

TV Review: Excellent 'Southland' Returns With First New TNT Episodes

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 3, 2011 - 10:20am

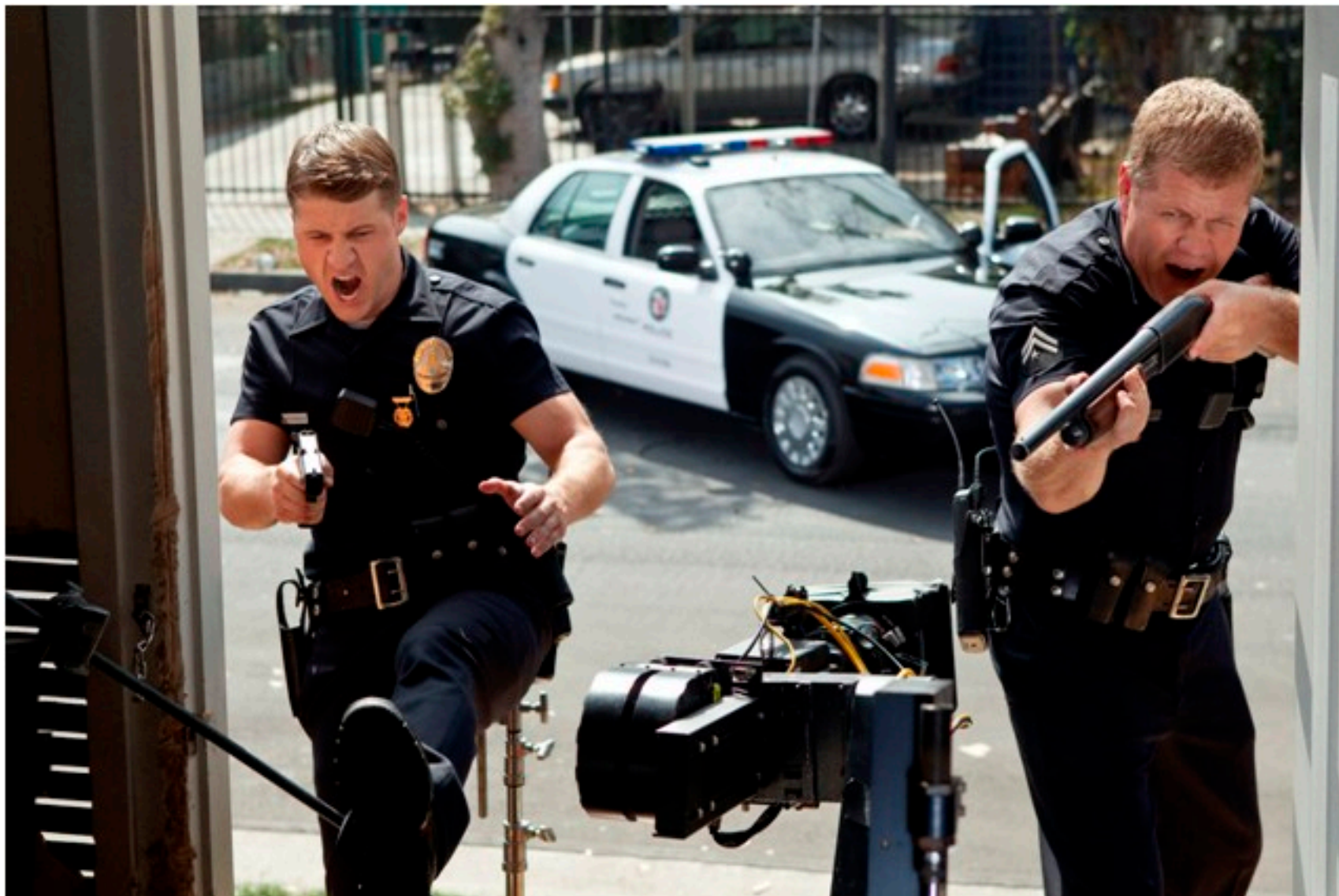
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CHICAGO – TNT's "Southland" has found that rare balance that evades most modern cop shows. In fact, it may be the best show of its type since "NYPD Blue." There have been (too) many procedural shows about weekly mysteries that find tidy resolutions by episode's end but finding the balance between the daily life of being a cop and the kind of character-driven ensemble writing that propelled some of our best police shows to multiple awards is much more difficult. Watch it in action on TNT this week.



TV Rating: **4.5/5.0**

After picking up the unaired episodes that NBC unceremoniously discarded after canceling the show partway into its second season, TNT announced last year that they would produce their own third season for the show with ten episodes to air starting this week. The show will reportedly be a bit different with a smaller ensemble overall and more self-contained plots but it doesn't feel that distinctly different. Yes, you'll notice that some characters have less screen time (we'll get to that later) and I hope that we haven't completely discarded the home lives of some other characters, but the writing, acting, production, and direction is still nearly as good as any weekly program on television.



Southland Season Three

Photo credit: TNT

There is almost always a missing ingredient in modern cop shows. After the success of the "acronym genre" (shows like "N.C.I.S." and "C.S.I."), most producers have focused on case over cop — discarding the personalities of the men and women who fight crime in favor of more intricately-written crimes themselves. Well-written serial shows often have completely dispensable characters while some recent attempts at personality-driven cop shows have failed to find an audience or critical praise. It is very rare to find a program as good at both as "Southland" and you need look no further than the devastating third season premiere, the first produced for TNT.

The TNT premiere of "Southland" is DARK. Not only does it feature a brutally-beaten body found in a bathroom ceiling but a character watches a man blow the back of his head off and another victim has been eaten by dogs when he's found. This is not easily-digested material and the tone of the show feels darker in 2011 as the real world itself seems to be consistently more f-ed up every year.



Southland Season Three
Photo credit: TNT

Like it often does, the premiere of "Southland" follows several officers on the beat at the same time. Detective Lydia Adams (Regina King) and new Detective Josie Ochoa (Jenny Gago) work the case of a missing cleaning lady who is quickly found beaten and murdered above the tiles of a bathroom ceiling. Meanwhile, Detective Nate Moretta (Kevin Alejandro) and Detective Sammy Bryant (Shawn Hatosy) are called in to handle a couple of dead gang bangers dumped in a park. Finally, Officer John Cooper (Michael Cudlitz) and Officer Ben Sherman (Benjamin McKenzie) handle a diverse day that can include a traffic stop on a beautiful woman followed by a bloody shootout. Three arcs — Robbery-Homicide, Gang Unit, and Patrol. All three riveting.

You may be able to tell by the paragraph above that there are a few missing faces. Tom Everett Scott has a brief appearance, as does Arija Bareikis, and the loathsome C. Thomas Howell pops up in episode two of the new season, but if the stories are true than this 3-case structure with a more-limited cast seems to be the way the show will unfold on TNT at least for its third season. I hate to see the underrated Bareikis limited (and she does play a larger role in the second episode) but anything that keeps this show on the air works for me. And as for the idea that it will be more case-driven and less character-driven, it doesn't seem that drastic yet. We definitely get glimpses into the continuing personal problems of several of our major characters including Sherman, Cooper, and Bryant.

What's most notable about "Southland" is the way the chemistry has already built even with the program's unusual history. McKenzie and Cudlitz are perfect together, completely believable in every scene. In particular, Cudlitz, who plays a man living a life that features increasing physical pain, continues to be one of the more interesting actors on TV. McKenzie and Hatosy are simply great as well (doing the best work of their young careers) but the show still belongs to Regina King, simply spectacular in every scene. Her chemistry with newcomer Gago is still a bit unrefined, but it's supposed to be as the two officers have very different styles.

Being a TV critic means watching a lot of programs that feel the same. It's a medium built on repetition — if a formula works, repeat it until the audience gets tired and move on to the next formula. It's when a show breaks free from the formula that critics embrace it — "Lost," "Breaking Bad," "The Walking Dead." "Southland" doesn't so much break free from the formula of the cop show as redefine why the genre has been beloved for so long. It resets the bar.

New episodes of 'Southland' premiere on TNT on Tuesday, January 4th, 2011 at 9pm CST. It stars Ben McKenzie, Michael Cudlitz, Regina King, Jenny Gago, Kevin Alejandro, Shawn Hatosy, and Arija Bareikis from creator John Wells.



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