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October 9, 2012

TELEVISION REVIEW

# The Old Pro, Still Outclassing the New Girl

By MIKE HALE

By now Connie Britton must be a little tired of playing variations on the tough, beleaguered wife, as she did for five seasons on “Friday Night Lights” and one on “American Horror Story,” picking up three Emmy nominations along the way. But she’s back at it, this time as a country music queen in ABC’s new drama “Nashville,” and she’s still outstanding: “[Nashville](#)” is the best of the fall pilots, if only because of her presence.

There are other virtues to the show, which was [created by the screenwriter Callie Khouri](#) (an Oscar winner for “Thelma and Louise”) and has Ms. Khouri’s husband, the celebrated T Bone Burnett, as its music producer. The depiction of the modern country music business in “Nashville” feels reasonably authentic, and when the story stays within that realm, it has the mix of hardheadedness, sentimentality and honky-tonk come-on you can get from a good country song.

It also has an entertaining performance by [Hayden Panettiere](#), who’s the Anne Baxter to Ms. Britton’s Bette Davis in the show’s “[All About Eve](#)” central story line. (The character’s early success and blond hair have led to suggestions that she’s based on the real-life star Taylor Swift, but nothing else about her seems to support the comparison.)

As a young sensation who plays it innocent in public while sleeping with any man who can further her career, Ms. Panettiere is believably seductive and petulant. Her range isn’t much wider than that, but in the big scenes Ms. Britton, an expert at reaction shots and cutting asides, is often there to bail her out.

And it may be Ms. Britton’s job to keep bailing out the show, which spins along smoothly enough in Wednesday night’s premiere but not without some danger signs. Ms. Khouri’s résumé tends toward high-class soap opera (“Something to Talk About,” “[Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood](#)”), and there are some alarmingly ripe moments in the pilot, particularly a tearful phone conversation between Ms. Panettiere’s Juliette Barnes and her drug addict mother that’s set in a backstage closet.

There’s also a strong soap opera element to the other prominent story line, involving the poisoned relationship between Ms. Britton’s Rayna Jaymes and her father, Lamar Wyatt (Powers Boothe), a local businessman and political kingmaker. In the pilot Lamar persuades Rayna’s milquetoast

husband (Eric Close) to run for mayor of Nashville, despite Rayna's support of another candidate, setting up a story arc that feels perfunctory and not very interesting, as if Ms. Khouri's heart weren't really in it.

That's in direct contrast to the opening scenes, a crackling, constantly moving sequence set at a tribute to a music industry veteran (well played by the songwriter J. D. Souther) that sets up the Rayna-Juliette rivalry and takes Rayna in just a few minutes from blind complacency to anger and frightening insecurity.

After being half-snubbed by Juliette backstage — the first of several times when that young woman's behavior inspires an older character to say, "What the hell was that?" — Rayna is told that neither her new record nor her coming tour are selling, and that the solution is a co-headlining tour with Juliette.

[Ms. Britton](#) does particularly well with anger in all its forms, from self-righteous to wearily resigned, and "Nashville" promises to give her a blank check in that regard, starting with her disbelieving, "You are not seriously suggesting I open for Juliette Barnes?" That's definitely something to look forward to.

She also has a matter-of-fact yet potent seductiveness, and she's great in a scene in which Rayna and her bandleader, Deacon (Charles Esten), talk about their own past ("You're not some overnight sensation, though you are sensational overnight, to the best of my recollection") in the context of Juliette's attempts to steal Deacon for her own band.

The romantic entanglements in "Nashville" could get complicated: already we have Rayna, her husband and her lost love, Deacon, alongside the less interesting grouping of Deacon's songwriting niece, her boyfriend and Deacon's protégé. Cutting across the generations is Juliette, whose Sherman's March through the men of the country music business promises to include victims both young and middle-aged.

Early on she bags two important members of Rayna's team. This concupiscence may be overdone — if Juliette is already at the top of the charts, does she really need to be quite so predatory? — but for now it's fun to watch.

The question in the long run is what kind of balance "Nashville" will find between music and melodrama. In the pilot most things that have to do with music and the music business are good, and most things that don't are dull and sometimes worse. That extends to the songs themselves, which are written for the show (future episodes will include compositions by Elvis Costello and Lucinda Williams) and ably performed by the cast members.

"Nashville" integrates music and drama in a more successful and intelligent way than "Glee" and "Smash." If it can keep its storytelling on the same level, it will be the season's best new show.

## **Nashville**

*ABC, Wednesday nights at 10, Eastern and Pacific times; 9, Central time.*

Produced by Lionsgate ABC Studios and Gaylord Entertainment. Dee Johnson, R. J. Cutler, Callie Khouri and Steve Buchanan, executive producers.

WITH: Connie Britton (Rayna Jaymes), Hayden Panettiere (Juliette Barnes), Charles Esten (Deacon Claybourne), Eric Close (Teddy Conrad), Clare Bowen (Scarlett O'Connor), Jonathan Jackson (Avery Barkley), Sam Palladio (Gunnar Scott), Robert Wisdom (Coleman Carlisle) and Powers Boothe (Lamar Wyatt).

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