

TV Review: ABC's 'Once Upon a Time' Gets 'Lost' in Faerie Tale Land

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CHICAGO – With two “Snow White” films currently in production, it’s tempting to believe that Hollywood’s well of originality has run dry. Sure, faerie tales have always been reinterpreted for new generations, but how many re-imaginings does one generation need? It’s only a matter of time until every storybook legend is given a cinematic vehicle before teaming up in the inevitable blockbuster directed by Joss Whedon.

Now American television has followed suit, debuting two new dramas this season that incorporate fantastical characters into a modern setting: NBC’s cop show “Grimm” and ABC’s greatly publicized “Once Upon a Time.” The hype surrounding ABC’s audacious offering is largely due to the involvement of “Lost” writers Adam Horowitz and Edward Kitsis, who began developing the show long before joining J.J. Abrams’ team. On the basis of their diverting pilot, it’s clear that the program aims to do for Disney’s “Enchanted” what “Lost” did for “Gilligan’s Island”—transform a silly premise into a gripping ensemble piece.



Television Rating: **3.0/5.0**

So many twists and turns are revealed within the opening scenes that critics will have an especially difficult time avoiding key plot points in their reviews. What’s surprising is how straightforward the show is in regard to portraying its central conflict. Whereas “Lost” stranded its cast on an island with no knowledge of where they were or how to get out, the “Time” pilot is anything but ambiguous about the nature of its characters’ entrapment. The show opens with Snow White (Ginnifer Goodwin) and Prince Charming (Josh Dallas) in the throws of bliss until their wedding ceremony is interrupted by Debbie Downer—er, The Evil Queen (Lana Parrilla). She plans to bring down a curse upon the Enchanted Forest, freezing time while relieving inhabitants of their memories, and therefore their identities. Disguising herself as the mayor of Storybrooke, Maine, the Queen (under the alias of “Regina”) presides over a “Truman Show”-like community populated by figures such as Little Red Riding Hood, Jiminy Cricket and Cinderella—all confined in mundane mortal flesh. There’s no hope for escape unless an outside influence manages to unlock the mystery. And that’s where bail bondswoman Emma Swan (Jennifer Morrison) comes into play.



Raphael Sbarge, Lana Parrilla, Jared Gilmore, Jennifer Morrison, Robert Carlyle, Jamie Dornan, Ginnifer Goodwin and Josh Dallas star in ABC's Once Upon a Time.

Photo credit: ABC

Since it's initially unclear what Swan's connection is to the main plotline, I'll refrain from revealing too much detail. Swan is a self-described loner whose parents left her on the side of the road when she was a newborn. Her hermetic existence is cracked wide open when a precocious ten-year-old, Henry (Jared Gilmore), walks into her life claiming to be her son. The kid could be right, considering that Swan gave her newborn up for adoption a decade prior, but his other claims seem more than a little suspect. Henry believes Emma will be the cure to all his problems, and guides her back to his current home...in Storybrooke.

TV buffs will likely note that the town clock is frozen at 8:15, which is the same number as the infamous doomed flight that set the "Lost" pilot into motion. Yet this clever homage is not the only connection between "Time" and Abrams' long-running brain twister of a series. Both shows skillfully utilize parallel storylines that simultaneously unfold while featuring the same ensemble. Just as "Lost" cut back and forth between the characters' lives on and off the island, "Time" juxtaposes the characters' past adventures with their current imprisonment in the town. It's a nifty storytelling device, allowing the earthbound characters to spot resonant metaphors within "fictional" texts that are in fact detailed logs of their own backstories. Yet for all of its cleverness and manufactured suspense, Horowitz and Kitsis leave precious little to the imagination. It's difficult to determine how many seasons this broadly realized high concept could be credibly stretched.



Ginnifer Goodwin is whiter than snow in ABC's Once Upon a Time.

Photo credit: ABC

One of the strongest aspects about the pilot is the performance by Morrison, who grounds her scenes in an emotional reality that calls the fantasy scenes into question. Though Swan's willingness to cancel her plans in favor of a kid's delusions seems rather far-fetched, Morrison is sublimely subtle in conveying her growing compassion for a boy whose alienation mirrors her own. On the other end of the spectrum is Parrilla, whose portrayal of the Queen falls miserably flat. Her delivery of lines like, "Out of your suffering will rise my victory," lacks any sense of urgency or formidable malice. Yet strangely enough, Parrilla proves to be far more effective in modern dress, as her icy Regina evokes the radiant sociopathic demeanor of Madeleine Stowe in "Revenge."

Though she's been cursed with a series of lame movie roles, Goodwin's pixie-like beauty is well suited for the role of White, and her strong-willed portrayal is bound to please feminists. It's fun to observe the ways in which Horowitz and Kitsis go about subverting the familiar tropes, such as when the prince switches places with his formerly sleeping beauty in the modern realm. Yet it's clear that the show could benefit from a dose of "Princess Bride"-type whimsy, since one can only take these characters seriously for so long. A few solemn lines in the pilot inspire unintentional chuckles, such as when Prince Charming broodingly notes, "The animals are abuzz with the queen's plan," or when a man angrily barks out, "Rumpelstiltskin!" Yet his violent tone is justified once viewers meet the fiendish creature, played by Robert Carlyle as a cross between Hannibal Lecter and Gollum.

"Once Upon a Time" is hardly a game-changer, but it's still absorbing escapism, which is more than can be said for the majority of ABC's new programming during this underwhelming season. On the basis of its pilot, the show seems more like miniseries material on par with "The 10th Kingdom" as opposed to a long-running epic. If Horowitz and Kitsis truly intend on keeping the show around for longer than a season, they should attempt to inject a sense of awe and wonder into the proceedings, rather than strive for unenchanted realism. What fun is a faerie tale without magic?

'Once Upon a Time,' which airs on ABC, stars Jennifer Morrison, Lana Parrilla, Ginnifer Goodwin, Jared Gilmore, Robert Carlyle, Raphael Sbarge and Josh Dallas. The show was created by Adam Horowitz and Edward Kitsis. The first season premieres on Sunday, Oct. 23, 2011 at 7PM CST.



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