

## TV Review: ABC's 'Off the Map' Follows Well-Trodden Formula

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CHICAGO – Regardless of its exotic locales, “Off the Map” may benefit from a few more diversions. Everything about this fresh-faced ABC drama feels instantly familiar. Creator and “Grey’s Anatomy” producer Jenna Bans essentially takes the “Grey’s” formula and transports it to the jungles of South America, which are considerably more “MASH”-like than McDreamy.

Of course, there aren’t many locations more inherently intense and fascinating than a medical clinic in a third world country. The best moments in the early episodes of “Map” are the ones in which the doctors come up with improvised procedures to save their patients by utilizing organic elements from their surrounding environment. If you’ve never witnessed (or heard of) a “coconut transfusion,” you will have by the end of episode one.



Television Rating: **2.0/5.0**

Yet the excitement factor on “Map” is distressingly low. The endless “life or death” situations emerge like clockwork and quickly grow repetitive. What’s worse is that every character on the show has a dark past that they’re secretly running away from. These soon-to-be-revealed backstories inspire heavy-handed, often preachy monologues in which the characters relate a patient’s story to their own past experiences. It’s a “heartfelt” contrivance that never once feels organic. There’s a crucial moment late in the pilot when a rookie doc attempts to persuade a stubborn man into accepting medical assistance for his ailing family. Since the doctor didn’t bother learning the merest sample of the local language, he shares his backstory in all-too-eloquent English, concluding with the self-conscious moral, “I lost my family because I was proud.” Perhaps it’s a good thing that the local gentlemen didn’t understand a syllable of the phony dialogue, since the doctor’s earnestly flapping lips somehow ended up convincing him. Go figure.



Zach Gilford, Valerie Cruz, Mamie Gummer, Martin Henderson, Caroline Dhavernas, Jason George, Rachelle Lefevre, and Jonathan Castellanos star in ABC's Off the Map.  
Photo credit: ABC



One of the show's best assets is its attractive young cast, headlined by Caroline Dhavernas, star of the under-appreciated cult classic, "Wonderfalls." She plays Lily, one of three American doctors hurling themselves into the daily dangers at a medical clinic located "somewhere in South America" (which is actually "la ciudad de las estrellas," otherwise known as "the city of stars"). The other new recruits are goofy slacker Tommy (Zach Gilford of "Friday Night Lights") and uptight Mina (Mamie Gummer of the Meryl Streep Dynasty). Put these two sidekicks alongside the good-hearted yet vaguely colorless protagonist, and you have a heroic trio straight out of "Harry Potter," with the clinic standing in for Hogwarts. These kids are taught the ropes by three gung-ho, impossibly good-looking veterans: Zita (played by Penelope Cruz sound-alike Valerie Cruz), Otis (played by Denzel Washington sound-alike Jason George) and Ben (played by McDreamy look-alike Martin Henderson). Every show is required to have at least ten seconds devoted to examining the muscular density of the shirtless male, so viewers should expect to see a great deal more of Ben (I'm surprised Taylor Lautner hasn't already appeared as a special guest patient).



ABC's new drama Off the Map premieres Jan. 12, 2011.

Photo credit: ABC

The most unfortunate casualty of the oft-wasted ensemble is Gummer, a superb actress in her own right, who is so often cast in thankless roles. What attracted her to playing a twenty-something rip-off of 'Hot Lips' O'Houlihan? She must've had bite marks on her tongue when filming scenes in the third episode opposite Charlie (Jonathan Castellanos), an obnoxiously precocious comic relief who's every line is either a pointed quip or a wise observation. While Mina is attempting to save a patient's life, Charlie hangs around the guy's bed while asking about his love life. Mina has every right to be perturbed by the smart-aleck twerp, yet it's through Charlie's casual conversation with the patient that a potentially life-saving clue emerges. I haven't seen astute medical drama of this caliber since "Patch Adams."

Any time the show comes across a promising idea, it often brushes past it, failing to milk it for its full potential, such as a cute moment when Tommy attempts to conduct an entire conversation by using the only foreign word he's mastered: "Hola." If "Map" truly wants to survive past its inaugural season, I suggest that it include more scenes of the doctors in action, as they problem-solve their way through sudden crises. The strongest moment in the pilot is a genuinely tense sequence in which Lily must retrieve her first patient (a touching Michael McKean), who's suspended on a zip-line. The scene is far-fetched, to be sure, but it captures the edge-of-your-seat adrenaline that the rest of the show lacks. Loaded with forced and predictable melodrama, "Off the Map" may be off the air in no time.

*'Off the Map,' which airs on ABC, stars Caroline Dhavernas, Zach Gilford, Mamie Gummer, Martin Henderson, Jason George, Valerie Cruz, Rachelle Lefevre and Jonathan Castellanos. The show was created by Jenna Bans. The first season premieres on Wednesday, January 12, 2011 at 9PM CST.*



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