

“Caretaker”: A



(Pilot) The newly commissioned starship Voyager and a Maquis raider are flung into the remote Delta Quadrant by a powerful entity known as the Caretaker.

Air date: January 16, 1995

Teleplay by Michael Piller & Jeri Taylor

Story by Rick Berman, Michael Piller & Jeri Taylor

Directed by Winrich Kolbe

“Captain, if these sensors are working, we’re over seventy thousand light years from where we were. We’re on the other side of the galaxy.” – Ensign Kim

Written primarily by the same man who stabilized *TNG*'s writing staff and wrote *DS9*'s pilot, “Caretaker” skillfully launches *Voyager* with a two hour romp that simultaneously works well as a beginning and as a standalone story. Like *TNG*'s pilot, the story is basically a mystery mixed with a powerful alien, though here the elements are better interwoven and no expense is spared. At \$23 million, this is *Star Trek*'s most expensive episode of all time, giving the story ample location shooting, visual effects, and whatever it needs to jumpstart the series and launch a network.

Benefitting from exposition planted in *TNG* and *DS9* episodes (“Journey’s End”, “The Maquis Part I and II”, and “Preemptive Strike”) *Voyager’s* pilot opens with a *Star Wars*-like crawl and then kicks into gear, cutting a quick pace as it moves along and introduces the characters.

Dodging the obvious choice of the captain as its central player, the episode uses Tom Paris (Robert Duncan McNeill) as the way into the story and makes him more or less the primary focus. It’s an interesting choice, with Paris being an outcast, but his character arc helps sum up what the show’s all about: a new life. (Interestingly, the idea that Paris is unpopular because of a piloting accident that killed a well liked crewman is remarkably similar to something that happened to *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry. One day in the South Pacific back in 1943, where Roddenberry was serving as a pilot in World War II, his B-17 didn’t pick up enough speed to become airborne and the brakes wouldn’t respond. The plane ended up crashing into a sea of palm stumps, and two respected crewmembers died. Many in Roddenberry’s squadron questioned why he didn’t perform a ground loop maneuver that could have saved everyone, unaware or not wanting to understand that there wasn’t enough time. On a side note, the crash prevented Roddenberry from participating in a search for survivors of a Navy PT boat that was destroyed that same morning, forcing someone else to rescue John F. Kennedy.) *TNG* fans, of course, will remember McNeill as Nicholas Lacarno from the fifth season episode “The First Duty”, a character with nearly the same backstory as Paris. Naturally it’s easy to wonder why *Star Trek* invents Paris rather than just reusing Lacarno, but the truth is that McNeill’s character in “The First Duty” is (appropriately) selfish and arrogant, which is what really gets him into trouble. Paris, on the other hand, though similar in demeanor, is more selfless and full of self doubt. While *VOY* could (and almost did) reuse Lacarno and try to recharacterize him, there’s no reason to go to so much trouble because of one *TNG* episode some years back. With Paris a blank slate, the show is able to introduce him to us the way they wish and develop him throughout the episode and series without being tethered down.

In the meantime, the pilot offers Kate Mulgrew plenty of opportunity to put her stamp on Captain Janeway, creating a character that’s vulnerable in private but unquestionably in charge in public. Mulgrew, who was brought in to replace Geneviève Bujold, gives a performance that’s not just extraordinary but extraordinarily important for *Star Trek* and beyond. It might seem sexist today, but after a poor performance by Bujold (who quit the second day), there was some doubt from the executives as to whether a woman could actually front a show they were relying on to launch UPN. Mulgrew, however, owns the part, giving it a Kathryn Hepburn quality and proving she’s just as good as any leading man, Shatner and Stewart included.

Meanwhile, with nine regulars to introduce, some characters get shortchanged. The Doctor, who would go on to be one of the show’s breakout characters, gets in a couple funny lines but little more. Seska (who is not a regular but does prominently factor into the first two seasons) doesn’t appear at all. But while some have more to do and some less, most of the major characters

get a chance to at least outline the basics of their personalities and relationships. (Meanwhile, a visit to Deep Space Nine gives us a Quark cameo.)

Always remaining a favorite for the cast, crew, and fans alike, the events in “Caretaker” come back into play in several episodes of the series, starting with second season's “Projections”. Unfortunately, “Caretaker” is the *last Star Trek* pilot by Piller, who died of head and neck cancer in 2005. With his ability to successfully create *Star Trek* out of thin air, it's a shame he didn't get to do more, even if it was simply through standalone TV movies featuring new characters. (George Lucas tried this very thing with the *Ewok* movies, but he couldn't replicate the spark he carefully developed in the *Star Wars* movies. Piller didn't seem to have this problem within the *Star Trek* universe.)

For the debut of *Voyager* and UPN, “Caretaker” is a heck of a beginning. In fact it's so good, the show never has to employ an idea planted in the pilot specifically to set up a quick way to get back home if the show's concept was to prove unpopular early on: the idea of a second caretaker. (They bring back the idea, nonetheless, for the sake of completion in second season's “Cold Fire”.)

Did you know? Veteran director Rick Kolbe, who would go on to helm 17 more VOY episodes, also directed 16 *TNG* episodes and 13 *DS9* episodes. Kolbe died at the age of 72 in 2012.