

The India, Australia and China-centric episodes are written by Camille Ucan and Rose Johnson, the Brazil-centric episodes by Davey Moore, and the Italy-centric episodes by Becky Overton.

Free the Roads

Written by Michael White

In series 21, Bulgy was going to appear in another episode, most likely as a follow-up to *Unscheduled Stops*. While we may not know how that episode may have gone, *Free the Roads* fills that void quite well, and it makes for an entertaining viewing experience showing just how messed up Bulgy is in the head. I mean, who would ever think that Percy was an over-the-top supervillain? Only Bulgy would. Fantastic start to series 23.

Rating: Excellent (10/10)

Chucklesome Trucks

Written by Davey Moore

This episode leaves me with conflicted feelings; there's things I like about it and things that I don't. The references to the classic series were nice and all, but they overpower the story to the point that it feels like that all they wanted to do was appeal to the older fanbase. Thomas', James' and Percy's incidents are completely pointless; they could've put more emphasis on Rebecca taking her first goods train and the plot would've been much better for it. The ending moral is also very confused; if I have to rely on the life lesson segment at the end to figure it out, then there's a problem. But even then, it makes the episode more confusing than it already is. It all feels very muddled and doesn't give me much of a reason to go back to it.

Rating: Bad (3/10)

Heart of Gold

Written by Michael White

This was an episode featuring Toby that I didn't know I wanted until I got it. Many fans like myself despised how the tram engine was portrayed throughout the Barlow era, being portrayed as a cowardly wuss. While this episode does show Toby feeling insecure about what some people say about his looks, it also shows him as a more determined badass when it came to defeating the crooks from making off with King Godred's crown. It made Toby feel more like a three-dimensional character, and it gave off his best episode in the first series, as well as the best episode of series 23. That's four in a row for Michael White there.

Rating: Excellent (10/10)

Panicky Percy

Written by Camille Ucan and Rose Johnson

And now, four episodes in, we get to the worst episode of series 23, not to mention the BWBA era as a whole. Percy's character regression that started with *Three Steam Engines Gruff* reached its nadir with this episode. Its concept was one that I'd call dead on arrival; Percy freaking out about Thomas being in "danger" only to turn out he wasn't was a terrible idea from the get-go, and the execution is even worse. All Percy had to do was ask what had happened to

Thomas and the plot would end right there. This episode did the impossible; it toppled *Sodor Surprise Day* as the worst episode in the CGI series, but it's still a close second for worst episode of the show in general.

Rating: Atrocious (-10/10)

Crowning Around (India)

Series 22's India-based episodes weren't really that great (except *Tiger Trouble*; that one was pretty good), so this episode comes off as a pleasant surprise. Because they'd already put a lot of emphasis on international culture in the previous series, here, they're allowed to focus on telling a story, and for this series and the next, the international episodes fare better for the most part. Rajiv steals the show here when he loses his crown, but then realizes that he's still a useful engine with or without it. A great episode, and one of the best international episodes to date.

Rating: Excellent (10/10)

Gordon Gets the Giggles

Written by Becky Overton

Well, this is going to be interesting. This episode is enjoyed and reviled for the same reason; Gordon constantly laughing over the sight of Rebecca in a mess. Honestly, that doesn't really bother me much (though it does make you wonder how the passengers have such a high tolerance for Gordon's constant stops with the express), as it really showcases a different side to the big engine. He usually has a laugh at another engine's expense, but here, he's having a laugh over Rebecca laughing at her own mistakes, which is a pretty good lesson to teach; it's okay to have a laugh at yourself every now and again.

Rating: Good (8/10)

The Other Big Engine (Brazil)

So now we finally arrive with the Brazil-themed stories of the show; they're pretty much a mixed bag overall. Nothing terrible, but not that great either. Gabriela was introduced to us with no explanation as to how she and Thomas met, but we do at least see him meeting Gustavo. While he takes great pride in being an electric-powered engine, he's also pretty friendly and laid back (though you have to wonder how Thomas didn't find the comparison between Gustavo and Gordon immediately), even willing to help Thomas when he ran out of coal and water. Issues aside, the moral about not judging someone based upon previous experiences was good and a useful one for kids to learn.

Rating: Good (7/10)

Batucada (Brazil)

This episode feels really dull, save for the music being played. It was nice to teach kids about being creative, but there have been other episodes that taught that theme in a more interesting way before this episode. Apologies for a short review, but there is little to talk about here.

Rating: Bad (2/10)

Diesel Do Right

Written by Davey Moore

One of the show's most entertaining episodes, all thanks to Diesel being at his most enjoyable. It does feel a lot like his debut story, only here, he's taking advantage of someone new and gullible as Rebecca (not a knock on her, just describing her character) to try and get the other diesels in trouble, only to blow up in his face at the last minute. That fantasy sequence was also one of the most hilarious for how self-aware the show was at that point.

Rating: Excellent (10/10)

Thomas Makes a Mistake (India)

This episode has gained a reputation I don't think it's really earned. *Thomas Makes a Mistake* is heavily despised by the fandom because... well, the bland title spells it all out, and he tries to cover it up, making an even bigger mess. And to that, I say... really? Even if you ignore that the plotline is predictable, I don't think it was really worth the fuss it caused in the fandom. Had it taken place on Sodor, then perhaps the hate would be justified. But Thomas is in India, and he doesn't know the routes as well as those on Sodor, so it makes sense that he would get lost and distracted in the middle of his job. Plus, he actually tried to fix his mistake rather than ignore it and end up having to retrace his steps to do it properly. Yes, it's a lesson he should know by now, but **adults** have a hard time admitting when they've messed up, and it feels very relevant to today, especially given today's climate in a post-COVID world. This may come as a surprise to many people, but I find the episode to be quite watchable. It may not be the most exciting episode, but it's one with a lesson that should not be ignored.

Rating: Good (8/10)

Digs & Discoveries (All Tracks Lead to Rome/Mines of Mystery; Italy)

So here we are with not only the first mini-specials of the series, but the first Italy stories of BWBA. *All Tracks Lead to Rome* is a pretty slow start to the *Digs & Discoveries* saga, and it serves mainly as a build up to *Mines of Mystery*. Had Gina and Stefano not turned out as fantastic as they did as characters - the former especially, and I find it hilarious whenever she gets all huffy when Thomas makes her mad without meaning to - and for the exciting climax, it probably would've been pretty boring. A fine build up on the whole, but not much more.

Mines of Mystery is where the duology really shines. Seeing the Pack travel to Italy was a great move (and Thomas being joined by his friends on international adventures was something this era of the show needed), and seeing them interact with Gina was great. It would've been nice to have more of that being explored. The climax at the mines with Lorenzo and Beppe was also very exciting, though it kind of makes you wonder what goes on in Lorenzo's mind when it comes to singing when everyone's in danger, and the ending with them singing off into the sunset will never not be funny. What was also pretty satisfying was Gina telling Thomas to stop talking, I'd imagine many fans felt the same way given how often he appears and speaks.

Overall, *Digs & Discoveries* feels a lot like *King of the Railway*, only shorter and more focused. Also, can we have Gina come to Sodor? I'd love to see how she could handle the likes of Gordon and James! I bet they could've made some great stories with international characters coming to Sodor!

All Tracks Lead to Rome: Good (7/10)

Mines of Mystery: Good (8/10)

Average Rating: Good (7.5/10)

Grudge Match (Brazil)

Considering Raul was the Brazillian representative for the shunting competition in *The Great Race*, it makes you wonder why he didn't appear that often whenever the stories took place in Brazil. Instead, we had Gabriela, someone we'd never met before, turn up in every Brazil episode while Raul only appeared in this episode as well as a small bit part in *Thomas and the Forest Engines* next series. Anyway, this episode was alright, although the soccer sequence was a bit ludicrous by the show's standards, and Raul did learn that winning isn't everything. That's about it, really.

Rating: Okay (6/10)

Diesel Glows Away

Written by Davey Moore

Another okay episode. It was nice to see Nia's cheeky side reemerge and seeing her interact with Paxton, although Diesel seemed to come off as petty purely because he wasn't getting attention, which is ironic since his previous episode was about not wanting to get into trouble. Again, not much else to comment on here.

Rating: Okay (6/10)

Laid Back Shane (Australia)

I don't think the title really fits the episode's plot since Shane wasn't really all that laid back here. He comes off as more stubborn and self-assured, which leads to him getting in trouble. *Hot and Coaled* would've been a more fitting title, but that aside, it was another great episode set abroad and shows what happens when you get too carried away and ignore warnings.

Rating: Excellent (9/10)

Wish You Were Here (China)

In a post-COVID world, this episode has never felt more relevant than it ever did. Thomas' situation about missing Percy on his worldwide adventures is incredibly relatable, and many of us (as of March 2021) are missing our close friends and family. Being separated from them for over a year can suck, but as long as they're on your mind, they're never truly away. It's one of those episodes that, despite being away from Sodor, really captures the true spirit of the show - heart, charm and a great lesson that hits you right in the feels.

Rating: Excellent (10/10)

First Day on Sodor!

Written by Becky Overton

This episode was another one that I've never really been a fan of that much. Darcy's antics were very concerning, probably even dangerous since she could've gotten people and engines hurt with her drill (by the way, why was she moving it about even when not on the ground?). Not only that, how much use could she be for the Pack if tunnel digging isn't that frequent? I feel that Darcy is less a permanent member and more someone on short-term loan to the Pack; the fact that she only appeared in this series is telling. This episode wasn't all bad, though; Nia had a great supporting role in relating to Darcy about being the newbie of the team, and the fantasy sequence referencing *The Terminator* was so out there. On the whole, it's not Becky Overton's worst script, but it is one the weaker episodes for series 23.

Rating: Bad (3/10)

Rangers of the Rails

Written by Davey Moore

Most people say that out of the Steam Team members, past and present, Henry got the shortest end of the stick, but I say that Emily had it even worse than he did. Starting with this episode; it's not godawful or anything, but it (along with *Emily's Best Friend*) feels like it was mandated just to give her a lead role. It also has a very similar premise to *Emily Saves the World* and *Best Engine Ever*, and that works against *Rangers of the Rails* because it feels like Emily wanting to feel special feels like it's all the writers can do with her when it comes to lead roles. It was a nice idea to try and explore Emily and Nia's friendship; that was a missed opportunity right there for the next series.

Rating: Okay (5/10)

Lorenzo's Solo (Italy)

The international episodes really do seem to work best when Thomas isn't the lead character; heck, he only appears within the first minute here and doesn't show up for the rest of the plot! It's all about Lorenzo wanting to impress Dame Bella Canto and picks her up without Beppe, his best friend. But then he realizes that he's lost without his coach and that he's better off as part of a team with Beppe. Gina, of course, was great as well when it came to snarking about Lorenzo and Bella's egos and comforting Beppe.

Rating: Excellent (9/10)

Deep Trouble

Written by Michael White

Of Darcy's episodes, this is the better of the pair. It feels like it focused less on the gimmicks with Darcy and her drill (don't take that the wrong way) and more about telling a story. What else I liked was that unlike *Mucking About*, Max and Monty actually learn something at the end when it comes to playing about in dangerous places and listening to warnings. There were rumors that Andrew Brenner was the head writer for the Pack spinoff, but that never came to fruition and the information was removed. *Deep Trouble* is probably the closest we'll get to the Pack spinoff

being resurrected for CGI, so who knows what else they might have come up with had the original series continued? Overall, another great episode.

Rating: Excellent (9/10)

Too Loud, Thomas! (Italy)

Since when did Thomas' singing have to suck so badly? He's sung fairly well in the past (as well as *Steam Team to the Rescue*), so it feels like it was done for the sake of the story. That, and the comedy, and while there are occasional funny moments, Thomas' "singing" antics come off as more cringeworthy than funny. It's the second half where things get better, and it was probably one of the best uses of the engine movements when it came to teaching kids about using nonverbal communication. Had it been done with models or CGI pre-series 21, it would probably have come off as awkward. *Too Loud, Thomas!* has a nice concept behind it, but the comedy coming off as borderline forced really dragged it down.

Rating: Okay (5/10)

Out of Site

Written by Michael White

I've never understood the "Brenda replaced Byron" discussions; Byron barely had anything to do even in the Pack spinoff, and it wasn't like Brenda simply took his number. I'm not going to go too deeply into that discussion, but I will say that out of Michael's episodes, it's probably his weakest effort. Not necessarily bad; it's just that his other episodes happen to be better. Brenda's motherly persona was pretty fun when she got frustrated (plus, the Monty Python reference made me laugh), and the lesson she learned about communication and teamwork was good.

Rating: Good (8/10)

Steam Team to the Rescue

Written by Davey Moore

I like the concept behind this mini-special; there's a motive power crisis going on and the engines have to try and keep up with the heavy workload put upon them. The problem? It acts as though the Steam Team and the Diesel Crew (I think that's the collective term for them) are the only engines on Sodor, which raises many questions, almost like *The Big Freeze*, but in reverse, and with even more missed opportunities. I'm not one of those fans who keeps begging for BoCo to be brought back, but having him show up for the climax along with Edward and Henry would've made for a grand comeback and brought forth many opportunities to see how BoCo would've reacted to many of the changes around Sodor. All that being said, however, *Steam Team to the Rescue* feels like it was an unintended prediction for how the COVID-19 pandemic will play out, making it feel more poignant than perhaps it would've been when it first aired. Plus, you have to admire how determined everyone was to keep things moving. Overall, it's a special that could be great, but suffers from a half-baked execution.

Rating: Okay (5/10)

Episode Rankings

1. Heart of Gold - Excellent (10/10)
2. Wish You Were Here - Excellent (10/10)
3. Diesel Do Right - Excellent (10/10)
4. Free the Roads - Excellent (10/10)
5. Crowning Around - Excellent (10/10)
6. Deep Trouble - Excellent (9/10)
7. Lorenzo's Solo - Excellent (9/10)
8. Laid Back Shane - Excellent (9/10)
9. Mines of Mystery - Good (8/10)
10. Thomas Makes a Mistake - Good (8/10)
11. Out of Site - Good (8/10)
12. Gordon Gets the Giggles - Good (8/10)
13. All Tracks Lead to Rome - Good (7/10)
14. The Other Big Engine - Good (7/10)
15. Grudge Match - Okay (6/10)
16. Diesel Glows Away - Okay (6/10)
17. Too Loud, Thomas! - Okay (5/10)
18. Steam Team to the Rescue - Okay (5/10)
19. Rangers of the Rails - Okay (5/10)
20. Chucklesome Trucks - Bad (3/10)
21. First Day on Sodor! - Bad (3/10)
22. Batucada - Bad (2/10)
23. Panicky Percy - Atrocious (-10/10)

Final Series Rating: 148/230 (6.4/10)

Series Rankings So Far

1. Series 2 (Excellent; 233/260 - 8.9/10)
2. Series 21 (Good; 147/180 - 8.1/10)
3. Series 3 (Good; 211/260 - 8.1/10)
4. Series 1 (Good; 208/260 - 8/10)
5. Series 18 (Good; 206/260 - 7.9/10)
6. Series 20 (Good; 208/280 - 7.4/10)
7. Series 17 (Good; 189/260 - 7.3/10)
8. Series 7 (Good; 174/260 - 6.7/10)
9. Series 8 (Good; 171/260 - 6.6/10)
10. Series 6 (Good; 170/260 - 6.5/10)
11. Series 23 (Okay; 148/230 - 6.4/10)
12. Series 5 (Okay; 165/260 - 6.3/10)
13. Series 19 (Okay; 156/250 - 6.2/10)
14. Series 4 (Okay; 159/260 - 6.1/10)

15. Series 22 (Okay; 138/260 - 5.3/10)
16. Series 9 (Okay; 132/260 - 5.1/10)
17. Series 11 (Okay; 112/260 - 4.3/10)
18. Series 10 (Bad; 97/280 - 3.5/10)
19. Series 12 (Bad; 61/200 - 3.1/10)
20. Series 13 (Terrible; 4/200 - 0.2/10)
21. Series 15 (Terrible; -3/200 - -0.2/10)
22. Series 16 (Terrible; -14/200 - -0.7/10)
23. Series 14 (Terrible; -28/200 - -1.4/10)