



Suiting up for a trip through the galaxy: Rachel Luttrell and Joe Flanigan.

'Atlantis'

bound

'Stargate' spin-off introduces new villains, the Wraiths

By MICHAEL GILTZ

ON the new Sci Fi series "Stargate: Atlantis" — a spin-off from the quietly successful "Stargate SG1," which just launched its eighth season — the lost city is finally rediscovered. But according to co-creator Robert Cooper, it should have occurred ages ago.

"We planned for this to happen a couple of years ago," says Cooper, 35, who also helps oversee "SG1."

"But we were victims of our own success because the ratings for 'SG1' kept growing on Sci Fi.

We originally planned the spin-off to be more of a hand-off. 'SG1' would be finishing and then we would pass the baton to "Atlantis." When they said they wanted both at the same time, it made us rethink the concept for the spin-off."

Now, instead of one show ending and the other beginning, sci-fi fans get the best overload of entertainment since "Star Trek: The Next Generation" and "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine" aired at the same time in the early '90s. It's the latest mark of success for "SG1," which was itself a spin-off from the modest 1994 theatrical hit starring James Spader and Kurt Russell.

That led to the series debut on Showtime starring Richard Dean Anderson as the leader of a team of explorers that travels through Stargates to other worlds. Five years on Showtime and in syndication led to its relocation to Sci Fi, with the show always growing in popularity both overseas (where it's a smash hit and seen in more than 60 countries) and on DVD.

The show's unique appeal? The Stargate stories don't take place in some distant future — they involve people who live on earth here and now who must deal with alien cultures as best they can. Cooper knows that wish fulfillment — getting to interact with other worlds right now — is at the heart of "SG1." But he knew "Atlantis," especially since it would be airing at the same time as "SG1," had to be different.

That's why the team in this show is trapped in a different galaxy and living in the lost city of Atlantis. It's far from a safe haven thanks to its alien technology, the lack of force fields that leave it vulnerable to the elements and the threat of new uber-villains, the Wraiths.

In conceiving the new show, Cooper doesn't hesitate to name the one element of "SG1" he was happiest to jettison.

"The Goa'uld," he says firmly about "SG1's" main baddies. "I find them sort of ridiculous. That's something I probably shouldn't be saying, considering I still executive produce the other show.

"They're great for 'SG1' and they have a specific tone and feeling to them — these arrogant, theatrical, over-the-top, weird-dressing bad guys," Cooper says. "But for me it was a lot of fun to create the Wraiths — something fresh. They're a much more gothic, dark type of villain."

The cast is populated with newcomers, including Joe Flanigan as the daring, rebellious Maj. John Sheppard and Rachel Luttrell as Teyla, the hot, sexy leader of the Athosian race. Cooper, a lifelong fan of "The Six Million Dollar Man," confesses he approached Lindsay Wagner about playing Dr. Elizabeth Weir, the head of the Stargate team, but ultimately decided the show didn't need a name to draw viewers (Torri Higginson got the part).

Those fans shouldn't get too attached to "SG1," however. It looks like this could be the final season for that franchise.

"We definitely think of the second half of this season as the series finale," Cooper admits. "There are economics involved in moving forward to a season nine, and even to a season eight, quite frankly. But we'll see. I've learned never to say never. If 'SG1' does even better than last year, it's entirely possible Sci Fi will do whatever they have to do to make [another season] happen."

STARGATE: ATLANTIS
Friday, 9 p.m., Sci Fi