

TV Review: Promising ‘The Middle’ With Patricia Heaton, Neil Flynn

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 30, 2009 - 1:40pm

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CHICAGO – Just as Kelsey Grammer returns to familiarly snobby territory with “Hank,” his “Back to You” co-star Patricia Heaton returns to the life of the harried matriarch with “The Middle,” but the results are vastly different. Where “Hank” feels like a relic, “The Middle” updates the working mother for a new generation and mostly delivers.



Television Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Not as daring as “Modern Family” but nearly as funny, “The Middle” works because of the fearlessness of its cast, primarily Heaton, who proves that she was just as essential an element to the success of “Everybody Loves Raymond” as Ray Romano, Brad Garrett, Doris Roberts, or Peter Boyle. But, as “Hank” proves, one talented lead does not a sitcom make and “The Middle” has potential because of its interesting and diverse supporting cast and its often-clever writing.



The Middle.

Photo credit: ABC/Bob D'Amico

Sometimes playing like ABC’s version of “Malcolm in the Middle” if it were told from the perspective of Jane Kaczmarek’s character, “The Middle” is about a modern mother named Frankie Keck who is trying to juggle three troublesome kids and a demanding job. The latter is as a car saleswoman (with supporting work by Chris Kattan) and the former features a somewhat bland husband (Neil Flynn of “Scrubs”) and three sometimes caricature-ish children.



The Middle.
Photo credit: ABC/Richard Foreman

Frankie’s youngest son is named Brick (Atticus Schaffer) and he’s the kid who had trouble making friends at school because he was talking to himself or licking his desk but he seems genuinely sweet and loves his family. The oldest son Axl (Charlie McDermott) is a high-school age boy who walks around in his underwear and has the distinct body odor of a young man going through puberty. The poor girl caught in the middle is Sue (Eden Shur), another awkward gal who tries out for everything even though she seems to be good at nothing.

The family of “The Middle” may sound cliched but there’s a fine line between falling into generic sitcom traps and working within them. There’s a reason the sitcom always goes back to the family comedy - it’s a subject perfect for half-hour television - and I liked spending time with the Kecks.

Based on the premiere, “The Middle” shows more promise than out-of-the-box perfection. I think Heaton is perfect in the lead role and Flynn, while he may seem blase, is actually a great counter-balance to his more manic wife. There’s also a diversity in style among the supporting cast from “Frozen River”’s McDermott to “SNL”’s Kattan that’s interesting. A sitcom is only as good as its ensemble and Heaton has been surrounded by a strong one on “The Middle”.

Of course, it’s still her show and I worry that future episodes could get repetitive if they’re all about how much of a “super-mom” Frankie Keck has to be to get by. Some of the writers of “The Middle” come from the team behind the great “Roseanne,” another show about working-class parents and their three kids. That show started with a strong female lead but allowed the rest of the ensemble to shine as well. Here’s hoping “The Middle” follows that pattern and recognizes that what supports the center is just as important.

‘The Middle,’ which airs on ABC, premieres on September 30th, 2009 at 7:30PM CST. It stars Patricia Heaton, Neil Flynn, Atticus Schaffer, Charlie McDermott, Eden Shur, and Chris Kattan. It was created by Eileen Heisler and DeAnn Heline.



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [17]
Content Director
HollywoodChicago.com
brian@hollywoodchicago.com [16]

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[16] <mailto:brian@hollywoodchicago.com>
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