

TV Review: Weak Writing Blows Cover of ‘Covert Affairs’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on July 13, 2010 - 10:14am

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CHICAGO – “*If you join the CIA, will you be able to separate your work from your personal life?*” Such is the dilemma of “Covert Affairs,” a show about a tough-as-nails agent named Annie Walker (Piper Perabo) that conceptually seems to fit snugly into the USA Network model of hit, character-driven mysteries, but it’s going to take some serious work to improve on a deeply-flawed premiere.



Television Rating: **2.0/5.0**

Annie Walker is a girl “who certainly doesn’t fit the profile” and yet feels completely like a spy show cliché not unlike Sydney Bristow from “Alias.” It’s a tough role to pull off as Perabo is tasked with being believable as a super-spy who shatters test scores in her climb up the training ladder but also must be convincing in dialogue-driven scenes where her good looks are required to reduce most men around her to jelly. After one episode, it’s not clicking. Perabo is a lovely girl with a decent amount of screen presence, but the role, as written, requires a one-of-a-kind and Perabo is unconvincing. When she plays an agent pretending to be a call girl, she’s somehow not believable as either, but it’s primarily the fault of the generic spy show writing and not the casting.



Piper Perabo as Annie Walker

Photo credit: Steve Winkie/USA

She’s not helped by dialogue and pacing that goes against what is so often the strength of USA Network programming. To be blunt, I never once bought the action of the series premiere. The opening episode has echoes of such vastly superior works of fiction, including “Silence of

the Lambs,” and it’s constantly faltering by comparison. The extended pilot is not helped by an extension to over an hour. The best USA Network programs — “Burn Notice,” “Royal Pains,” “White Collar” — should be studied for their spectacular pacing that allows each hour to breeze by in what feels like half the running time. On the other end, “Covert Affairs” feels twice as long as its actual running time.



Piper Perabo as Annie Walker
Photo credit: Robert Ascroft/USA

To be fair, it’s easy to believe that the failures of “Covert Affairs” are all due to first-date jitters and there’s a chance that the wrinkles in this super-spy suit could easily be ironed out before long. Perabo is talented and when she’s allowed to settle into her character’s gorgeous outfits instead of having to sell so much character development as she is in the premiere, it’s not hard to see her being an effective character. And that’s what drives all of USA’s successful programming — character. Right now, Annie’s not up to the star status of the rest of the team on her network but she could be before long.

If “Covert Affairs” does click with audiences and improves after the premiere, Perabo won’t be able to do it alone. She’s surrounded by a better-than-average supporting cast that includes Christopher Gorham, Kari Machett, Peter Gallagher, Anne Dudek, Clarke Peters, and Emmanuelle Vaugier. On paper, “Covert Affairs” features arguably the best cast on television this summer. But talented actors only go so far if you don’t write them clever dialogue or give them intriguing plotlines in which to display their craft. However, having this much firepower in your cast means that merely a few tweaks to the writing and pacing and the talent will rise to the top.

The show also has notable production values, especially for made-for-cable programming. Produced by some of the “Bourne Trilogy” team, the show looks great and sometimes just enough flash-bang on a Tuesday night can be all we need to get us over to hump day. Although they’ll have to do better than the unbelievable climax of episode one, which includes a very poorly-staged fight scene.

The fact is that USA shows are starting to be held to a higher standard. Ten years ago, “Covert Affairs” would have worked, but with a female lead not as interesting as “In Plain Sight,” spy action not as expertly paced as “Burn Notice,” and dialogue nowhere near as clever as “Royal Pains” or “White Collar,” “Covert Affairs” suffers greatly in comparison. Only time will tell if this affair becomes one worth remembering.

‘Covert Affairs,’ which airs on USA, stars Piper Perabo, Christopher Gorham, Kari Machett, Peter Gallagher, Anne Dudek, Clarke Peters, and Emmanuelle Vaugier. It was created by Matt Corman and Chris Ord. The show premieres on July 13th, 2010 at 9PM CST.



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