

TV Review: Scattered 'Scoundrels' Has Great Cast, Weak Writing

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on June 19, 2010 - 10:59am

- [ABC](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Carlos Bernard](#) [4]
- [David James Elliott](#) [5]
- [Desperate Housewives](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Leven Rambin](#) [8]
- [Patrick John Flueger](#) [9]
- [Scoundrels](#) [10]
- [Television](#) [11]
- [Vanessa Marano](#) [12]
- [Virginia Madsen](#) [13]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [14]

CHICAGO – Based on a hit New Zealand series entitled “Outrageous Fortune,” ABC’s “Scoundrels” is a hit-and-miss affair at best. The network is aggressively trying to counterprogram new series against the summer cable hits like “Mad Men,” “Royal Pains,” and “The Closer,” but viewers are unlikely to return for a show as inconsistent as this one without some major changes.



TV Rating: **2.5/5.0**

“Scoundrels” tells the story of the West family, a group of career criminals who also happen to be living the life of a typical suburban family. The idea is that the Wests have criminal tendencies but the same daily family problems as you and me. The teenage daughter may be having trouble at school but she’ll find a clever and illegal way out of it and the West parents barely blink an eye when the police knock on their door with yet another search warrant. It could be subtitled “Desperate Criminals” in that ABC is hoping a bit of the audience who likes to visit similarly wacky characters on Wysteria Lane will take to this unusual clan.



Scoundrels

Photo credit: ABC

And the key word is “wacky.” Nearly every element of the premiere episode of “Scoundrels” feels like it’s designed to “push the envelope” with its quirky characters. The material is rather dark when one thinks about it with date rape drugs, home invasions, statutory rape, prison sentences, and blackmail as plot points, but it’s all presented in such a self-aware way that none of it feels genuine despite the great Virginia Madsen’s best attempts to make it so. Nearly every plot point feels like it’s designed to make you roll your eyes at the wacky behavior.

Scoundrels
Photo credit: ABC

Madsen plays Cheryl West, a woman trying to keep her family together as her husband (David James Elliott of "JAG") looks down the barrel of a prison sentence. When his time behind bars ends up being more than anyone predicted, Cheryl realizes she's going to have to turn a few things around. Her oldest daughter Heather (Leven Rambin of "Grey's Anatomy") is going to have to get a job that doesn't involve taking her clothes off. Her youngest daughter Hope (Vanessa Marano of "The Comeback") is going to have to actually go to school. And her troubled son Cal (Patrick John Flueger of "The 4400") is going to have to start acting more like his identical twin brother Logan (also Flueger in a clever bit of casting that should display the young actor's diversity), who is the only one who's gone straight and turned into a lawyer. Carlos Bernard of "24" co-stars as the cop who's been assigned the West family as a seemingly daily case.

The cast of "Scoundrels" is a talented one. Madsen brings a genuine quality to everything she does and she alone nearly makes the premiere worth a look. Flueger is a talented young actor and Rambin is an interesting one while Bernard is always fun to watch. Casting is sometimes half the battle in winning over a TV audience and "Scoundrels" does a good job in that department.

Sadly, the other half of the battle is writing and that's where "Scoundrels" flounders a bit. It too often feels like a show that's trying too hard to entertain instead of just letting its characters breathe. The USA Network has done a great job of taking quirky, unusual personalities and making them feel realistic and it's clear that ABC would love to replicate a little bit of that network's success with a program like "Scoundrels."

If they're going to do so, they need to go back to the drawing board a bit. Don't make subsequent episodes so frenetic and so desperate in their desire to be different. You've introduced us to the West family, now allow us to get to know them without the snarky asides and camera tricks. Otherwise, we won't care what happens to these "Scoundrels."

"Scoundrels" stars Virginia Madsen, Patrick John Flueger, Leven Rambin, Vanessa Marano, Carlos Bernard, and David James Elliott. It premieres on ABC on Sunday, June 20th, 2010 at 8pm CST.



[15]

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- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/scoundrels>
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