

TV Review: NBC Hopes Third Time's the Charm with Intriguing 'Awake'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 1, 2012 - 10:36am

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CHICAGO – NBC continues to struggle on Thursday nights, producing two flops in the 9pm CST hour already this year — “Prime Suspect” and “The Firm.” Will the third time be the charm with tonight’s premiere of the highly-advertised “Awake”? While the show is intriguing, unique, and well-acted, it’s hard to see it taking off on the peacock network. I’m starting to wonder if anything that doesn’t star Adam Levine possibly can.



TV Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Please don’t take this dire commentary on the state of NBC as wish fulfillment on my part. They have taken some remarkable risks this year and currently air some of the best shows on network television — “Community,” “Parks and Recreation,” “Smash,” and, yes, “The Voice.” I probably watch it for personal recreation more than any other broadcast network. But they can’t find a hit. The fact is that they’re still struggling from the aftershocks of the “Jay Leno Show” earthquake when viewers and writers left in droves and are still slow to come back. Will “Awake” finally be the wake-up call for NBC?

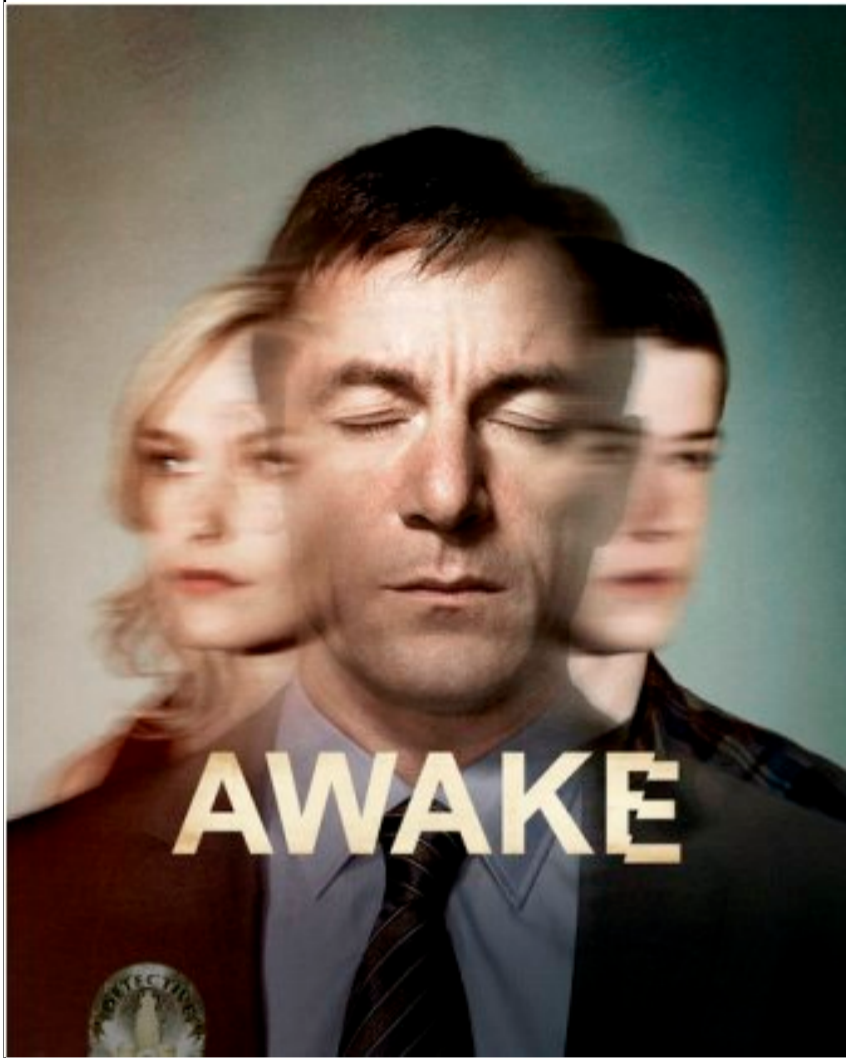


Awake

Photo credit: NBC

“Awake” is about a man named Michael Britten (Jason Isaacs) who lives in two realities. After a horrible car accident, he loses his lovely wife Hannah (Laura Allen) but his son Rex (Dylan Minnette) survives the crash. Or does he? He closes his eyes and the situation is reversed — his wife is alive but his only son is dead. Both tragic outcomes feel completely real to Britten. Is one a dream? Or is something more “Lost”-esque

going on? When the two realities start to blend into each other and even offer clues to the crimes that Britten is trying to solve in each of them, the question of whether or not this man has discovered a new kind of multiple personality disorder or has breached the space separating alternate universes becomes more prominent.



Awake
Photo credit: NBC

Britten still has a job to do in each of his realities and he has a shrink to see in both as well. This creates four roles — parallel detectives and parallel doctors. He gets along well with Detective Isaiah Freeman (Steve Harris) but butts heads with Detective Efram Vega (Wilmer Valderrama). Both shrinks (Cherry Jones & BD Wong) try to convince him that their reality is the actual one and that the other one is a dream. The dual existence gives Britten kind of a zen-like approach to crime-solving, which reminded me of NBC's stellar "Life," a program that never found the audience it deserved.

While "Awake" is certainly a somber show, Isaacs smartly plays Britten as a man not deep in depression. He still has his wife. He still has his son. There is natural emotional pain that he'll never have them together again but "Awake" is not the dirge you might expect. If anything, I kind of wanted it to be MORE emotional. Imagine the different skill sets it takes to comfort a wife grieving the loss of her son and a son grieving the loss of his mother. And imagine having to "fake" the same grief in both or be considered insane. These issues of grief are touched upon but not too deeply investigated, which makes for a show that doesn't get as depressing as it could but also feels a bit unfulfilled. I'm also fascinated to consider where "Awake" goes from here. Will Britten start dating in the life in which his wife is dead (maybe even Rex's tennis coach, played by Michaela McManus)? Will his wife emotionally bounce back in the one where she's lost her son?

Instead of a constant focus on the emotional gravity of Britten's situation, the writers turn "Awake" into something of an existential procedural. The detective has cases to solve in each reality and he soon realizes that one case can inform and help solve the other. Harris and Valderrama are both good in their supporting roles, offering different flavors for each reality.

But the show belongs to Isaacs. He's great, finding gravity in what could have been a show that just came off silly or, worse, melodramatic. This is a TOUGH part. He's in nearly every scene and he completely carries the piece. He's the main reason to check out this intriguing-if-inconsistent show. Maybe he can save NBC.

"Awake" stars Jason Isaacs, Laura Allen, Dylan Minnette, Steve Harris, Wilmer Valderrama, Cherry Jones, B.D. Wong, Michaela McManus, and Laura Innes. It premieres on NBC on Thursday, March 1st, 2012 at 9pm CST.



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