

TV Review: William H. Macy, Emmy Rossum Save Troubled ‘Shameless’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 9, 2011 - 1:56pm

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CHICAGO – Showtime has built a critical and award-winning reputation around strong lead characters for some of our most best TV actors: Michael C. Hall in “Dexter,” Edie Falco in “Nurse Jackie,” Mary-Louise Parker in “Weeds,” Laura Linney in “The Big C,” and Toni Collette in “United States of Tara” are only a few examples. The new enrollee in Showtime’s program is Oscar nominee William H. Macy, star of “Shameless,” a remake of a hit British show that’s going to need some serious work to go to the head of the class but has the potential to do so.



TV Rating: **3.0/5.0**

Frank Gallagher (William H. Macy) is an unrepentant alcoholic. He spends most of his mornings on his kitchen floor and most of his afternoon and nights at the Alibi, a bar run by his enabling neighbor. The ceramic tile he often uses as a bed happens to be on the south side of Chicago and, sadly, Frank does not live alone. He happens to be a single father of six children, ranging from the age of bar-hopping to the age of diaper-wearing. The fact that he seems to barely care about his family through his alcoholic haze is barely recognized as a problem.



Shameless

Photo credit: Showtime

The reason that Frank’s shot at “Worst Parent of the Year” can be used as black comedy is because the kids are pretty damn self-sufficient. They are led by Fiona (a surprisingly-effective Emmy Rossum), the tough-but-beautiful oldest daughter who works several jobs while also finding time to manage paying the bills (which most of the family contribute to paying) and handling family drama. This modern young woman even finds time to go clubbing, where she meets a young man (Justin Chatwin of “War of the Worlds”) who claims to have fallen in love with her on first sight.



Shameless
Photo credit: Showtime

Fiona has two working brothers — a smart one named Lip (Jeremy Allen White) and a quieter one named Ian (Cameron Monaghan). They share a room and, in the pilot, not only does Lip learn that his brother is gay but he also begins an affair with a girl he’s tutoring who likes to go down on him under the kitchen table while her parents are still in the house. One of those parents happens to be an agoraphobic played by the great Joan Cusack, who has a much-bigger role after the pilot and could end up being the main reason to watch “Shameless.”

The rest of the Gallagher clan is rounded out by the quiet-but-scary Carl (Ethan Cutkosky), the sweet-but-neurotic Debbie (Emma Kenney), and a baby named Liam (twins Blake Alexander & Brennan Kane Johnson). Oversexed neighbors Veronica (Shanola Hampton) and Kev (Steve Howey) occasionally stop by for the fun at the Gallagher house. As Frank says in the pilot introduction, the Gallaghers know how to party.

The writers of “Shameless” stuff their pilot to the brim with quirky black humor to the point that it often stops feeling genuine. Booze, kinky sex, infidelity, closeted homosexuality, “hum jobs” during tutoring, grand theft auto — the writers of “Shameless” seem to think that no one on the south side comes without a bizarre private life. The pilot often crosses that fine line between presenting the complications of people and writing character traits that feel designed to be eccentric.



Shameless
Photo credit: Showtime

More damagingly, the premiere often mistakes edge for heart, which can be a significant problem when writers focus on poverty-stricken characters because “Shameless” starts to feel a bit like exploitation. It can be refreshing to watch serious subject matter like alcoholism

treated as the everyday existence that it is for many people but it can also verge on unfeeling. Most viewers don’t want to feel like they’re laughing at people one bill away from homelessness, especially given the fact that the Gallagher family probably couldn’t afford Showtime, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that most people watching “Shameless” would be sipping their white wine and saying something like, “Aren’t poor people funny?”

If the writing is trying so hard to be quirky that it verges on exploitation, why give “Shameless” a shot? The cast and the pedigree of the people behind the show. Likely attracted by the fact that the British version has been such a hit, producer John Wells (director of “The Company Men,” producer of “Southland,” “ER,” more) found a fantastic cast. Macy’s more prominent arc in the second episode (you should be warned that he’s barely in the premiere) gives him a chance to show the kind of range he’ll have to for “Shameless” to work and a few scenes between him and the always-great Cusack are gold. Rossum is charismatic, beautiful, and has real chemistry with Chatwin. Neighbors Hampton and Howey are trying way too hard to be wacky in the premiere but, like the rest of the show, could easily settle down. And White has breakout star potential.

The fact is that what doesn’t work about “Shameless” in its pilot can easily be fixed and likely will be automatically as the show’s blatant desire to be different settles into something more genuine. In fact, the second episode, directed by Wells himself, feels much less desperate and already represents a slight improvement. “Shameless” may be a near-miss to start but it features such a strong cast along with one of the best TV showrunners out there in Wells that it could rise to the ranks of the Showtime greats before the end of the season. Frank Gallagher may not be as instantly memorable as Dexter Morgan, Jackie Peyton, Nancy Botwin, or Tara Gregson, but he could sober up and surprise us all.

“Shameless” stars Emmy Rossum, William H. Macy, Justin Chatwin, Jeremy Allen White, Cameron Monaghan, Ethan Cutkosky, Emma Kenney, Shanola Hampton, Steve Howey, and Joan Cusack. It premieres on Showtime on Sunday, January 9th, 2011 at 9pm CST.



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