

TV Review: TNT's Remarkable 'Southland' Returns Even Stronger

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 17, 2012 - 3:25pm

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CHICAGO – TNT's "Southland" continues its remarkable run tonight with a fourth season premiere that is as confident, accomplished, and entertaining as anything yet produced by this once-canceled program. It's the best cop show on TV, a spectacular recreation of what it can be like to be on the ground and behind the wheel on the streets of Los Angeles. This is one of the most creatively successful and well-acted programs of its type in years and it just keeps getting better.



TV Rating: **5.0/5.0**

What's so satisfying about the unusual run of "Southland" is that people are noticing. The show that NBC canceled and TNT had to pull from the brink of another "brilliant but canceled" marathon grew by 8% in its third season. I expect similar growth this year after it appeared on several top ten lists for the year in television just ended. The team behind this show have taken every speed bump in front of them — lower budget, changing casts — and not just gotten over them but creatively excelled. Each of these tweaks has resulted in a show that's more sure of itself than ever. The cast, the writing, the direction — it's never been better. I do think one of the arcs in the premiere is a bit melodramatic and over-written but it's a minor complaint for a great episode of a near-perfect show.



Southland Season Four

Photo credit: TNT

What struck me the most about the third season of "Southland" was the dark tone of the show. From the premiere, they were pulling no punches in terms of presenting the danger in the lives of these characters. And the season went some incredibly dark places, including the death of a major character. Perhaps more than any show on television, I feel honest unpredictability when I watch an episode of "Southland."

Anything can happen. No one is safe. Heroes can make mistakes. Obnoxious jerks can be life-savers. And anyone can die at any minute. The show's greatest accomplishment is the way the writers balance unpredictability with character development. It never feels random like bad cop shows often do but always feels just dangerous enough to be unpredictable. One minute you're shooting the shit with your partner, the next you're fighting for your life or, in one of the best scenes in the history of the show, jumping into a backyard during a suspect chase and finding yourself in a very deadly situation. "Southland" is about people who have to constantly think on their feet and it conveys that aspect of being a cop with more dramatic resonance than arguably any other program in the history of the show.



Southland Season Four
Photo credit: TNT

The show is set up with a day-in-the-life structure as it follows several pairs of officers at the same time. The season premiere charts a rough day for Detective Lydia Adams (Regina King) and her new partner (Dorian Missick), Officer John Cooper (Michael Cudlitz) and his new partner Officer Jessica Tang (Lucy Liu), and Officers Ben Sherman (Ben McKenzie) and Sammy Bryant (Shawn Hatosy). Lou Diamond Phillips appears in the season premiere as an old street cop who gets under Ben's skin a la the "aggressive jerk" played by C. Thomas Howell. They are cut from a similar cloth (and not just because they were both movie stars in the '80s).

Once again, all three of the arcs this episode are riveting. Cudlitz has long been the most fascinating actor on the show and he has a great new arc this season. His Officer Cooper has returned from back surgery and his fellow cops naturally see any physical weakness as something to rip on and ridicule. And yet Cooper seems almost to have found some zen during his recovery. He looks at his also-mocked new partner, a perfectly-cast Lucy Liu, and sees someone with secrets herself. An infamous YouTube video (that is seen at the end) along with an easily-mocked name has made Officer Tang a brunt of some jokes, but she's a confident, good cop and Cooper sees that. They should have a very interesting dynamic.

It's also fun to see Sherman and Bryant hitting the streets together and they hit it HARD in the premiere. They have the most action-packed arc and are included in the aforementioned great chase scene. These are two great characters and it should be particularly interesting to see how Bryant still continues to deal with the incredible tragedy of last season. Finally, Adams has a personal connection to a new case. It should be interesting to see how this plays out but the great King is given the least-engaging storyline of episode one. That will almost certainly change with episode two.

And that's one of the things I love about "Southland." Picking a best performance or most-interesting arc changes from episode to episode. The writers and actors have perfected the art of the ensemble, allowing Cudlitz a bit of spectacular development one week, King the next, Hatosy the next, etc. It's never forced as most of the key players get some drama every week, but it's a show for which it's hard to pick a best actor or even a best episode. It all blends together into a perfect fabric of gritty realism.

"Southland" was one of my top twenty shows of 2011 but it just missed out on the top ten. If the fourth season premiere is any indication of the quality of the show that we'll get all year, it will be impossible to keep it off the top ten for 2012.

"Southland" premieres on TNT on Tuesday, January 17th, 2012 at 9pm CST. It stars Ben McKenzie, Michael Cudlitz, Regina King, Shawn Hatosy, Lucy Liu, Dorian Missick, C. Thomas Howell, and Lou Diamond Phillips from creator John Wells.



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [15]

Content Director

HollywoodChicago.com

brian@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

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