HBO’s Hung: Exploring social desperation, among other things

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17 July 2010

Created by Dmitry Lipkin and Colette Burson

In the HBO series *Hung*, Ray Drecker (Thomas Jane) used to be a star athlete at (fictional) West Lakeview High School in the Detroit suburbs. He married cheerleader Jessica (Anne Heche), and they had twins, Damon (Charlie Saxton) and Darby (Sianoa Smit-McPhee), who are now in high school themselves.

After Ray’s hopes for a successful career in professional sports were dashed, he became the basketball coach at his high school alma mater and then, after 20 years of marriage, Jessica left him. Self-centered and feeling cheated out of life’s better things, she married her dermatologist, Ronnie Haxton (Eddie Jemison), thinking he could provide her with a better life. To make matters worse, Ray’s house is gutted by a fire, resulting in the loss of custody of his children. He is forced to live in a tent on his lot, while he rebuilds his house.

“I used to have a family. Used to have a life. Used to have kids and a job. Now, well, now I have my d---. A d--- and a dream. If that’s not the American way, what is?” Such is the premise of the series, now in its second season.

Producer Dmitry Lipkin has a certain reputation for adopting the viewpoint of the outsider. His previous series on cable channel FX, *The Riches*, starring Eddie Izzard and Minnie Driver, focused on a family that used every confidence scheme in the book to flimflam their way into a wealthy lifestyle otherwise unavailable to them, including taking over the identities of dead people.

Lipkin seems to have insight into and sensitivity about class relations in America and brings that to his work.

Hung is an exploration, through the distorted lens of television, of how far people will go when driven by circumstances to take desperate measures.

The production and marketing of a series such as *Hung* is a complex business, requiring a combination of ingredients, including humor, an element of impiety, as well as some social insight and a considerable degree of talent. It is no secret that television is a ruthlessly competitive enterprise driven by and with large fortunes at stake.

Hung plays heavily, and valuably, on its viewers’ sense of the uncertainty and instability of life in this era. It can’t be accidental that the industrially, socially devastated city of Detroit is the backdrop for the story. Lipkin’s characters struggle along in the suburbs, largely unconscious of the bigger picture, most of them shallow and self-centered. To what extent the program is criticizing their self-involvement remains somewhat ambiguous.

Tanya (played by the talented Jane Adams), perhaps the most interesting character, is no exception. She works for a publisher, but considers herself a poet, even though she hasn’t written anything since adolescence. Through a sexual encounter with Ray, she recognizes the opportunity his “attribute” provides to make them both a lot of money. She proposes to become his pimp, a role she is totally unsuited for. Ray just wants to get the money to rebuild his house so he can get his kids back. He accepts her offer.

Lipkin told E! News, “Tanya really thinks they’re doing something new and groundbreaking. They’re bringing happiness into the world. Maybe it’s misguided, maybe it’s not, but we embrace that idea. She’s not seeing it just as a moneymaking venture. She’s seeing it as a way to change her life and change

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other people's lives."

Embrace the idea, indeed. Lipkin and the creators seem to know what they are doing. Whether they believe that someone in Ray's circumstances would resort to prostitution or not, this is the show's premise. Stranger things have happened. In any event, it provides a fantastical framework for humorous situations.

One feels that everything is unraveling from episode to episode. Not only is Ray's identity constantly on the verge of being exposed, his integrity increasingly gets him into trouble. This provides much of the dynamic for the series.

The second season finds Ray in even worse circumstances. His illusion that the school sports program would never be cut is shattered when he finds that his job will only be there through spring. Next year he can reapply, but in any event he'll have no benefits.

Ray's unhappy children are perhaps the moral center of the show. Damon is experimenting with a homosexual relationship, which clearly has an upsetting effect on his father. Darby rejects her mother's "living through men," and joins a "fat and proud" organization. While gaining custody of and providing for the twins are what drives Ray into selling himself in exchange for the money to rebuild his house, one senses they would be outraged if they knew how he was amassing the resources.

While Tanya's fragile ego and poetic sensitivities often get in the way of her pimping, the tough-minded Lenore (Rebecca Creskoff), who wants a piece of the action, is more suited to the job. Tanya calls her service "happiness consultation." Lenore has a more realistic view. She already has a clientele for her fashion business that will happily pay $1200 for a pair of designer shoes rather than $79 for the identical "junk." Lenore recognizes the value of Ray's "product" and has designs to steal him from Tanya. The latter meanwhile consults with a real pimp for tips as to how to manage her talent.

In a comical scene in front of the famed Diego Rivera murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts, (DIA) Lenore attempts to give a pep talk to Ray and Tanya: "You can learn a lot from Diego Rivera. Notice the workers. Clearly their jobs are depressing. They work too many hours for too little pay, and they have to wear very unattractive overalls."

Tanya interrupts, "Actually, Lenore, the workers are meant to be the heroes of this mural."

Lenore responds, "Here's the thing. Horny clients with disposable income are like fruit. I can only pick them when they're ripe."

Lipkin describes the series as "both absurd and hopefully compelling and meaningful." There is something to his conception, but to this point the show lacks the necessarily sharp edge. While the conditions in Detroit obviously provide material for meaningful drama and even comedy, despite the best efforts of Thomas Jane, Jane Adams and a splendid cast, *Hung* is too cartoonish so far to be taken really seriously. Or at least as seriously as is needed.

Well-known Detroit-area locations show up as settings in the series, such as the DIA, the Redford Theater, which still plays classic movies, Hamtramck and 8 Mile Road, but their use seems a bit contrived. That seems in line with a general lack of a fully organic connection between the series and American life.

Its premise is an intriguing and provocative one, and *Hung* strives for humor, while it exposes a real social situation. It hits at things here and there, sometimes quite knowingly, but the show needs to go further and look at things more sharply.

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