

TV Review: Characters of ‘Mad Men’ Getting Lost in Changing World

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 7, 2013 - 11:21am

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CHICAGO – Don Draper (Jon Hamm) is no longer the most popular person in the room. Time, depression, alcoholism, and the changing politics have altered this character, once such a vital force of human nature. Remember the days when everything Don said hit with the client? When he could juggle secret pasts and multiple mistresses? One of the most prominent arcs of “Mad Men” overall has been how that Don is fading away as the ‘60s head toward the next decade. And the opening two-hour episode of “Mad Men,” “The Doorway,” airing tonight on AMC, only continues Don’s march toward rock bottom. The episode’s length damages its pacing (as almost always happens with supersized episodes of dramas and comedies) and “Mad Men” has never been a series to come into a new season at its peak (Weiner and his team work their way into a season more gradually) but this is still riveting drama with one of the best ensembles on TV and undeniably high production values. It’s good to have them back.



Television Rating: **4.5/5.0**

As Don and Megan (Jessica Pare) take a client-funded vacation in Hawaii, it's impossible not to notice that Don's no longer the center of attention. It turns out that Megan is something of a star, being recognized by strangers for her acting work and, of course, getting heads turning for her beauty. Don doesn't sleep well, spending late nights drinking at the resort bar, where he runs into a soldier on leave from Vietnam who is getting married in the morning. Does the young soldier remind Don of a younger version of himself? Does he just feel the passage of time more than he used to? It feels like this encounter will haunt an increasingly depressed Don. A later one in which a man almost dies in front of his eyes certainly will as well. Don is reaching that age where we take more notice of major moments in life like a young man's marriage or another's near-death. Is Don starting to come to terms with his mortality? And does he like what he sees?



Mad Men

Photo credit: AMC

Don's not alone. Roger (John Slattery) is unexpectedly faced with a situation that forces him to deal with the past and his eventual death. Meanwhile, Betty (January Jones) sees a youth who may be going astray and, somewhat surprisingly given her general cold nature, seeks to help her. Or does she? Why Betty does what she does in “The Doorway” may be the episode's most fascinating question thematically.

Finally, Peggy (Elisabeth Moss) is forced to deal with a crisis with one of her major clients when real world horror threatens to extinguish creativity. Pete (Vincent Kartheiser) and Joan (Christina Hendricks) have smaller roles in the premiere but that’s sure to change, and I found Pete’s lame attempts at the more bushy male fashions of the season hysterical in his one major moment. Whereas all the other ads guys now have long hair and a variety of facial stylings, Pete has longer sideburns and a little five-o-clock shadow. That’s as hippie as Pete gets.



Mad Men
Photo credit: AMC

While it’s always tempting to read thematically into episodes with writing this smart perhaps “The Doorway” is merely set up for the season. It would be impossible to ignore Don’s increasingly depressing state but perhaps that’s just set up for the final scenes which reveal a secret of one of the most popular characters of the last decade. And Roger and Betty could shake off the developments of this week or they could forever alter these characters. Much like “The Sopranos,” it’s often hard to tell which plot turns on “Mad Men” will end up merely being part of the fabric of the show and which ones will have lasting repercussions.

So judged purely on its own and not as to what it may say for the rest of the season, “The Doorway” is a good-not-great episode of “Mad Men,” like a lot of season premieres. It gently brings us back into this world of pitch meetings and liquid lunches but it does so with a pacing that feels slightly off. “Mad Men” is a slowly paced show already and stretching that pace to two hours does it no favors. I’ll never understand the double-episode premiere. I think it comes from TV executives who know that opening episodes always get big numbers and want more ad sales but it’s very rarely creatively sound. These writers are experts at the form they’ve been given - 43-47 minutes without commercials. They’re not quite as good at doubling that just as a great athlete wouldn’t be that good at playing two games in a row.

Having said that, the cast is still amazing — Moss, Hamm, & Slattery do work here that already lands them on the Emmy shortlists and Jones is more engaging and interesting than the entirety of last year — and the dialogue is still crisp and smart. I may not be in love with the season premiere of “Mad Men” specifically but it’s difficult not to be in love with the show overall, still one of the best on TV.

“Mad Men” stars Jon Hamm, January Jones, John Slattery, Elisabeth Moss, Vincent Kartheiser, Christina Hendricks, and Jessica Pare. It was created by Matthew Weiner. The sixth-season premiere airs on AMC at 8pm CST on April 7, 2013.



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