

TV Review: Don Cheadle Enters Showtime's Intriguing 'House of Lies'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 8, 2012 - 10:30am

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CHICAGO – The premiere of “House of Lies” is a smug, self-aware affair, a pilot that doesn’t show you how smart and clever it is as much as begs you to think it so over and over and over again. But, thanks largely to its talented cast, it passes the ultimate test of a premiere and intrigues enough to make a second episode worth investigating. From here, “HoL” works. The second episode is a noticeable improvement as the desperation dissipates and the show settles into its flawed-but-interesting groove.



Television Rating: **3.5/5.0**

The first ten minutes of “House of Lies” are so grating and annoying that one could easily be dissuaded from continuing and I wouldn’t blame them. With regular breakings of the fourth wall, gratuitous adult humor, and characters that almost seem intended to be disliked. This is a show that opens with a man waking up after “hate banging” his shrill ex-wife and moves on to display how he’s essentially a high-powered con man, a marketing consultant who convinces fat cat businessmen that they need his skills, even though those skills are never really defined in any way. That’s part of the joke. They sell nothing to people who can afford it. But, as the next few episodes indicate, it’s starting to eat away at them.



House of Lies

Photo credit: Showtime

Who’s they? In a tragic case of naming a character who cons people a little too literally, Marty Kaan (Don Cheadle) is the A-list earner at Galweather-Stern, a management consulting firm that includes wonderful appearances by Richard Schiff and Griffin Dunne as Kaan’s bosses in future episodes. He heads a team that includes the clever-and-gorgeous Jeannie (Kristen Bell of “Veronica Mars”), outgoing Clyde (Ben

Schwartz of "Parks and Recreation"), and buttoned-up Doug (Josh Lawson). Of course, Marty has home drama as well, fueled by the fact that his ex-wife (Dawn Olivieri) happens to also be his biggest business competition and that his son Roscoe (Donis Leonard Jr.) happens to be the most popular drag queen in high school. In the premiere, he wants to try out for "Grease." To play the Olivia Newton John part.



House of Lies
Photo credit: Showtime

Like a lot of Showtime comedies (including two that return the same night, "Californication" and "Shameless"), "House of Lies" often feels like it's trying too hard to be edgy. Seeing Don Cheadle glance knowingly at the camera after trying to get his comatose wife out of bed and accidentally falling face first into her ass reeks more of desperation than of edge. And the fact is that Marty, at least at first, simply isn't likable. Watching him and the boys get down and dirty at a strip club on their client's dime isn't very entertaining. We don't know these characters well enough yet to enjoy the fact that they're having so much fun. They come off more like spoiled jerks, the kind of guy who cuts in line in front of you at Starbucks or won't turn his phone off at a fancy restaurant. It can be a chore to spend time with them.

Which should instantly make one wonder why actors as incredibly talented as Cheadle, an Oscar nominee who should have won for "Hotel Rwanda" and a much more deft comedian than his dramatic fans might expect, and Bell would be drawn to this material. Because they read more than the first script. The second episode is instantly more engaging, as the writers have found more of the pace and rhythm for their characters and taken them from desperate to entertain to desperate in a way that feels human. Whether it's Jeannie mistaking a visit from a head hunter as a date or Doug having an awkward encounter with Cat Deeley in an airport, the humor feels significantly less forced in all of the episodes I've seen after the premiere. And the core group is developing a key rhythm in that each has their own tones and strengths, much like how, when it was good, the quartet in "Entourage" each brought something different to the table.

In fact, as hard as it may be to believe given the tone of the premiere, I now like these characters, which is the key to any show that wants people to tune in every week. They don't have to be perfect, but you have to want to spend time with them. Thanks in no small part to the incredible cast assembled for "House of Lies," I'm curious to see what they do next. Honestly, just seeing a group as talented as Cheadle, Schiff, Dunne, and Bell in one room has a certain draw for anyone who knows their talent and past work. "House of Lies" still needs to iron out some kinks. Don't be so afraid to be honest and emotional. "Nurse Jackie" has found a near-perfect balance of arguably unlikable leads with honest emotion. "House of Lies" could easily get there if it finds the truth in the people who sell so much falsehood.

"House of Lies" stars Don Cheadle, Kristen Bell, Ben Schwartz, Josh Lawson, Dawn Olivieri, Richard Schiff, Donis Leonard Jr., Glynn Turman, and Griffin Dunne. It was created by Matthew Carnahan and premieres on Showtime on Sunday, January 8th at 9pm CST, after the season premiere of "Shameless" and before the return of "Californication."



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [19]

Content Director

HollywoodChicago.com

brian@hollywoodchicago.com [18]

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