



# Van Helsing Series Premiere Review: Pilot

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***As vampires rule the world, a reluctant messiah emerges from the ashes.***

*This Van Helsing review contains spoilers.*

*Van Helsing season 1 Episode 1.*

One thing becomes abundantly clear three minutes into the pilot of SyFy's latest genre offering ***Van Helsing***; this is not your teenaged daughter's vampire story. Gone is the inherent sexiness we've come to associate with the highly attractive creatures of the night, and in its place a gritty, grimy, visceral appearance that articulates the reality of an existence that revolves solely around securing basic human needs in the face of post-apocalyptic obstacles. Bloodthirsty vampires attempting to storm Seattle Valley General Hospital give 21st century viewers a unique re-imagining with all the prerequisite details: buckets of blood, ravaged body parts, frequent bouts of terror, and above all, characters that inspire concern.

It's 2019 as the series opens; "Three years since *The Rising* began. Civilization has fallen. Vampires rule the streets. Only whispers of a human savior have given mankind hope." Let's get this out of the way right now. Comparisons to ***The Walking Dead*** are unavoidable, and it remains to be seen what will set ***Van Helsing*** apart from being just another horror series with an attractive woman wearing black and kicking ass as she fights back against beings that have lost their humanity. However, for now, showrunner Neil LaBute's untitled pilot employs a familiar narrative to set the stage for a unique take on elements of Bram Stoker's classic tale. How will a collection of disparate individuals cope when faced with a horrific set of circumstances that offers few ethical options?

Though we don't see Vanessa Helsing in action until midway through the episode, Kelly Overton (***True Blood***) plays a young woman who wakes from a coma having missed the volcanic eruption that led to the vampire pandemic. We're

immediately struck by the strength of her performance as Overton dominates every scene she's in. Disoriented and confused after being roused from her repose by a feral bite to the neck, she immediately springs into action revealing that she is not a woman to be trifled with. And in the first of LaBute's plot twists, we learn that biting Vanessa not only fails to turn her into a creature, but produces the unexpected consequence of returning a vampire to a human state. However, we are also left to ponder whether she lay dead or merely comatose on the hospital table leading up to her resurrection.

Axel (Jonathan Scarfe, ***Hell on Wheels***) has been ordered to guard Vanessa without knowing why, and his stoic response to this situation embodies everything we expect from a U. S. Marine. Referring to Vanessa as Sleeping Beauty, it's clear he's developed an attraction to her, and now that she's awake and determined to find her daughter, it seems rather obvious that they'll be leaving the relative safety of the hospital. The friction between the two provides a perfect launch of the relationship these two will undoubtedly have as she searches not only for her daughter, but an understanding of what makes her inherently special.

LaBute and director Michael Nankin (***Defiance, Hell on Wheels***) employ some character tropes, but these are used judiciously to establish how members of the small group react to self-serving motives along the way. It's understandable that one man who's narrowly made it inside the compound wants leave to find his wife from whom he's been separated, but these are dire times when the well-being of the group takes precedence over the needs of the one. Like *The Walking Dead*, we have a group of individuals

thrown together in a life or death situation, but Vanessa's "magic bullet" status raises the game's stakes.

All pilots face the same hurdle; can the writers lead viewers to care enough about the characters to return on a weekly basis? Are the stakes facing them high enough, and how can the writing team avoid simply presenting Vanessa on a quest to bring the world back from the brink of disaster one bite at a time? Interestingly, many pilots rely too heavily on narrative exposition and voiceover, but here, not only does the violent and oft times gruesome action demand the viewer's attention, it forces the individuals to take sides in the approaching storm and provides viewers some necessary character motivation. One who does emerge as a potential dark horse is Sam (Christopher Heyerdahl, ***Sanctuary***), a deaf man who steps forward as things begin spiralling out of control, lending a hand to Axel as the team leader faces a potential mutiny. Look for him to act as the group's voice of reason.

Officially debuting on SyFy September 23, this early unveiling reveals a show with a wealth of potential and a strong genre pedigree including ***Continuum***'s Simon Barry and Jonathan Lloyd Walker. On the surface ***Van Helsing*** may appear to be just another post-apocalyptic survival tale, but if this initial chapter is any indication, enough intriguing questions have been raised about Vanessa Helsing and her role as mankind's savior to compel viewers to return and watch this reluctant messiah cope physically and emotionally with a role she didn't ask for and doesn't want.

4.5/5