

TV Review: Grisly Sacrifice for Science in Captivating Period Drama 'The Knick'

Submitted by [NickHC](#) [1] on August 8, 2014 - 7:16am

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CHICAGO – Cinemax's ominous new series "The Knick" is a hospital drama that's very much in the voice of its director, Steven Soderbergh. Set in New York City at the turn of the 20th century, the series presents the medical world as it inches closer and closer to modernity, while making contemporary parallels to the desperate hustle by surgery room clients and their doctors alike regarding treatment of the human body. What has changed in the politics of medicine? What hasn't?



Television Rating: **4.0/5.0**

The Knick is the name of the hospital (formally called The Knickerbocker) that employs John W. Thackery, a disturbed surgeon played by Clive Owen, who tiptoes towards medical breakthroughs often at the expense of human lives. He proclaims emotionally early in episode one that science is at a crucial point, in which more breakthroughs have been made in the last five years compared to the last five hundred.

In the beginning of the series, his previous surgical partner and boss suffers a permanent side effect of failing to distance his work of life and death from his humanity, a fascinating thesis about the necessary mentalities for such a field. This puts Thackery in position to lead the front lines of the hospital, a situation that the doctor's own Chinatown visits for heroin dosages complicate.

Meanwhile, the Knickerbocker begins to expand in other notions. By the end of episode one, the building is set for electricity, and a new medical student (Algernon Edwards, played by Andre Holland) is brought on the surgical team, but chastised for his non-white racial background. Similarly, hospital manager Herman Barrow (Jeremy Bobb) starts to feel the wrath of the gangsters he owes money to. In a smaller yet as distinct passages to the story, "The Knick" also follows two men who run an ambulance, but who treat the business like a seedy, morally-disconnected operation that goes on a stiff commission.



The Knick

Photo credit: Cinemax

This series about a time past earns a unique sense of immediacy in its scenes of “performance,” which for Soderbergh are the grisly operations performed by Thackery and crew that show every cut and incision on human bodies who become high stakes experiments. Like how he filmed the strip club scenes in “Magic Mike,” (as his own cinematographer named Peter Andrews), Soderbergh basks in the visceral nature of these images. The barbaric, sometimes disturbing procedures present the martyring of human lives for the progression of science.

Like these operations, Soderbergh’s aesthetics provide an energy to a story that remains a dense, if not gothic period piece. Although his previous medical movies (and those set in modern times) “Contagion” and “Side Effects” found stark usage out of a static camera, this series keeps the camera handheld but standing still, providing a more modern touch. As a cream on top is the score of Cliff Martinez, whose trademark synth warbles take the story entirely out of the 1900s, but makes the project feel like a period piece actually made in the 1980s.



The Knick

Photo credit: Cinemax

Anchored by sturdy performances from numerous actors primed for discovery, “The Knick” is greased and busy enough with its multiple strands to provide promise through its first season (Soderbergh is listed as the director of all ten episodes); of all its tales, however, Owen’s is the most magnetic. One can imagine that the former film director is tickled by the breathing room that the TV format allows a story that warrants it. Complications regarding gender and race begin to peek up more in the series’ second episode, confirming that the show is ready to expand to an entire world that will survey issues outside of the hospital’s drama.

The series is certainly formed by its intellectual curiosity, of which has been a big factor of many Soderbergh’s films like “Magic Mike” and beyond. “The Knick” is a blood-soaked sponge that absorbs details of the period to create a thick, tonally driven, and cold atmosphere with everything pointed in a modern direction. The excitement of Soderbergh’s latest venture is in seeing how dots of historical context are connected, while its narrative course remains unpredictable. As shown in its first episode, a scene of electricity being installed, lighting up dark passages, has rarely been as exhilarating, or ominous. It’s a promising sign of how the series will present a bleak America once upon a time, including the breakthroughs that were achieved by human sacrifice.

“The Knick” premieres on Friday, August 8, 2014 on Cinemax.

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