

TV Review: Earnest ‘Life Unexpected’ Should Connect With Viewers

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 18, 2010 - 11:52am

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CHICAGO – The television landscape changes so often that it’s a remarkable fact that a network as young as The CW can already have a past that makes a new program feel like a throwback. And yet the incredibly earnest “Life Unexpected” feels like a program that used to be on The WB or UPN before the merge and should appeal to viewers lamenting the lack of shows like it on the air.

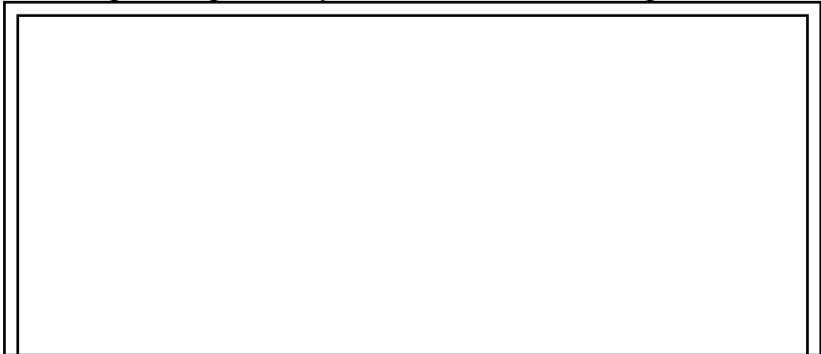


The fact is that genuine, heartfelt characters have become hard to find on the youth-driven network. Shows either feature cartoonish, soap opera caricatures like those on “90210,” “Gossip Girl,” or “Melrose Place” or come with a hook like “Smallville” or “Supernatural”. The new drama, “Life Unexpected” harkens back to the days of programs like “Gilmore Girls” and “Everwood,” when character not hook was the number one focus.



Life Unexpected
Photo credit: The CW

The show is led and completely stolen by the talented Brittany Robertson as 15-year-old Lux, a poor girl who had a hole in her heart that required a number of surgeries when she was a baby. An infant on the operating table can be a tough sell for a foster child and Lux ended up shuffling through the system and never finding a home.





Life Unexpected
Photo credit: The CW

As she is about to turn 16, Lux wants to be emancipated from the foster care system but she needs the signatures of her biological parents to do so. This leads her to the doorstep of father Nate (Kristoffer Polaha), something of a slacker who didn't even know that the girl he knocked up back on the night of their high school winter formal kept the baby.

It turns out that girl is Cate (Shiri Appleby of "Roswell"), a popular radio talk show host, who herself is just about to get engaged to her on-air partner, Ryan (Kerr Smith of "Dawson's Creek"). When Lux ends up being forced to remain in the joint custody of her new-found parents, Cate and Nate reluctantly agree to take care of the child who often seems more mature than either of them.

Created by Liz Tigelaar ("What About Brian") and with a pilot directed by Gary Fleder ("Kiss the Girls"), "Life Unexpected" is at its best when the love for its characters shines through the melodrama. So many shows aimed at teens merely use their characters as plot devices, but one gets the impression that the writers of "Life Unexpected" are trying to create three-dimensional people for the audience to care about instead of mere soap opera.

Robertson (who recently starred on "Swingtown") has amazing break-out star potential, stealing nearly every scene she's in. With a character that has been compared a bit to Juno (but not quite as bitter), Robertson totally nails the role. Seeing actors from the early days of The WB (Smith, Appleby) is fun and Polaha is charming but there are far more issues in the writing of the adults than of Lux, easily the best thing about the show.

The problems with the adults are two-fold. First, a lot of the chemistry has yet to click. Appleby and Smith are not effective as a professional or personal partnership and watching Nate and Cate (even the pairing of their names is annoying) bicker with each other is aggravating. Second, too much of the adult drama is a bit too earnest. Appleby too often looks on the verge of crying and Polaha's bartender lifestyle is a bit overwritten.

The tendency of the writers to dip into the angst well a few too many times holds "Life Unexpected" back from true success but it's somewhat remarkable how surprising it is to see a show even attempting something emotionally honest, especially on a network that appeared to have forgotten how to do so.

'Life Unexpected,' which airs on The CW, stars Shiri Appleby, Kristoffer Polaha, Brittany Robertson, Kerr Smith, and Austin Basis from creator Liz Tigelaar. The show premieres on January 18th, 2010 at 8pm CST.



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Source URL (retrieved on **Apr 24 2024 - 10:53pm**):

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