

TV Review: Fascinating Character Fuels James Spader in ‘The Blacklist’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 23, 2013 - 1:37pm

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CHICAGO – When he gets a part that he can bite his teeth into, James Spader chews it up. He got such a part when his agent got him the lead role on NBC’s “The Blacklist,” premiering tonight, September 23, 2013. With a pilot directed by the talented Joe Carnahan (“The Grey”) and a concept that should give Spader plenty to “eat” for years to come, this is NBC’s best shot at a dramatic hit. Following the premiere of “The Voice,” I expect “The Blacklist” to be one of the few breakouts this season.



Television Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Raymond “Red” Reddington (Spader) is one of the FBI’s Most Wanted fugitives. A genius in the mold of Hannibal Lecter, Reddington is a criminal power broker, the kind of guy who knows the guys who get their hands dirty and how to connect them. Having a government background makes him an even deadlier proposition for the United States. He not only knows where the bodies are buried but who buried them. And so the FBI’s collective mind is blown when he walks right in and surrenders. What’s his end game?



The Blacklist
Photo credit: NBC

Red’s motives for surrender become even harder to read when he demands that he speak to only one agent, a beautiful young profiler named Liz (Megan Boone), who appears to have no connection to Red and nowhere near the experience to deal with one of the most important criminals in the history of crime. Red tells them all that he will help Liz capture Ranko Zamani, a long-thought-dead terrorist who has been pulling the strings in international crime. Red plays mental games with his young agent (making the “Silence of the Lambs” parallel even stronger) but he is offering something that the FBI can’t turn down — not only a list of the world’s most dangerous men and women but the tools to find them.



The Blacklist
Photo credit: NBC

It's a strong concept for a weekly action series given that it allows for both a criminal-of-the-week structure and the overall arc of why Red is doing this and why he's so insistent on working with Liz. Most importantly, the pilot of "The Blacklist" is simply well-done action. (It's a shame that the two best new action dramas of the season air opposite each other in this program and "The Blacklist".) The pilot is particularly well-paced and impressive in its blockbuster-level production values (not surprising when you realize its director helmed "The A-Team").

While the action is better than the ads have let on, "The Blacklist" is still a show built around its charismatic star. I think Megan Boone could develop her own following — she's engaging and believable — but this is Spader's game and he plays it with gusto. He knows that this is not a character built around subtlety. He's the smartest guy in the room, whatever room he's in. And Spader loves that kind of part. He's perfectly cast. Maybe more so than anyone on a new show this year.

To be fair, I'm not sure "The Blacklist" works without Spader, and so I'm worried that the actor won't be able to do the heavy lifting every single week. It helps to have a great actor like Harry Lennix in the supporting cast, but the writers of "The Blacklist" need to prove that it's about more than just Red. "Hannibal" was such a surprisingly effective drama in part because its title character wasn't its only interesting one. The same needs to happen here for long-term success: Expanding the show past its charismatic lead. That may come. But, for now, Spader is enough reason to watch.

"The Blacklist" stars James Spader, Megan Boone, Diego Klattenhoff, Ryan Eggold, and Harry Lennix. It premieres on NBC on Monday, September 23, 2013 at 9pm CST.



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