

TV Review: All Style, Little Substance in NBC's 'The Playboy Club'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 19, 2011 - 12:12pm

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CHICAGO – In the four years since the pilot of “Mad Men,” there has been an obligatory and opportunistic surge of ‘60s-themed media, capitalizing on the rising nostalgia for the era of civil rights marches and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The tumultuous decade has been resurrected in everything from stylized contact lens commercials, to the lushly beautiful film “A Single Man,” to this season’s ABC pilot “Pan Am.”



TV Rating: **2.0/5.0**

Thus, this season, four years into the pro-‘60s fervor, NBC brings us “The Playboy Club,” a stylized but unmemorable fiction set against the backdrop of Hugh Hefner’s real-life Chicago nightclub that was sprung of, and perhaps helped spring, the decade’s sexual revolution.

The pilot opens with the real Hugh Hefner’s raspy narration, and with it his implicit blessing on the series. But rather than taking this as a harbinger of intriguing things to come, by the end of the episode, I’d decided that this was merely a sign of his desperation to cash in on his previous glory.



The Playboy Club
Photo credit: NBC

At the center of the series is Nick Dalton (Eddie Cibrian), an ex-mob lawyer struggling to go legit in a bid for election to state’s attorney in

Chicago. Bunny Maureen, or the Cigarette Bunny (Amber Heard), is a doe-eyed new hire at the Playboy Club and is the newest prime cut at the meat market. David Krumholtz plays Billy Rosen, manager of the club, and Laura Benanti is Carol-Lynne, Dalton's now-aging and bitterly jealous Bunny girlfriend.



The Playboy Club
Photo credit: NBC

When the series opens, Maureen has just arrived from Fort Wayne, Indiana, alluding to a troubled upbringing and clinging hopefully to dreams of becoming a singer. After Dalton and Maureen's coyly flirtatious early meeting in the club, the sought-after Bunny is almost immediately attacked in a dark, deserted back room by mob boss Bruno Bianchi, who is Dalton's former employer. A struggle ensues among Maureen, the mafioso, and Dalton, who has come to her rescue, which results in the accidental death of the crime-family head. Thus, Dalton and Maureen are now inexorably and conveniently linked in their complicity as they risk being discovered by the police, or worse, by the Bianchi crime family.

Hefner's narration states, "*Bunnies were some of the only women in the '60s who could be anything they wanted to be.*" Maybe so, but much like the '60s, this pilot is a man's world. Though cursory attention is paid to Maureen and her fellow Bunnies, it's as if the show's creators couldn't help but fetishize Dalton, as a brooding and devilishly handsome lead à la Don Draper. Though certainly, this show is equal-opportunity fetishism—while Cibrian's Dalton is more style than substance, Heard's Maureen is the picture of blinking wide-eyed coquettishness.

However, Heard has a couple of substantial scenes. One is between her and the manipulatively competitive Carol-Lynne, in which the two women face off in a tersely quiet confrontation that displays Maureen's honesty and a toughness not previously hinted at.

Still, with a few exceptions, both Maureen and Dalton are rarely more than eye candy. The series feels like there is not much to it other than Beautiful People who show up to the Playboy Club to see and be seen. Perhaps that was the driving force behind the real-life Playboy Club, but in a sea of '60s-era homages, this surface-level treatment seems culturally and artistically unnecessary.

"The Playboy Club" premieres Monday, Sept. 19 at 9:00 p.m. CDT. It stars Eddie Cibrian, Amber Heard, David Krumholtz and Laura Benanti. Directed by Alan Taylor ("The Sopranos," "Mad Men"), and written and produced by Chad Hodge.



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