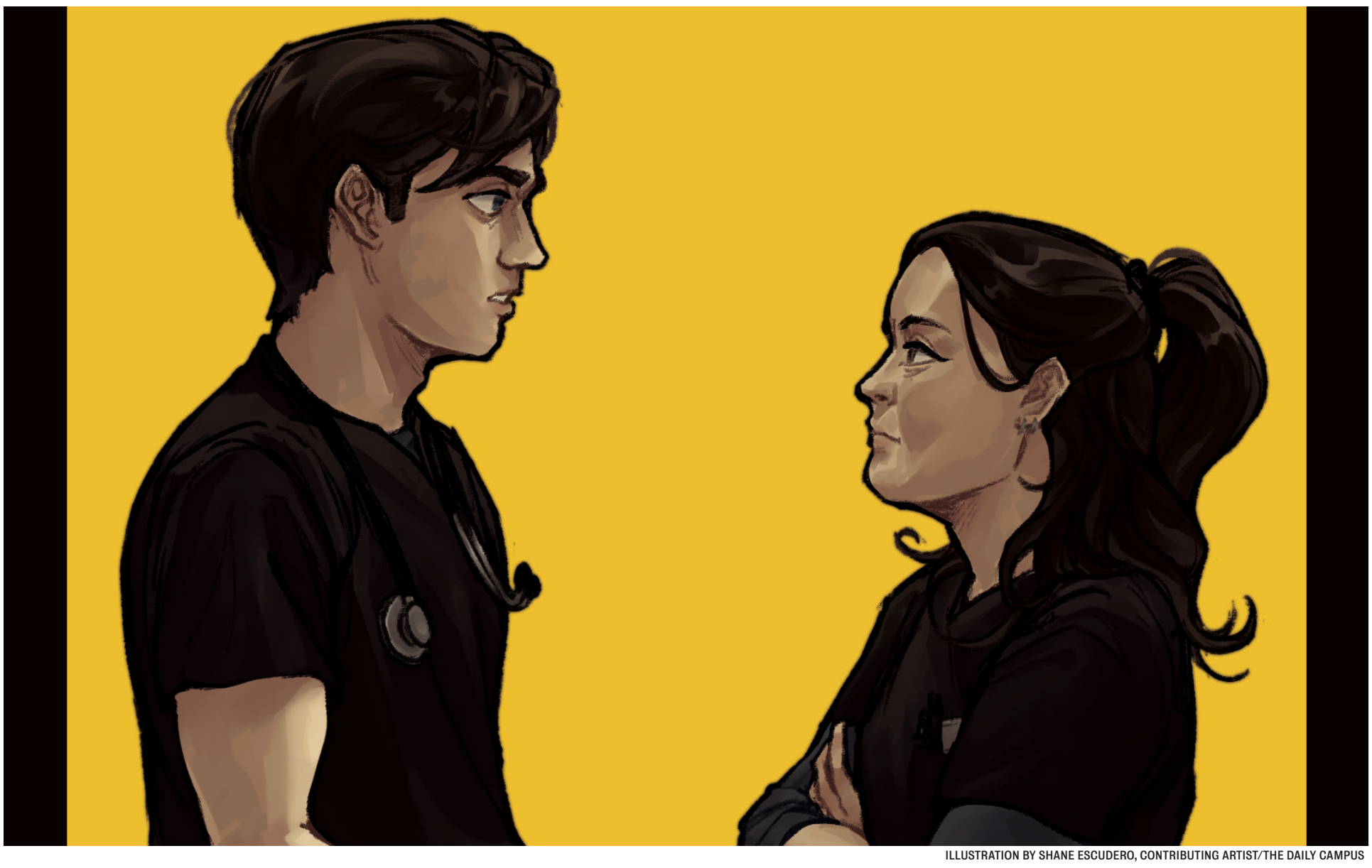


ILLUSTRATION BY SHANE ESCUDERO, CONTRIBUTING ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS

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Career shows have taken over television. Anytime you see a new show it usually features firefighters, doctors or police officers going about their daily lives, often in an exaggerated format. The characters that take on these roles are either fan favorites or meant to be villains from the start, with little to no room for other interpretation. HBO's series "The Pitt" challenges this narrative. The characters in "The Pitt" prove that it is not just another doctor show, but a lens into how to create some of the most realistic TV personas, especially in the field of medical dramas.

In season one of "The Pitt" we meet the day shift, which is led by attending physician Dr. Robby. Robby advises senior residents and provides support to the interns, nurses and medical students. In this dynamic it is clear one senior resident, Dr. Langdon, thinks he has the confidence and cockiness to lead the Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Hospital's Emergency Room (ER). He yells at med students when they make small mistakes yet proves he is capable of having a soft spot. The turning point of the season is the realization that a lot of his emotional irregularities are due to an addiction to painkillers. When a resident, Dr. Santos, uncovers and exposes that Langdon was stealing these painkillers, Langdon gets kicked out of the ER. When we pick up in season two he has gone to rehab, is completing his steps to recovery and making amends with those he wronged. His character in season two was completely different from how we saw him in season one. Given the context of his struggles and seeing the sincere effort he puts into making a change, Langdon becomes an ambivalent character. It is hard for me to adore him considering the bridges he burned, but his pivot as a character also makes it hard for me to totally hate him. This dynamic characterization is the reason why the show works so well.

Santos' knowledge of what Langdon has done and the grudge she holds against him for even being allowed to come back to the ER follows us into the second season. She helps put into perspective how the real world would feel about the situation. Santos often gets a bad rep for her own cockiness, which is a mirror to Langdon's in season one. But through her own moments of vulnerability, she is similarly a complex character. She switches from completing unsupervised medical procedures to comforting a patient who tried to commit suicide about his importance in the world. Another moment in the shift shows the physical evidence of her own mental health struggles, displayed through self-harm scars. This adds even more layers to her character, revealing that behind her mask of indifference, she is still deeply affected by things that hurt her.

Through the format of showing the characters in just one shift an hour at a time, we see them at their worst and at their best. Where in season one some characters had personal issues that they took out on other ER staff, in season two those same characters serve as a voice of reason. On the contrary, others like Robby, who seemed to be healing from his PTSD in the first season, now have lower morale this season. When characters in television are viewed as idols, it is nice to see a change of pace in this show where they are humanized. The majority of medical show portrayals and the sentiments surrounding healthcare workers in a post-COVID world have made us think that they are bulletproof, when that is far from the case.

"The Pitt" allows us to see these professionals going through the emotional turmoil that is working in a hospital, adding to their already-stressful personal lives. This season has already shown the new attending doctor, Dr. Al-Hashimi, contacting a therapist over her personal mental health, and several nurses being encouraged to reach out to their in-house trauma counselor following the events of season one's mass shooting. This distinction makes us de-center the idea of idolizing certain characters and despising others; instead, we see the healthcare system as the true villain. This key difference makes "The Pitt" stand out from other medical dramas. The show shifts viewer's scrutiny to issues like lack of insurance coverage, hospitals minimizing the pain of women of color and rural hospital scarcity.

As the current season continues, it is increasingly important to see how characters like Langdon and Santos (among others) are not meant to be all good or all bad. They are nuanced, just like real people. If more hospital dramas were like this, people would have more empathy for those who work in the medical field due to their incredibly realistic character development.



Noah Wyle on a promotional poster for medical drama "The Pitt." Wyle plays Dr. Michael Robinavitch on the show. PHOTO COURTESY OF @HBOMAX ON INSTAGRAM