

TV Review: 'Dollhouse' Continues to Frustrate With Season-Two Premiere

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 25, 2009 - 12:02am

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CHICAGO – For its entire first season, "[Dollhouse](#) [6]" fluctuated wildly in tone and style, never quite figuring itself out as a weekly series and remaining inconsistent in terms of quality. Every time it threatened to finally click together an awful episode or dumb plot twist would derail it and fans would be left shaking their heads. Even though many things have changed for season two, the frustration remains the same.



Television Rating: **2.5/5.0**

Perhaps it's ironic that a show about people who can take on any persona has yet to really develop one of its own. The surprise renewal has reportedly reinvigorated creator [Joss Whedon](#) [13] and his team, as they have made clear that season two of "Dollhouse" will shake things up and head in a new direction. Despite a strong guest appearance from [Jamie Bamber](#) [18] ("[Battlestar Galactica](#) [19]") and the arrival of the great [Alexis Denisof](#) [2] ("[Angel](#) [20]") as a supporting cast regular, "Dollhouse" continues to fall just short of being a show that actually works.



Dollhouse

Photo credit: FOX/Frank Ockenfels

There was reason for hope. "Dollhouse" ended strongly...twice. The aired season finale, "Omega," really shook things up and the unaired, futuristic episode, "Epitaph One," that could only be found on the DVD or Blu-Ray hinted at a darker season to come. Where would a show that basically blew itself up before a surprise renewal go in round two?



Dollhouse

Photo credit: FOX/Isabella Vosmikova

"I thought I'd seen it all. But this engagement? Honestly, this one's sick," says Boyd. The pre-credit tease for the return of "Dollhouse" features Echo getting married to an international criminal (Bamber). Honestly? This one's dull. Despite an unusual client that I won't spoil here and a fun turn by Bamber, the actual case of the week is a snooze.

It's partially because it's undeveloped because the focus isn't really on the engagement but the chaos that reigns at the Dollhouse. At the end of last season, Echo (Eliza Dushku) was imprinted with multiple personalities and the effects of that will clearly linger into season two. Answering the need for viewers to have a heroine with at least a little bit of consistency from week to week, Whedon hints that Echo will actually develop a personality beyond the flavor of the week.

As for the infamous Paul Ballard ([Tahmoh Penikett](#) [15]), he surprisingly took a job offer from the Dollhouse at the end of season one and is actually working with Echo and the rest of the gang. Penikett was a great nemesis for the Dollhouse. And he may still be. Whether or not Paul is working from within to bring down the organization he despises is not quite clear but he remains one of the better elements of the show.

What about the rest of the cast? Boyd (Harry Lennix), Sierra (Dichen Lachman), and Adelle (Olivia Williams) are largely put to the side for the premiere but Topher (Fran Kranz) and Whiskey (Amy Acker) get an amazing and ill-conceived amount of screen time.





Dollhouse
Photo credit: FOX/Isabella Vosmikova

Acker is a great actress but she has multiple scenes in the premiere where she comes to terms with the recently-discovered fact that she's a Doll and the melodramatic dialogue simply doesn't work.

Those scenes between Whiskey and Topher hint at a more somber "Dollhouse" than season one. Even during the engagement, a singer-songwriter, solo guitarist sings plaintively on the soundtrack as Echo essentially prostitutes herself. Was anyone longing for more drama in "Dollhouse"? Don't they realize that the show excels with twists and turns, when the focus is on action over dialogue?

The problem with emphasizing drama on "Dollhouse" is that it forces the viewer to take elements of the show seriously, including its arguable misogyny. If it's escapism, that's one thing. But if Whedon wants us to take the emotion of Whiskey seriously, then we must also factor in the fact that this is yet another episode of "Dollhouse" where a woman not completely in control of her own actions sleeps with a stranger. And that's just the tip of it. Echo runs into action scenes showing more bra than shirt and gets the crap beat out of her repeatedly in a later scene. When does a show go from being a comment on misogyny to just being one that's anti-women?



Dollhouse
Photo credit: FOX/Isabella Vosmikova

I know, I know. How could a show from the creator of one of the strongest heroines of the last twenty years ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer") be misogynistic? I think Whedon is trying to comment on the use of women in society but he's lost sight of the commentary. It's just another element that feels unfocused.

I know I keep saying it, but there's still hope for "Dollhouse". The cast is very talented and Whedon is still one of the best TV creators of the last twenty years. But the show needs to settle on a tone. Stop trying to have it both ways. If you're going to make Echo a serious heroine, teach her how to button her shirt. If you're going to be more drama than sci-fi action, give us consistent characters to care about.

At the start of season two, it's still unclear what show you're going to get from week-to-week with "Dollhouse". Whedon can't even pick a genre. The aired season finale was action, the unaired one was science fiction, and now the premiere is more drama than anything else. It's nice to see a show that tries to break the mold, but "Dollhouse" needs to develop one of its own at the same time if it's ever going to truly succeed.

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'Dollhouse,' which airs on FOX, stars Eliza Dushku, Dichen Lachman, Enver Gjokaj, Fran Kranz, Harry Lennix, Olivia Williams, Amy Acker, Alexis Denisof, and Tahmoh Penikett, and was created by Joss Whedon. The season two premiere airs on Friday, September 25th, 2009 at 8PM CST.



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