

NBC's *American Odyssey*: Mercenaries, jihadists and Machiavellian US corporations

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NBC's *American Odyssey* (simply *Odyssey* in the UK), created and co-written by Adam Armus, Nora Kay Foster and Peter Horton, will not be returning for a second season. Though at times confused in its approach, and dramatically uneven, the show demonstrated some interesting intentions and dared to raise certain issues that are generally suppressed or ignored on American network television.

The series followed three groups of people ensnared in a conspiracy involving the funding of terrorist operations by a large US corporation. The main focus is on Odelle Ballard (Anna Friel), an American soldier thought to be dead after her military unit is blown up in Mali. *American Odyssey* opens with her team having just killed the leader of a terrorist group, and Ballard downloading what she thinks is a significant set of files found on his computer, including a number of receipts for funds transfers from Societel Mining, a US company, to the Al Qaeda terrorist cell. That evening, her unit is blown up in a drone strike and she narrowly avoids death at the hands of mercenaries from Osela, a private, Blackwater-like company, sent in to take a body count and finish off any stragglers.

The suggestion that Islamic “terrorists” might be in the pay of American interests was enough to get the series denounced as “left-wing fantasy conspiracy theory” material in certain quarters.

Ballard develops a bond with Aslam (Omar Ghazaoui), a Muslim teen who saves her life and accompanies her during her grueling attempt to return home (hence the “Odyssey” of the title). This proves very costly for him, as Odelle is being pursued by murderous agents of Osela. The relationship between the two is well done. The character of Aslam was one of the better developed and more complex in the series. He is caught between the relative simplicity of living in

a regimented world of religious tradition and the necessity of ruthless cunning to survive the violent chaos of war. Ghazaoui conveys the stressed teen with aplomb; his bursts of anger and vulnerability are equally believable.

Aslam is an effective foil for Ballard, who, for her part, is realizing that the principles for which she thought she was fighting are meaningless, and the majority of those whom she had thought to be allies turn out to be willing to kill her or arrange her death. To the writers' credit, she retains an element of humanity, wanting what is best for Aslam—though, significantly, not consulting him to see if their idea of “best” matches up. The scene in which this comes to a head is a heavy-handed allusion to the US government's behavior in this area of the world, but the actors pull it off.

Over the course of the season, the conspiracy Ballard has uncovered pulls other characters into its orbit—but the stories here are generally less compelling and in some cases become seriously bogged down. Particularly tiresome is the plot line involving Harrison Walters (Jake Robinson), a freelance journalist whose father is killed after asking questions relating to Ballard's rumored survival. Aside from the needless (and shopworn) subplot about his intended assassin falling in love with him, the most ludicrous part of this arc is the portrayal of the *New York Times* as a bastion of whistle-blowing, independent journalism free from corporate or government interference!

In interviews, the creators of *American Odyssey* refer to a number of contemporary issues, including the role of private mercenaries, the dominance of corporations over American political life and the revelations of Edward Snowden. Nora Kay Foster, for example, told a journalist that “Corporations are more powerful now

than a nation-state, and people are really onto the fact that our democracy has been hijacked by corporate interests, and our votes are not really counting anymore because our candidates are all who has the most money.”

Another of *American Odyssey*’s executive producers, Peter Horton (perhaps best known as an actor on *thirtysomething*), commented that the series was “post-Snowden in the sense that indeed what we know is the extent to which ... government agencies and, frankly, private industry can invade our private space.” The program, he suggested, was “ultimately about power: Do we have it as individuals in our country or anywhere in our world? They’re [the lead characters are] three Davids up against the Goliath of money and power.”

In this light, the absurd presentation of the *Times* as the champion and voice of opposition to the attacks on democratic rights is all the more striking ... and revealing about Hollywood liberalism. Indeed, this reviewer kept expecting the other shoe to drop, i.e., that Ballard (or the others) would be betrayed through the machinations of this rotten publication. Instead, we have an idealized—past the point of wishful thinking—newspaper staffed by editors and reporters who are only interested in making sure the public knows what’s going on.

This is not the only instance in which the gravitational pull of the creators’ political outlook negatively influenced the program’s truthfulness. Interestingly, one of *American Odyssey*’s subplots involved a populist candidate for top political office in Greece. Would-be prime minister Sofia Tsaldari (Orla Brady) is only interested in the good of her people and standing up to the European Union in an effort to free her country from onerous debt. She is aided in her efforts by Peter Decker (Peter Facinelli), a former US Department of Justice prosecutor who now works for a major, corrupt corporation.

The fictional figure of Tsaldari stands in sharp contrast to the reality of the miserable, impotent Alexis Tsipras and Syriza. Horton explains that the show’s creators began working on the series three years ago, “just at the beginning of Greece’s problems, and we thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be interesting if there was a candidate who came along and it was a people’s candidate who said, ‘I’m gonna just toss this debt and

we’re gonna pull out of the eurozone?’ Well, lo and behold, right around the time our show launches, that’s what happens in Greece.” Except, of course, that it didn’t.

In any event, some of the issues touched upon by *American Odyssey* were important ones, although the series never got to the systemic heart of the matter. The ability or inability of a television series to strike the public nerve, of course, depends on a host of factors, some of them quite arbitrary. However, the somewhat diffuse, sprawling, half-hearted, neither-fish-nor-fowl approach of programs like this must have something to do with their low ratings. The public can sense, perhaps at an unconscious level, when punches are being pulled.



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