

TV Review: Jeremy Irons Carries Saga of Corruption in ‘The Borgias’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 2, 2011 - 10:45am

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CHICAGO – Power, royalty, sex, corruption — Is this “Camelot,” “The Kennedys,” or “The Borgias”? There’s an odd number of tales of royal families on TV this weekend and the best belongs to Showtime with an instantly-striking performance from the Oscar-winning Jeremy Irons. With strong direction from Neil Jordan (“The Crying Game,” “Interview with the Vampire”) and lavish production values, this 9-episode series should find a loyal audience for Showtime even if it does feel a bit overly familiar.



In 1492, at the beginning of one of the most important eras of human evolution as art, science, and invention were about to explode worldwide, there was no more important position in the world than that of Pope. When Innocent VIII died, it was unclear who would replace him and bring pride back to the city of Rome, one that was already succumbing to the corruption of a new world. A surprising candidate stepped forward and essentially bribed his way into the position: Rodrigo Borgia (Jeremy Irons), who would take the name Pope Alexander VI and rule with such unbridled power that he would inspire one of Machiavelli’s most notorious characters in “The Prince.”



The Borgias
Photo credit: Showtime

“The Borgias” tells the story of its titular family’s downright revolutionary abuse of power. As influential artists were crafting the Renaissance, Rodrigo Borgia and his family were revolutionizing the art of manipulation, murder, and general mayhem. If you think being President or King is a powerful throne on which to sit, imagine if the only being you answered to were God. When Lord Acton famously said, “*Absolute power corrupts absolutely*” even he wasn’t thinking on this grand a scale.





The Borgias
Photo credit: Showtime

And being the son of the Pope ain't bad either. The main supporting player in this saga of corruption — the Michael Corleone to Irons' Don Vito — is Cesare Borgia (Francois Arnaud), a handsome, charismatic young man who starts by doing whatever it takes to get his father into power and then is forced to go far to keep him there. For his service, he is turned into a Cardinal, while his brother Juan (David Oakes) becomes head of the papal armies. Even his daughter Lucrezia (Holliday Grainger) will eventually be used as a political tool. Rodrigo is almost brilliant in his blatant nepotism, placing people loyal to him wherever he may need them.

Like most powerful men, Rodrigo Borgia has his carnal appetites as well. The mother of his children (Joanne Whalley) started as an illicit lover and he will take another (the gorgeous Lotte Verbeek) before the end of the first two-part episode, putting his papacy at risk by having such an affair. Of course, the way Borgia came into power and the blatant way in which he wielded it created more than a few enemies. For at least the first season of the series, the most notable is Cardinal Della Rovere (Colm Feore), a man who feels divine purpose in his removal of the clearly-sinful Borgia but one wonders how far he'll slide to get his way.

Clearly, there's a lot going on in "The Borgias" and craftsmen Neil Jordan and Jeremy Irons relish the opportunity to tell another costume drama filled with sex, murder, and betrayal. The high pedigree of the team behind Showtime's offering elevate it above "The Borgias" and even above the so-so "The Tudors" but I couldn't help feeling like I had seen this before. Perhaps I'm just exhausted by the odd current glut of power struggles on my television, but I had a hard time caring about "The Borgias" even though I respected and admired most of the production.

It's definitely a program that's impossible not to admire on a technical level and the multi-faceted work by Irons is always fascinating, but the two-episode premiere can get a bit bogged down in its Shakespearian aspirations. I'm not sure yet what it can add to the conversation about power, royalty, sex, and corruption — one of the most consistently drawn-upon wells in the world of TV writing — although TV with this caliber of acting, direction, and general production values should be encouraged. While it may not feel new, it's still a strong dramatic offering from a network consistently delivering them.

"The Borgias" stars Jeremy Irons, Francois Arnaud, David Oakes, Holliday Grainger, Joanne Whalley, Lotte Verbeek, and Colm Feore. The premiere was written and directed by Neil Jordan. It premieres on Showtime on April 3rd, 2011 at 8pm CST.



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