

Watching & Waiting: “Dallas” in 2012

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“Bullets don’t seem to have much of an effect on me darlin’,” the old man calmly mutters. Of course we the audience know just what he means. No matter how old he might be—in character and in years—it’s a pleasure to be able to say: J.R. Ewing is back! And he still has it.

There’s nothing like sitting down in front of a television here in 2012 to watch a new program that quickly proves not-so-new upon hearing that grand, wonderful, unmistakable theme music. It’s almost like a trip back in time—almost perhaps, though not.

The nostalgia factor is obvious, at least to those of us who know the characters and all that’s happened with them and to them over the past 30+ years. To see most of them alive and relatively well satisfies our initial curiosity. After all, we’re tuning in to get reacquainted with our all-time favorites and be caught up on where they’ve been and just where their lives have come. We—that is the aforementioned “those of us” with sharp memories who know what’s going on—are the reason for the “return” of the world-famous show. Ultimately, we’re the ones who must be satisfied in order for the program to be a success.

This said, I ask: Why am I largely disappointed thus far in the new “Dallas”?

It’s not all bad; some strong moments are beginning to come through. But then, it’s not all good. The simple difference as I see it so far is this: Any scene featuring an original character is good, if for no other reason than we’re watching closely and listening carefully for what will be revealed to us through these icons we’ve known for more than three decades. On the other hand, any scene containing only the “new” generation of characters is rather weak, if not just plain bad. Without J.R., Bobby, Sue Ellen or Cliff to command and hold our attention, we could easily have before us any cheesy, unrealistic, poorly acted show made up of yet another generic collection of attractive-yet-dull, scheming-yet-scattered 30-something amateurs.

In other words, we the audience are here to see “Dallas” as we know and love it, complete with our many questions and expectations. The younger characters, though built around Bobby and J.R.’s sons, have not yet earned their place in this 20-years-later continuation series. They are strangers to us, especially the non-Ewings whose names are just now being introduced. Seeing them on screen without the anchoring and direction of their elders leaves me wondering what program I’m really watching.

I waited more than week and absorbed an additional episode before spelling out my thoughts, allowing my first impressions to gel. Suffice to say, after three episodes the new “Dallas” is beginning to pick up and show some glimmers of promise, perhaps thanks to more Bobby-J.R. together time, along with an amusing reunion of the two brothers and Cliff Barnes. (Talk about nostalgia, coupled with the unflattering reminder that everyone gets old!) And to see how well we’re listening, the name Pam has been tossed about a couple times. Of course we heard it. It’s these tidbits which the real audience—we longtime loyal “Dallas” fans-- are expecting. Any new viewer wouldn’t know the difference.

Speaking of tidbits, we were treated in the first episode to a mere moment of Ray and Lucy, so quickly so that we could have easily missed them if we blinked. So why have trotted them out at all? Will they be back? As I said, it's nice to see they're still kicking, as yet another dash of nostalgia hooks us. But then, disappointingly enough, we're steered back to those corny and unconvincing youngsters. I'd rather have heard what Ray and Lucy have been up to for the past couple decades.

Where was Sue Ellen in episode three? She made her anticipated though not-so-thoroughly explained Southfork reappearance in the pilot, proclaimed her allegiance to her son, palled around with Bobby's wife Ann (another not-so-thorough explanation herself) to see Christopher's fiancé's wedding dress (as if she had any obvious reason to be there), and went on to be the buzz of a potential Texas governorship. But then, once John Ross decides to work with his father rather than double cross him, allowing his scheming and manipulating to take off J.R. style, his original "ally" is MIA. Perhaps he doesn't need his mother now, or does he?

Bobby is no stranger to marital tragedy. At least this time around he's landed a wife who's alive and with him. Still, this does not explain Ann Ewing, marked with the unique distinction of being the new character of the older generation. Sure, she can sling a rifle, drive off prowlers and shed a tear or two, but quite simply: Who the hell is she and where did she come from? This may very well be explained yet, but I thought we'd know a bit more by now.

As for the storylines involving no classic characters whatsoever, I'm nonplussed. Who is this brother-in-law of Christopher's and what is he plotting? I ask this after reminding myself he's part of the show, though clearly not a strong or memorable part. As J.R. would say, the boy's an amateur, not worth our time. This subplot simply exemplifies parts of the new "Dallas" that are not holding my interest.

The plotting and backstabbing: Now here of course come the interesting parts. This is "Dallas" after all, with J.R. Ewing retaking the helm. While I'm glad to see the tensions mounting, too much happening too quickly can be off-putting, as the layers can easily confuse us. The twisting, manipulating story arcs seemed so much easier to follow 30 years ago. The production values of today, by contrast, seem to have our eyes looking every which way simultaneously while our minds race to keep up. As for those "side villains" if you will, I remain at least initially unimpressed. Somehow today's B-list schemers lack a certain gravitas that carried the original show in its heyday. A blackmailing lawyer and a two-faced business woman just aren't who they used to be I'm afraid.

Still, I'm paying close attention. And still yet, like for most die-hard "Dallas" fans, this new series has me asking questions. For one: How did perpetual loser Cliff Barnes become so rich, confident and powerful? Or-- is he? The longer I watch, perhaps the more my questions will be answered, while the more the new Ewing generation will grow on me. This is my hope anyway, for the sake of recapturing my longstanding attraction to this most renowned dysfunctional family of fiction.

For now, nostalgia trumps fluff, seniority beats youth, and the mastermind reigns over all amateurs. This is how I see it anyway. Today's "Dallas" showcases the new generation, with the youngsters even billed first in the opening credits. Obviously we're supposed to like them, but will we like them enough? I have the feeling most young viewers have no clue what they're seeing and couldn't care less about this

new series. It's the nostalgia factor; the new show is for us fans of the old. Translation: I have my doubts about the success of the new "Dallas." I hate to say I'm disappointed thus far, because truly, I do not want to be. As such, I'll be watching-- and waiting.

Above all else, ole J.R. still has it. Whether anyone else does, remains to be seen. No matter the final consensus some weeks from now, this 2012 revival deserves a nod-- flaws, shallowness and inconsistencies notwithstanding. Let's give it some leeway and see what happens. If it turns out horribly, I'll certainly have plenty to say. If, however, I'm pleasantly surprised and maybe even enthralled, I'll heed J.R.'s advice to "never pass up a good chance to shut up."