



SYFY'S VAN HELSING IS HALFWAY BETWEEN THE WALKING DEAD AND THE STRAIN (REVIEW)

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*Editor's Note: this review contains **minor spoilers** for the *Van Helsing* premiere. You've been warned!*

As part of an extremely small group willing to admit enjoying Stephen Sommers' 2004 videogame-like Universal Monster shooting gallery that was *Van Helsing* the movie, I'd have been just fine with a TV spin-off. Fortunately for the rest of you, that's not what this new Syfy show is: It credits the Zenescope comic book *Helsing* for inspiration, though it isn't that either—the only thing the show seems to have in common with the steampunk cheesecake book is that its title character is female; I assume that the credit is simply to avoid a lawsuit over who did that first.

What *Van Helsing* the show is, is even more bizarre: A vampire apocalypse show from executive producer/showrunner Neil LaBute, a man generally known for scathing battle-of-the-sexes drama, and of course this cinematic gem, which I unabashedly enjoy... *Not the Bees* - *Nic Cage in The Wicker Man*

Given his prior output, you'd imagine that if LaBute were to make an apocalypse tale, it would involve women rising up against men and castrating them. Instead, his end of the world is only metaphorically phallic, in that it involves the Yellowstone supervolcano erupting and spewing darkness into the air, allowing vampires free reign to operate during the daytime. In the first three episodes, there appears to be two distinct types of vampires: the smart ones (who've been at it for a long time and all boast Eastern European names like "Dmitiri") and the newly turned, who are basically the Walking Dead with slightly more intelligence.

The show opens three years after things have all gone to hell, in 2019. We're in an abandoned hospital occupied by just three people: Axel (Jonathan Scarfe), a Marine Doc (Rukiya Bernard), a recently bitten vampire locked in a cage whom Axel keeps alive by letting her sip his blood through an IV; and Vanessa (Kelly Overton), a sort-of comatose woman (it's tough to explain, so just roll with it) whose awakening will be the catalyst for the main storyline to begin. Though some press releases have given away a few more details, I shall say only that she has powers, and so far we don't know how she obtained them. Try to avoid spoilers on the specifics, because the moments when they are revealed are perfectly pulled off. You've probably guessed by now that Vanessa is "Van" Helsing, though she's referred to as Vanessa Seward at least once, a Bram Stoker in-joke that's presumably her character's married name.



The first episode, written by LaBute, deals with what happens when a group of newcomers (among them some faces familiar to Axel) arrive at the hospital, threatening to derail the careful sense of order he's maintained. With Vanessa waking up and wanting to find her daughter (who would most likely have been killed three years ago), yet another wrench is thrown into the works, and LaBute is in his comfort zone for a while as Axel and Vanessa engage in hostile banter. Both are, in their way, classic LaBute archetypes: he's a blond, blustery dude

while she's a raven-haired schemer, and while they soften to each other in subsequent episodes not written by the showrunner, LaBute does not do cute. This battle of the sexes is a legit battle, and does not play like a precursor to flirtation (though other writers may well take it in that direction later).

The second episode, which will air directly after the first this Friday, takes us back to 2016 and a pre-apocalypse Seattle—wherein we see Vanessa and her daughter—and begin to get the sense that her daughter is important enough to the show to be alive somewhere after all. It's a jarring change of scenery, and presumably the reason the first two episodes will air back-to-back, to cushion the contrast. This flashback, however, seems to do its job fully; there's no sense that this will be a recurring device a la *Lost*. Episode three is back in 2019 full-time.



I get why the show is called *Van Helsing*, as it's a familiar branding that gets across a vampire premise right away, but the connection to existing lore is the least interesting aspect of the show. I presume that at some point, we'll learn that Vanessa is descended from the original Abraham Van Helsing who fought Dracula (going out on a limb here, I'm guessing Hugh Jackman's "Gabriel Van Helsing" will not be mentioned). To me, at least, this is a lot less interesting than Vanessa just being an original character with mutant abilities. What we see of the vampire world thus far is a different enough take that going all-different seems more appealing than forcibly tying it in to Bram Stoker's novel, but I'll remain optimistic that it is just a gimmick and not something that will be too constraining on the narrative.

There's vampire gore aplenty, though certain things must remain offscreen—the murder of a child, for example, happens after a fade to black, but with terrifyingly evocative audio. And LaBute pushes profanity boundaries to a point where things seem almost arbitrary; one character says, “what the fuh?” while another invites Axel to “Go fffk yourself.” It's like how we all knew (but agreed not to say) what “frak” meant on *Battlestar Galactica*; there's plausible deniability to pretend it's still network-acceptable even though it's an obvious cheat. If you like *The Walking Dead* and/or *The Strain*, *Van Helsing* is worth checking out. If it gets more LaBute-y, it'll be even more worth checking out. If it gets too tied down to existing vampire lore...well, let's just hope it doesn't.

THREE BURRITOS SO FAR WITH ROOM LEFT FOR A POTENTIAL FOURTH:



Van Helsing debuts Sept. 23rd at 10pm on Syfy.