

The best TV drama series you are not watching

Contributed by Tim Riley
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The nominations for the Emmy Awards were recently announced, and maybe you were a little amazed, or puzzled, that a basic cable TV series, not seen on HBO or Showtime, was nominated for a surprising number of categories, including outstanding drama series and outstanding lead actor.

I am referring to AMC's "Mad Men," a very stylish period piece about the advertising world in Manhattan at the dawn of the Kennedy era. Heretofore, AMC was probably best known for its seemingly endless supply of classic Hollywood movies. With 16 nominations for a celebrated drama series, AMC just may be moving up in the TV world.

Now, many of you may be wondering what the fuss is all about, considering so few people have probably watched the series at all. "Mad Men" became the darling of critics everywhere, and recently the Television Critics Association (TCA) bestowed three awards on AMC's freshman series "Mad Men," including Program of the Year, Outstanding New Program of the Year and Outstanding Achievement in Drama.

Keep in mind that the TCA, unlike the Emmy Awards, has only nine categories for awards, and "Mad Men" was very unlikely to win in a category like children's programming or news and information. My guess is that you had no idea the TCA gave out awards anyway.

I never like to fall in line with the herd of critics blathering and raving about a particular series, but "Mad Men" is really fascinating in so many ways that I am irresistibly drawn to the second season that started July 27. If you miss the start, keep in mind that cable networks always run their original programs multiple times, thus saving you the trouble of recording shows for later viewing.

Oh, by the way, "Mad Men" also won the Golden Globes earlier this year for Best Television Drama Series and Best Actor in a Drama Series for Jon Hamm. The aforementioned Mr. Hamm is the star of the show, playing the very dapper Don Draper, creative director of the Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency.

On a superficial level, Don Draper has an idyllic life, working in a glamorous industry and having a model family, including his pretty wife Betty (January Jones), a former professional model. Beneath the glossy surface is an entirely different story, since Draper has a double life and a secret past that sometimes bubbles up into more public view.

Last season, every episode left one anxious to see the next, anticipating more layers of the onion to be peeled. The greatest fascination with "Mad Men" is that most of the action took place in the shark-infested waters of the Madison Avenue corporate headquarters.

At the end of the first season, Draper was blackmailed by ambitious young account executive Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) and, in the process, Don's true identity was finally revealed.

In the second season, the newly-promoted Draper struggles to stay ahead of the young bucks nipping at his heels, while dealing with the entanglements in his personal life. The sneaky Pete Campbell is someone to keep an eye on, as he will certainly maneuver for advantage in the corporate pecking order.

The 1960s era setting for the corporate world is highly charged by sexual shenanigans and seduction, and as such, some of the secretaries are fodder for the kind of harassment that is not only politically incorrect but legally actionable today.

Draper's former assistant Peggy (Elisabeth Moss) proved her talent by becoming a junior copywriter, but not before succumbing to an unfortunate office fling. As head of the secretarial pool, the attractive Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), a real femme fatale, is gifted at office politics, but she's had a dangerous affair with Sterling Cooper partner Roger Sterling (John Slattery).

Fascinating to watch for so many reasons, "Mad Men" looks at the societal issues and culture of the early 1960s through the prism of a corporate world where lust, power and ambition run rampant. The show's characters, in large or small roles, offer a range of interesting perspectives on cultural mores.

Restless and often moody, Draper smokes and drinks too much. Actually, just about everybody is smoking and drinking, almost to extremes. Sexism is rampant, and hardly any male employee is above flirting and sexual harassment. The devious Pete Campbell, a recent newlywed, sexually pursued Draper's assistant Peggy, while treating most women with condescension.

"Mad Men" is very deserving of the Emmy Awards nominations for such categories as outstanding art direction, cinematography and costumes. This is a show with an incredible visual appeal, where the producers have taken great care to create an authentic look for the early 1960s.

Though the second season should prove compelling, it would seem essential to be familiar with the entire first year. If you missed all the AMC reruns, the entire first season has been released on DVD.

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