

TV Review: Riveting But Uneven ‘House of Cards’ Debuts on Netflix

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CHICAGO – By now, many of you have probably worked your way through the thirteen episodes of Netflix’s highly anticipated and (mostly) highly acclaimed new dramatic original series, “House of Cards,” starring Kevin Spacey, Robin Wright, Corey Stoll, and Kate Mara. While TV critics often get programming in advance, this was a case where everyone had access to all 13 episodes of the first season of a show at the same time.



Television Rating: **4.0/5.0**

It’s only one way in which “House of Cards” changed the rules. And lest you think that this series is not a game-changer, call someone at HBO, Showtime, Hulu, Amazon, or the ratings-deprived networks. They’re all paying close attention to what Netflix has accomplished here in defining a new business model that is not just profitable but creatively vital as well.



House of Cards
Photo credit: Netflix

Time will tell if “House of Cards” has the impact on the Netflix subscriber base that the company is hoping for but I can tell you this now that I’ve seen all 13 episodes — at its best, it’s great drama. There are entire episodes that will stand among the best that will air on any channel all year. And the performances are simply incredible from top to bottom. There are six good-to-great turns in the first season of “House of Cards” and not a weak link in the entire cast. So many great drama — “The Sopranos,” “Breaking Bad,” “The Wire” — share that trait: A uniformly stellar ensemble.



House of Cards
Photo credit: Netflix

After much deliberation, I will tread very lightly with spoilers, as I would reviewing something before it has aired. For those of you looking for more detailed plot analyses, they're out there. This is more for those curious about overall quality who may have not subscribed yet or added the show to their queue.

Everything on “House of Cards” dominoes from the off-camera, pre-show decision to not choose Congressman Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) to be the newly-elected President’s Secretary of State. The House Majority Whip is furious and begins a carefully-crafted plan to dismantle the power structure that betrayed his trust. It includes sabotaging an education reform bill, the assistance of an intrepid young reporter named Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), the Clean Water Initiative run by Frank’s wife (Robin Wright), and an addiction-prone U.S. Representative named Peter Russo (Corey Stoll), who Frank uses like a pawn on a chess board. Other major characters include Underwood’s Chief of Staff Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly), Russo’s girlfriend Christina (Kristen Connolly), the new White House Chief of Staff (Sakina Jaffrey), and a reporter (Constance Zimmer) at the Washington Herald who later joins Zoe on her quest for journalistic prominence.



House of Cards
Photo credit: Netflix

The first two episodes of “House of Cards” were directed by David Fincher, and the masterful filmmaker’s incredible attention to detail sets the tone for the entire series. Other notable directors allowed to helm episodes include James Foley (“Glengarry Glen Ross”), who really gets the show pulsing in the third and fourth episodes, Joel Schumacher, Carl Franklin (“Devil in a Blue Dress”), and Allan Coulter, who directs the final pair. It’s interesting to me that a film director takes the opening duo and a man known for directing some of the best TV of the last two decades (12 episodes of “The Sopranos” & 6 of “Boardwalk Empire”) brings the show in for a landing. From film greatness to TV greatness.

The best elements of “House of Cards” on a writing level address the symbiotic relationships that define most of the political machine. The blend of new media into something with clear tones of Shakespearean power drama is brilliant. The way Underwood uses Barnes, Twitter, and general media is as modern and insightful as we’ve seen on TV. Underwood brilliantly understands that it is not the event itself but the way the event is covered and reported on that matters. That mix of politics and publicity has never been captured more interestingly.



House of Cards
Photo credit: Netflix

The writing on “House of Cards” is stellar but it is the ensemble that truly resonates (and will do so through the Emmys). Kevin Spacey & Robin Wright have garnered much of the press so far and they’re both stellar as the MacBeth and his Lady of this piece but the supporting cast is just as strong, arguably more so. Corey Stoll delivers the best performance in the piece overall, finding the right balance of fallibility and confidence for this show-stealing character. Mara, Kelly, Connolly all deserve praise as well.

“House of Cards” feels like it could be the Best Drama on TV for about 7-8 episodes and then it gets a bit too caught up in its own plot. Without spoiling anything, a major character’s downfall comes too easily. He’s trapped too quickly. And, from that point on, “House of Cards” becomes more soap opera and less drama. The former is borne out of plot twists, the latter from character. I missed the character development of the first half of the season in the second half.

It’s a minor complaint for a major show. Even as it was becoming too soap operatic and uneven, I would never give “House of Cards” a negative grade. It’s too daring, too ambitious, and too riveting. It may not live up to those first few episodes by the end, but my response was still the one Netflix really wants when it’s over — I can’t wait for the next 13.

“House of Cards” stars Kevin Spacey, Robin Wright, Kate Mara, Corey Stoll, Kristen Connolly, and Michael Kelly. It was created by David Fincher and the first season is now available on Netflix.



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