

Un-True Detective: HBO Noir Series Misses the Mark

Written by By Howard Barbanel For the Sun
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Although the second season of *True Detective* on HBO has a lot of the same names attached to it behind the camera, the new iteration of the title which just premiered bears scant resemblance to last year's bravura bayou noir mini-series.

Season one was strikingly original – set in hazy, humid and swampy Louisiana – a venue unfamiliar to most Americans, it starred a Southern tag team so captivating that even if Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson had Confederate Stars and Bars license plates viewers still would have loved them. McConaughey and Harrelson played incredibly intense, driven and seriously flawed police detectives and human beings. Awash in cheap bourbon, cheap women and even cheaper beer, their reprehensible self-destructive behavior was both pitiful and pitiable. And there is difference number one between season one and season two. That McConaughey and Harrelson were on a crusade to find the creepy ritual killers of young girls made you root for them every step of the way. That you couldn't see the plot twists coming made for riveting television. Season two has no such redemptive underpinnings.

In Season two the producers have also spared no expense to bring us a group of big Hollywood stars – probably too many and not the right ones. Where McConaughey and Harrelson were a believable couple, season two has four key characters seemingly only connected by the murder of someone we probably will never care about. In season one, rescuing virginal girls being played alive for a pseudo religion is something everyone can get behind. Punishing their captors and killers is something everyone can root for. In Season two we have a dead corrupt City Manager of a tiny industrial Southern California armpit. Why become emotionally invested in that?

Series Creator/Writer Nic Pozzolatto dishes out three troubled dissolute Southern California cops played by Colin Farrell, Rachel McAdams and Taylor Kitsch. Thrown into the mix is a quasi-legal casino owner and would be *shtarker* (tough criminal mastermind) played by Vince Vaughn. On paper, this should be a winning quartet, but the instruments are out of tune and the metaphorical musical score, i.e., the plot and the script is never going to make the

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Billboard
Top 10.

Farrell, who was brilliant in 2008's *In Bruges* as a damaged neophyte incompetent hitman is plunged in *True Detective* into the depths of self-despair and self destruction after selling his soul to Vaughn. Wallowing in Johnny Walker Blue Label, there's nothing about his character that is remotely redeeming or worth rooting for. Farrell's American accent just isn't as interesting as when he speaks like a Brit or an Irishman.

McAdams is also asked to wallow in a self-loathing so palpable that it's just shocking. The producers took the glam Queen Bee from *Mean Girls* and butchered her out to an almost unrecognizable degree – and also to a non-credible level. She's hard to believe in the role and is stretched well beyond her many talents. She can't pull off the Charleze Theron mud-and-blood slathered tough trash role.

Kitsch seems to have peaked dramatically as Tim Riggins in *Friday Night Lights*, nothing he's done since evinces the same level of passion and pathos. His beefcake starring roles in 2012's *John Carter* (the *Water World* of its time) and *Battleship* ran aground faster than a deep keeled yacht in three-foot waters. In *True Detective* he's suffering (naturally) from the psychic after effects of military service and is also looking for ways to punish and even maybe even kill himself. Kitsch is so remote and introverted that even his steamy hot girlfriend can't crack through, so why should the audience bother?

Finally, Vaughn, utterly likeable and believable in such wonderful comedies as *Wedding Crashers*, *Dodgeball* and *Old School* is as miscast in a "heavy" mob boss role as Tom Hanks would be if he were also asked to play a gangster. Vaughn is a terrific comedic actor because of his easy sardonic wit and everyman demeanor. Henry Fonda could convincingly play evil (and against type) in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time In The West*. Vaughn is no Henry Fonda, but then Fonda really couldn't do comedy that well either and he didn't try very often. In suppressing his natural likeability, Vaughn becomes not just unlikable but

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also uninteresting.

Pozzolotto in situating season two in Southern California begs comparison with scads of other L.A.-based noir classics such as *L.A. Confidential*, *Chinatown* and *Double Indemnity*, to name but a few – and

True Detective

comes up short and wanting in comparison. Where season one nailed rural Louisiana, season two misses the mark in Southern California. Season two is the wrong story, with the wrong characters and the wrong actors playing against type unsuccessfully. Let's hope that Pozzolotto wasn't a one-hit wonder with season one.