

TV Review: Entrancing ‘Revenge’ Serves Up Plentiful Guilty Pleasures

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CHICAGO – With lobbyists controlling the nation’s capital and the middle class perched on the edge of poverty, an increasing number of American viewers are seeking modes of escapism. And what better way to escape than watch a wronged girl wreak havoc on a cultish clan of rich snobs? Creator Mike Kelley (“Swingtown”) has the current economic woes to thank for making his new ABC drama serial, “Revenge,” all the more enticing.

Though the show has garnered instant comparisons to cheesy back-stabbing soap operas of the ’80s, Kelley has assembled a first-rate cast and crew to keep the potentially campy material at least partially grounded in credibility. Of course, each episode still has enough bitchy one-liners and delicious double-crosses to fill a Bette Davis marathon, and is sure to be hailed as one of the season’s top guilty pleasures.



Television Rating: **4.0/5.0**

“Everwood”’s ever-radiant Emily VanCamp stars as Amanda, a twenty-something woman with a mysterious past and a serious axe to grind. Under the guise of “Emily Thorne,” Amanda infiltrates an upscale community in the Hamptons by renting out a house where she once lived with her now-deceased father. The house has an excellent view of Grayson Manor, the regal abode of Amanda’s arch-nemesis, Victoria (Madeleine Stowe). One of the most interesting things about the show is its use of flashbacks, which not only detail the scorned heroine’s troubled childhood but also offer glimpses at the various ensemble members who now view the grown-up Amanda as a complete stranger. Though her father is depicted as a devoted family man, it’s inferred that his supposed affair with Victoria may have been the indiscretion that doomed his fate, destroyed his reputation and left him in wrongful imprisonment. The deep-seated conspiracy that ruined his family extends far beneath the sun-drenched beaches and pastel-colored mansions on this ghoulishly chipper estate, and it’s clear that Amanda intends on taking down the conspirators one by one.



Gabriel Mann, Ashley Madekwe, Nick Wechsler, Emily VanCamp, Josh Bowman, Connor Paolo, Christa Allen, Madeleine Stowe and Henry Czerny star in ABC’s Revenge.

Photo credit: ABC

After opening in the midst of a blood-spattered Labor Day bash, the show cuts back three months to “Emily”’s arrival in the Hamptons. She quickly arouses the suspicion of Victoria when she starts warming up to her hunky son, Daniel (Josh Bowman). Yet Amanda’s meticulous charade is airtight, particularly when she joins forces with her equally disgruntled partner-in-vengeance, shrewd entrepreneur Nolan (Gabriel Mann). While Kelley loosely based his revenge yarn on Alexandre Dumas’s immortal “Count of Monte Cristo,” “Revenge” owes a greater debt to prime-time staples such as “Peyton Place” and “Dallas.” Its addictive appeal lies in the promise of watching Amanda’s master plan gradually unfold over the 13-episode season.

After being routinely typecast as the good girl for much of her career, 25-year-old VanCamp is clearly delighting in the opportunity to take part in such diabolical naughtiness. There’s a chilling coldness within each of her warm smiles and calculated imitations of gaiety, and Amanda’s double life gives VanCamp a great range of nuances to bring to every seemingly casual exchange. It’s a juicy role for the actress, and she’s well-matched by Stowe, who’s hell-bent on perfecting the art of the withering stare. Backed by the hollow applause of her intimidated subordinates, Victoria lunges in for the kill when she suspects that one of her friends has committed the ultimate betrayal against her. The impeccable timing of the revelation is entirely a part of Amanda’s devious grand design. After finding her beloved house currently under the ownership of Lydia (nicely played by Amber Valletta), she discovers a damning element in the homeowner’s private life that could easily be used to her advantage. To say more would be criminal.



ABC’s new drama *Revenge* premieres Sept. 21, 2011.

Photo credit: ABC

One of Kelley’s smartest decisions was to hire a seasoned pro to helm the pilot. Phillip Noyce (of “Patriot Games” and “Quiet American” fame) keeps the pacing brisk while planting his tongue firmly in his cheek. A show this cluttered with melodramatic gestures can’t take itself too seriously, and the ideal reaction to this lark would be one of entranced bemusement. The show is certainly not without its cornball moments, such as when the financially struggling (and therefore sympathetic) lad Jack (Nick Wechsler) reveals that his prized boat is named “Amanda” after ‘a girl he once knew...’ His brother Declan (Connor Paolo) is the sort of irritating twerp that viewers will enjoy watching get pummeled (be sure to stick around for episode two).

I’ll admit that I laughed out loud when Angus and Julia Stone’s “Hold On” was self-consciously used during an icy exchange between Lydia and Amanda. After Lydia sticks a thinly veiled threat into her friendly chatter, the song cuts in with the line, “Hold on, what did you say that for?” I also giggled when Amanda whipped out a photo of her various enemies and started crossing out their faces with a red marker (just like Uma Thurman in “Kill Bill”).

The show’s silliness quotient would’ve proved fatal if married with a deadly serious tone, but “Revenge” strikes just the right note of morbid playfulness. Armed with an exceedingly strong cast, Kelley’s latest effort promises to offer a season chockfull of delicious paybacks and tangled plot threads that keep the viewer guessing. Is it groundbreaking television? Of course not, but it certainly succeeds as compulsive escapism. After sitting through endless news stories in which justice is flat out denied, I honestly can’t think of a more unapologetically pleasurable diversion.

‘Revenge,’ which airs on ABC, stars Emily VanCamp, Madeleine Stowe, Josh Bowman, Gabriel Mann, Nick Wechsler, Connor Paolo, Henry Czerny, Christa Allen, Ashley Madekwe and Amber Valletta. The show was created by Mike Kelley. The first season premieres on Wednesday, Sept. 21, 2011 at 9PM CST.

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