

TV Review: 'Combat Hospital' Fails to Get the Pulse Pounding

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CHICAGO – Is there a script doctor in the house? ABC is in dire need of one. How could the network possibly greenlight “Combat Hospital” in light of its recently botched, strikingly similar effort, “Off the Map”? Both shows fail to mine the potential drama in their inherently dramatic premises. Medical clinics in the South American jungle or an Afghanistan war zone should have no time or patience for melodramatic soap opera.

That being said, “Hospital” is a slight improvement over “Map,” despite its generic title and lack of colorful locales. Set in a NATO Role 3 Multinational Medical Unit at Kandahar Airfield (reportedly modeled after a real-life clinic), the show has genuine potential to explore an assortment of intriguing conflicts. The premiere episode, “Welcome to Kandahar,” only hints at the possible directions that the program could take in order to prevent itself from becoming a standard medical drama destined for cancellation.



Television Rating: **2.5/5.0**

Underrated character actor Elias Koteas lends his effortlessly magnetic presence to the role of Colonel Xavier Marks, commander of the high-pressured, multinational medical center in Southern Afghanistan, circa 2006. Koteas' subdued demeanor is calming and intimidating in about equal measure. Malick fans may recall the great scene in 1998's masterful war film, “The Thin Red Line” in which Koteas stood up to an enraged Nick Nolte without ever once raising his voice. His reluctance to chew the scenery makes his work all the more entrancing. That makes him a perfect choice for Col. Marks, a man so accustomed to his chaotic surroundings that he can simultaneously shoot a snake and operate on a patient without flinching a muscle. Sure, that moment is a little silly, but not nearly as much of an eye-roller as the following line, delivered by the clinic's new trauma surgeon, Rebecca Gordon (Michelle Borth), who groans, “That wasn't in the manual...” It's the sort of dialogue that works better in a glib TV spot than it does in the midst of a supposedly authentic one-hour drama. Of course, how authentic can an Afghanistan-set series be when it's shot in Toronto?



Deborah Kara Unger, Arnold Pinnock, Michelle Borth, Elias Koteas, Luke Mably and Terry Chen star in ABC's *Combat Hospital*.

Photo credit: ABC

As in "Map," the show opens as fresh-faced recruits intermingle with wizened veterans while a ceaseless stream of bodies flow through the doors of the bustling unit. Major Gordon initially comes off as a Hotlips-style ditz, hiding her latest pregnancy test from fellow doctors while refusing to buckle up for a rocky landing. Yet Borth never allows the character to become a flake, and her vaguely deadpan demeanor appears to have been borrowed from Cheryl Hines (if only Marks was played by Larry David...). No sooner has Gordon stepped off the plane than she begins to lock horns with her new boss. Faced with losing a patient during a surgery performed by a stumped rookie doc, Capt. Bobby Trang (Terry Chen), Gordon flies to the rescue with a precise incision and the swift insertion of a chest tube. Instead of praising her last-minute operation, Marks scolds her for undermining the doctor's confidence. This is the moment that earns Gordon the necessary empathy from viewers. For the rest of the episode, Gordon fights against impending fatigue while fleeing to the aid of one emergency case after another, as the sound design effectively conveys her fading consciousness. Unfortunately, the editing overdoes it by cutting within shots to further increase suspense (it doesn't).



ABC's new drama *Combat Hospital* premieres June 21, 2011.

Photo credit: ABC

A bigger problem with this pilot is the tired familiarity of character dynamics threatening to emerge in future episodes. Luke Mably (best known to teenage girls for "The Prince & Me") plays British doc Simon Hill with a McDreamy sleaze and desperate desire to get in the knickers of every eligible female. His few lustful glances at Gordon erase any shadow of a doubt that a torrid yet misguided affair is in their future. "Hospital" is at its least convincing when it attempts to feign lightheartedness within such a relentlessly dire setting. Since the clinic includes casualties on both sides of the war effort, an injured Taliban member is wheeled in right alongside the bodies of American casualties. This subplot should inspire great provocative drama, but the pilot uses it primarily for gross out gags. As doctors attempt to restrain the rebellious man, he spits in one of their faces, resulting in an ultra-lame, "Dude—gross!" punch line.

Another subplot that deserves greater exposure this season centers on a women's clinic briefly introduced to Gordon by her bunkmate, Major Pedersen (Deborah Kara Unger). Clinic volunteers visit Afghan women in their homes to serve their physical and mental needs. If "Hospital" truly intends on surviving the next few weeks, it should truly explore the complex relationship between the multinational caregivers and their local patients. It can't simply fall back on reliable clichés and expect to sustain audience interest. The dramas that endure are the ones that take risks. If "Hospital" can't realize the innate potential of its material, it will be quickly written off the map.

'Combat Hospital,' which airs on ABC, stars Michelle Borth, Terry Chen, Elias Koteas, Luke Mably, Gord Rand, Karan Oberoi, Arnold Pinnock and Deborah Kara Unger. The show was created by Daniel Petrie Jr., Douglas Steinberg and Jinder Chalmers. The first season premieres on Tuesday, June 21, 2011 at 9PM CST.

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