

TV Review: Despite Dana Delany, 'Body of Proof' Proves Dead on Arrival

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CHICAGO – Meet Megan Hunt. On second thought, don't. In fact, avoid her like the plague. If you see her walking toward you, make sure to cross the street or dive into the next room. The woman needs space, you see. She's been through a lot. And if you so much as throw a word in her general direction, you will be showered with the sort of self-satisfied smugness labeled in some quarters as "empowering."

Pay careful attention female viewers, because ABC's "Body of Proof" intends to empower you. Its heroine, Ms. Hunt, impeccably represents the Leigh Anne Tuohy era of faux feminism. Her strength and independence are represented by pure unbridled bitchiness. In scene after scene, Hunt struts into a room with her snobbish little grin and sizes up every situation with a stream of thickly worded exposition while everyone stands sheepishly gawking at her. This is decidedly more irritating than inspiring.



Television Rating: **2.0/5.0**

What a pity, considering the fact that this untamable shrew is played by Dana Delany, a superb actress richly deserving of a worthy vehicle. Her smashing success as Nurse Colleen McMurphy on the acclaimed yet short-lived Vietnam series, "China Beach," would make Delany seem to be an ideal choice for the lead role in "Proof." Her character is a neurosurgeon who loses her job after a car crash leaves her hands with a bad case of paresthesia, a crippling disorder that led to the accidental death of a patient. As if Hunt's professional life wasn't enough of a disaster, her personal life is also on the skids. She blames her long work hours for the dissolution of her marriage, and her inability to maintain custody of her young daughter. When women work this often, Hunt complains, "they're just absentee mothers. If it's a man, he's called the provider." Yes, Hunt has endless justifiable reasons to complain. But that doesn't make her consistently pompous unpleasantness any more defensible, let alone engaging. If a man were cast in a similar role, he'd either be the villain or a comedic sourpuss in need of redemption (a la "Mr. Sunshine"). Yet I suspect that "Proof" creator Chris Murphey sees Hunt as the sort of social rebel viewers will want to high five rather than flip off.



Geoffrey Arend, Windell Middlebrooks, Jeri Ryan, Dana Delany, Sonja Sohn, John Carroll Lynch and Nicholas Bishop star in ABC's Body of Proof.

Photo credit: ABC

In the pilot's early moments, we learn that Hunt has taken on a new career as a medical examiner. Her meticulous knowledge of the human body has enabled her to find vital clues to a given murder simply by observing the corpse. She leaves not a trace of doubt about her skills by explaining, "I honor the body for what it tells me about the life. The body is the proof," while the camera slowly closes in on her face as if to say, 'This Is The Meaning Of The Title.' Anytime she delves into one of her overwritten monologues, she sounds like House as played by Patricia Heaton without the occasional charm. At least Tuohy (in "The Blind Side") had a never-ending gallery of sexist and/or racist meatheads to legitimize her need to put up a hardened front. Here, Hunt only has Bud Morris (played by the wonderful John Carroll Lynch), a veteran homicide detective who can't understand why this ex-surgeon keeps impinging on "his" case, even as she makes spectacular progress. The admiration he gained for her at the end of the pilot appears to have vanished in future episodes, thus leading me to dread a predictable cycle of respect giving way to skepticism, as if the previous episode hadn't even happened. Lynch is too good a character actor to simply play the cantankerous foil for Miss Prove It All.



ABC's new drama Body of Proof premieres
March 29, 2011.

Photo credit: ABC

No one could stand to be a probable love interest for someone this insufferable, unless that person had the limitless patience of Peter Dunlop (Nicholas Bishop), a medicolegal investigator also harboring a fractured past. The early episodes thankfully don't strain to make these compatible colleagues an item, though Dunlop is required to draw forced parallels between Hunt's life and the lives of the deceased. Once she learns that a victim restored her relationships after a sudden accident, Dunlop suggests that Hunt could learn a lesson from her story, embracing her misfortune as an opportunity to grow. There's nothing inherently wrong with this plot point, except that it feels completely tacked on. Not a single element in the show feels the least bit original, from the neurotic comic relief (Geoffrey Arend) contained in a bubble of awkward silence, to the obvious red herrings that would cause Matlock's eyes to roll. The ease with which Hunt comes to her assured conclusions is borderline laughable, such as when she surmises that a victim was wearing sunglasses simply by examining its disembodied hand and foot.

And yet, despite my multitude of reservations, I'm not quite ready to fully write off this show. Delany does excel during moments when her character is allowed to register human emotion, proving that she's not just a clever android. The fleeting scenes with her daughter are well acted enough to make one hope that future episodes will probe deeper into Hunt's character, and possibly lead to some sort of gradual transformation. It's also nice to see Hunt's boss, chief medical examiner Kate (Jeri Ryan), prove that one needn't be stuck-up in order to be considered strong. These few glimmers of hope may be foreshadowing better episodes in the show's future. The question is: will viewers stick around to find out? On the basis of this pilot, I sure wouldn't.

'Body of Proof,' which airs on ABC, stars Dana Delany, Nicholas Bishop, John Carroll Lynch, Jeri Ryan, Sonja Sohn, Geoffrey Arend and Windell Middlebrooks. The show was created by Chris Murphey. The first season premieres on Thursday, March 29, 2011 at 9PM CST.



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