

TV Review

Sleepy Hollow: A mix of legends and myths punctuated by gunfire

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Fans of history or literature, or both, will be severely disappointed if they expect Fox Television's *Sleepy Hollow* to be true to either. Author Washington Irving's characters Ichabod Crane, Katrina, and the Horseman (from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," published in 1820) are herein transformed from a nervous schoolmaster, a wealthy 18-year-old girl and a (possible) ghost into a spy for Gen. George Washington, a witch and the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy, respectively.

Waking up some 250 years after dying on the battlefield, Crane (Tom Mison) joins forces with Lt. Grace "Abbey" Mills (Nicole Beharie) and relates a story of having fought with Washington against not just the British, but for the very future of mankind in a supernatural war against the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (described in the Book of Revelation), of which the Headless Horseman is one. Crane died even as he separated the head from the Horseman on the battlefield, and was buried in a hidden grave by his wife, Katrina, who was secretly a witch.

In the modern day, Crane transforms with improbable speed from a suspect in a recent spate of grisly murders into something of a police consultant and partners with Mills to investigate a series of beheadings in the town. Over the course of the pilot, Mills comes to believe that Crane is from the past and the horseman is real. They receive nominal support for their supernatural investigations from Captain Frank Irving (Orlando Jones), who may possess secrets of his own.

In terms of its style, *Sleepy Hollow* (created by Phillip Iscove, Alex Kurtzmann, Roberto Orci and Len Wiseman) is confused. There are some scenes that are very well, even beautifully composed, and if one were to turn off the sound, they could be viewed as interesting illustrations. However, there is an inattention to quality (and good

taste) that emerges in such scenes as that of the Horseman riding away from a battle with not an axe, but an automatic machine gun propped on his shoulder. This is the stuff of cut-rate late-night horror films (or perhaps this owes something to the deplorable *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* [2012] trend of combining history and horror). Moreover, the costuming for the historical parts of the show is generally quite good, but the outfit donned by the specter of Katrina (Katia Winter) is like something one would see on the cover of an overheated romance novel.

There is chemistry between Mison and Beharie. Both are competent actors and strive to make the ridiculous scripts work. Mison conveys a subtlety amidst the bombast and plays the fish out of water element well. Beharie plays a modern woman who manages to bring some complexity to her role. She is provided with a backstory of her own; she and her sister saw a demon in the woods as children, but she denied it and has been successful while her sister stuck to the truth and ended up in a psychiatric hospital. Beharie communicates the lingering guilt Mills feels over her abandonment of her sister admirably.

Over the course of several episodes, we are shown that George Washington, a product of the Enlightenment, was in reality a member of a secret mystical organization, guardian of holy secrets and other such balderdash. Crane was chosen by Washington to defeat the Horseman then, and has reawakened because the Horseman has risen and only Crane and a prophesied partner (Mills, of course) can stop him and prevent the end of the world.

In each episode, the pair face some new, cobbled-together threat from Beyond, each of which seems surprisingly easy to overcome despite the frantic yet uninformative warnings from the ghost of Katrina,

perhaps the most annoying ghost in television history, that they face mortal danger. Plot lines are brought in and dropped willy-nilly from episode to episode. Various Horsemen (there are three others, after all) make appearances, each time with Great Threats to Mankind, but all are vanquished handily—often through Faith.

Indeed, a basic premise of *Sleepy Hollow* is mistrust of the rational. Mills' skepticism about the supernatural is portrayed as something holding her back. A moment arrives in nearly every episode where she is forced to trust in unknown forces, and is shown as increasingly willing to believe. In one show, Mills finds herself in a church talking to God and asking for a sign. At first feeling rebuffed, she leaves, only later to have a sign very blatantly given. Crane declares that it was "your faith" that solved the problem at hand.

Neither are myths and legends treated well in the show. The mix of biblical snippets, bits of lore and superstition pitched in make for an internally inconsistent system that seriously undermines any potential the show has. We are promised, or threatened, with the prospect of golems and scarecrows, among other bogeymen, in upcoming episodes.

In working with fantasy it is important to get one's story straight; the facts do not have to make sense in reality as long as they make sense in the story's world. The writers fail to bring their proposed world to life. Lt. Mills and the others are asked to believe things that seem unreal and fantastical, and because they are obliged to do so by the script, they do. The audience, however, needs more convincing.

Overall, one wonders what the intention is here. Loosely-treated historical facts smothered under layers of myth and legend make this particular entry into the field of reviving fairy tales and legends as police procedurals (*Grimm*, for example) one of the less successful artistically.



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