

TV Review: Premiere of Joss Whedon's 'Dollhouse' Imperfect But Intriguing

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Television Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – A friend of mine suggested that I need to be patient regarding [Joss Whedon](#) [10]'s highly anticipated "[Dollhouse](#) [15]," starring [Eliza Dushku](#) [4], [Olivia Williams](#) [11], [Amy Acker](#) [16], and [Harry Lennix](#) [8]. Watching the so-so premiere, "Ghost," airing Friday, February 13th, 2009 at 8pm CST, it's easy to see why. All the ingredients are there for a riveting, fantastic series, but it feels like a show still finding its way.

To be fair, this wouldn't be the first time that a Whedon series needed a little patience. As much as I love "[Buffy the Vampire Slayer](#) [17]," it didn't really find its groove until part of the way through the first season and didn't become TV perfection until season two. On the other hand, "[Firefly](#) [18]" was brilliant from episode one (either the actually aired premiere or the intended one).



Eliza Dushku as Echo.

Photo credit: Miranda Penn Turin/FOX

The basic litmus test of a premiere is whether or not it creates enough intrigue and displays enough potential to keep viewers coming back in week two. Judged on that scale, “Dollhouse” succeeds.

Somewhat surprisingly, the biggest strength of “Dollhouse” doesn’t appear to be Whedon’s excellent storytelling skills and ear for dialogue, both of which are a little stifled in the premiere. What works best in “Ghost” is the riveting performance by Eliza Dushku, who proves that she not only still has the screen presence and charisma that made her such a scene-stealer as Faith but that she may have developed more.

“Dollhouse” reportedly began life at a lunch between Dushku and Whedon where they talked about all the different types of roles Eliza can play, deciding to put them all in one concept. Dushku plays Echo, a young woman who works for the Dollhouse, a secret and highly illegal organization that wipes personalities clean, turning people into shells for different assignments. The dolls can be whatever the client needs from a romantic partner to a covert assassin.

In the premiere episode, Echo is tasked with a negotiator assignment, trying to bring home the kidnapped daughter of a wealthy client.

Of course, the real task of the premiere is showing the audience what “Dollhouse” is going to be, but that’s a little unclear from “Ghost”. The actual “case” is not that thrilling and it’s surprising to me that Whedon and FOX thought this should be the episode to kick-start the series after all the drama surrounding the re-shot pilot.



Tahmoh Penikett, Enver Gjokaj, Eliza Dushku, Dichen Lachman, Fran Kranz, Olivia Williams, Harry Lennix.

Photo credit: Kurt Iswarienko/FOX

Whedon and his team are clearly much more interested in what's going on at the Dollhouse and with the agent (Battlestar Galactica's Tahmoh Penikett) trying to find it and take this illegal operation down. The case feels like an obligation and every time the premiere went back to it, I lost interest.

If "Dollhouse" is going to be a mystery-of-the-week show, showing off the different personalities that Dushku can play and the stories Whedon can tell, they need to be more interesting than the one in "Ghost". Whedon perfectly balanced monsters of the week with an overall plot arc with "Buffy" by finding a way to make both interesting. I'm hoping he can do the same with "Dollhouse," but the "Charlie's Angels for a new generation" premise hasn't clicked for me yet.

I'm also surprised at how earnestly Whedon and the team are playing "Dollhouse" in the premiere. Whedon has commented on the more serious tone of the show, but I missed his incredible ear for dialogue in "Ghost". I'm hoping he develops it with his ensemble in the near future.

What will keep audiences coming back next week and possibly beyond is the cast. Dushku is great. The excellent Harry Lennix and Olivia Williams seem interesting and Penikett, despite being given a horribly written expository scene intercut with boxing footage, could become a household name with this potentially riveting character.

We know by now what Whedon can do as a writer, so it's likely that will surface again with time, as he and his ensemble get used to their premise and characters. Right now, "Dollhouse" is like the first few minutes of Echo's awakening from a new wipe - finding its feet and figuring out its strengths and weaknesses. Let's all be patient.

'Dollhouse,' which airs on FOX, stars Eliza Dushku, Dichen Lachman, Enver Gjokaj, Fran Kranz, Harry Lennix, Olivia Williams, and Tahmoh Penikett, and was created by Joss Whedon. The series premiere airs on Friday, February 13th, 2009 at 8PM CST.



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