

## TV Review: Breezy ‘Pan Am’ Pilot Exudes Promise in Flawed Launch

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CHICAGO – Feminism continues to be redefined for a new generation in this season’s slate of TV dramas. While NBC’s “The Playboy Club” makes the age-old error of confusing exploitation with empowerment, ABC’s “Pan Am” argues that flight attendants paved the way for the modern woman. Both programs offer a predominantly female perspective of the era recently popularized by “Mad Men,” while emulating Matthew Weiner’s cinematic approach to a small-screen serial.

Yet while “Playboy Club” is awash in dreary melodrama, “Pan Am” has the breezy tone and gauzy look of Steven Spielberg’s droll period piece, “Catch Me If You Can.” Loosely based on the experiences of former stewardess Nancy Ganis (who serves as executive producer), the show promises a palatable hodgepodge of romantic soap opera and nostalgic whimsy served with a dash of cold war espionage. Though the pilot succeeds as a promising launching pad, it is not without its instantly identifiable shortcomings.



Television Rating: **3.0/5.0**

Christian Ricci heads the exceedingly attractive cast as Maggie, a skilled stewardess temporarily grounded on a uniform violation. She’s called on last minute to fill in for an absent co-worker during the maiden flight of the 707 jet, described by cocky captain Dean (Mike Vogel) as “the newest clipper jet in the Pan Am fleet.” By opening the show in 1963, it’s clear that creator/writer Jack Orman (“ER”) intends on exploring key moments in the decade from a wide-angled perspective, since the ladies’ globe-hopping job opens the doors for plenty of intentional intrigue.

Despite being top-billed, Ricci has scant screen time in the pilot, which focuses on the lives and back-stories of her three fellow employees. French brunette Colette (Karin Vanasse) is shocked to discover that the man she slept with after a previous flight is married with children. Blonde novice Laura (Margot Robbie) is equally mortified by the sight of her face gracing the cover of “Life Magazine,” presenting passengers with an image too daunting for her to fill. Meanwhile, Laura’s sister Kate (Kelli Garner) spends much of the pilot sneaking quick looks at an ominous man with glasses and a suspicious briefcase. It takes a while for the pilot to reveal the ambiguous nature of Kate’s relationship with the mystery man, resulting in a twist many viewers will reject as flat-out absurd. It remains to be seen whether the ambition of Orman’s plot will lead the show to tantalizing destinations or mere flights of lunacy.



Christina Ricci stars in ABC's Pan Am.

*Photo credit: ABC*

"West Wing" director Thomas Schlamme does a fine job helming the pilot, which never drags and allows each of its fine actresses to shine (with the exception of Ricci, who better get a major plotline stat). Robbie is particularly touching as an anguished bride-to-be desperate to reroute her aimless existence by following in the footsteps of her sister. Laura's inexperience causes her to come off as a klutz, but she's never depicted as a stereotypical bubblehead. In fact, there isn't a ditz among these sleek stewardesses, who are all well-educated, fluent in multiple languages and impeccably dressed (though a few occasionally need to be reminded to wear a girdle). When chauvinistic first officer Ted (Michael Mosley) refers to the attendants as a "new breed of women," Dean snarls, "Don't try and ground them." This single line is meant to portray Dean as anything other than an arrogant jerk. His extreme level of self-absorption leads to a moment late in the pilot so inane that it nearly grinds the entire production to a halt (we'll get to that in a moment).



Margot Robbie and Kelli Garner star in ABC's Pan Am.

*Photo credit: ABC*

With a predictable array of pop tunes largely borrowed from the Bobby Darin songbook (such as "Faraway Places" and "Mack the Knife"), "Pan Am" breaks no new ground in its familiar portrayal of the period. ABC made the rather dopey decision to have its characters refrain from smoking, while playing up the angle that stewardesses served as an inspiration for the young girls of America. Sure, they were objectified nearly as much as the Playboy Bunnies, but did their worldliness and sophistication represent a giant leap for womankind? The jury is still out on that verdict, and the pilot's feminist anthem is as earnest as it is overplayed.

There are certainly enough fabulous, faraway places for "Pan Am" to explore and enough enticing plot threads to keep attention rapt. Yet Orman risks sinking the whole show if he allows hokey subplots to upstage fascinating historical set-pieces. In what is surely the worst sequence in the pilot, one of the characters flashes back to a stealth mission where a Pan Am flight team rescued Cuban prisoners during the Bay of Pigs. This scene is taken directly from Ganis's life story, but the show never pauses long enough to do it justice. What had the potential to be a tense sequence of fact-based heroism instead turns into a melodramatic proposal between first officer Dean and the flight attendant of his dreams. Despite the captain's desperate pleas to get the prisoners off the ground, Dean stands outside the plane and demands to have her hand in marriage, thus stalling the mission in favor of his trivial pursuits. I suppose Orman figured that the scene would look more dramatic with the engines whirring and the actors' hair blowing in the wind, but staging the scene outside as opposed to in the cockpit is...well...just plane silly.

*'Pan Am,' which airs on ABC, stars Kelli Garner, Margot Robbie, Christina Ricci, Karine Vanasse, Mike Vogel, Michael Mosley and Annabelle Wallis. The show was created by Jack Orman. The first season premieres on Sunday, Sept. 25, 2011 at 9PM CST.*



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