*Scream* (Television Pilot)

Directed by: Jamie Travis

Written by: Jay Beattie, Jill E. Blotevogel, Dan Dworkin, Jaime Paglia

Starring:

Willa Fitzgerald as Emma Duvall

Bex-Taylor Klaus as Aubrey Jensen

John Karna as Noah Foster

Tracy Middendorf as Maggie Duvall

These are some mighty big shoes to fill. I bet this must be nerve-wracking. How did it feel to take on one of the biggest horror franchises ever? Jeepers, I wouldn’t want your job (scratch that – of course I would).

You get the point. Dimension Films and their new partner on this excursion – MTV -- are returning to this classic cash-cow, this time bringing it to the small screen. We’ve left behind Woodsboro for Lakewood, a brand new community about to embark on a meta-slasher mystery all its own.

The folks behind the films in the *Scream* franchise (including Bob Weinstein – present last night at the LA FilmFest to introduce the world premiere) are taking a chance on this fresh vision. They’ve got to get the temperature and atmosphere just right – to impress the long-time fans, bring in the newbies and keep both groups on board for a different kind of story-telling.

The pilot lovingly opens with an updated version of the Drew Barrymore stalking from the original film. Instead of scary calls to a phone, it’s all about threatening texts. There is an appropriate amount of suspense and gore, so we know we’re in the right place. This opening sequence eases you into this new (but familiar world) like a first time lover makes you feel when things heat up. They know the right way to incense you and hopefully they are going to take it slow – giving you things you love to make this action exciting.

In the pilot (titled “Red Roses”), we’re introduced to the teenagers of Lakewood. Our focus is on Emma (Willa Fitzgerald) who lives with her coroner mother (Tracy Middendorf) and has a hefty group of mismatched friends, including her long-lost bestie and apparent lesbian Aubrey (Bex-Taylor Klaus), her boyfriend Will (Connor Weil), serial killer aficionado and resident nerd Noah (John Karna), resting bitch-face champion Brooke (Carlson Young), doofus-y jock Jake (Tom Maden) and the new-to-town mysterious hottie, Kieran (Amadeus Serafini). As you can expect, just as in the original film, each of these characters are a type – filling the roles we previously knew as Sidney, Tatum, Billy, Randy and Stu, etc.

This ensemble cast (many of these actors were just getting through their “terrible two’s” around the time the original film was released) is all appropriately young and pretty. Just what you’d expect to help market to an MTV, reality-show-weened millennial audience. That isn’t, however, meant to demean the acting talents of this group. They all have a lot of exposition to cover (and they do it well, this isn’t boring), each with their own secrets – making this a massive mystery, along with the expected stalk-n-slash goodness we’ve come to love.

Among the very best is Bex-Taylor Klaus (channeling some serious Rachel Maddow) portraying recently outed lesbian Aubrey (a video of her making out with another girl goes viral in the opening moments of the show – setting the mystery into motion). It’s apparent from the get-go that she’s got one of the juiciest roles. Not only does she have to accept and embrace her blossoming sexuality, she’s got to deal with all of the murder and who-dunnits in her community. We get a lot of the history (and current bitterness) between Aubrey and Emma – adding piece by bloody piece toward a completion of the puzzle. Aubrey is the character I feel most inclined to follow.

Wait a minute – not so fast!

Emma’s mom, Maggie (Tracy Middendorf – most familiar to horror audiences from *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare*) is equally as interesting. She’s also got a lot of secrets up her sleeve, and the pilot starts to dish on some of them right away. Clearly as she’s the senior stateswoman of the cast of characters, she’s got the most muddy and tricky history of them all. And her reactions as a bloody package arrives on her doorstep late in the episode cement that she’s going to be my fave performer in this eclectic group.

My big question (and giant wish to be fulfilled): Are there plans or even wispy brain-storming thoughts in the writer’s room – to refer in any way to the events of the film franchise? Even a tiny little mention of “those events over in Woodsboro so many years ago”? For me (and this makes sense in the universe of the films) it would be extra-meta and extra fun for such a discussion or perhaps a character intrusion (Sidney perhaps) to take place. Am I hoping for too much? It’s certainly not out of the realm of what has been created here. I understand they are taking the bull by the horns and creating a new world (complete with the Wes Craven-approved new mask design), but nonetheless, my fingers are crossed.

And that mask (what little we see of it) is far darker than the iconic original and cartoon-y version. Per the show-runners at the Q&A, the mask (unlike in the film series) plays a large part in the mystery. It’s a piece of the puzzle, rather than some random off-the-rack Halloween goody.

The Jamie Kennedy character (John Karna as Noah) sets up the eventual progression of the series. Obviously, to extend the world of a slasher film franchise into a weekly story, there will not be a constant barrage of gory killings at the hand of Ghostface. During the Q&A (as well as in the words of nerdy Noah on-screen) it was revealed that the show will be like a *Friday Night Lights*/soap opera feel, as we follow the everyday lives and get to know the characters. So when the horror and inevitable killings do happen, “it will hurt”.

*Scream* premieres on MTV on June 30th. It remains to be seen if I will keep up on the series. Based on this sleek production, my interest is piqued, but just like *Bates Motel*, I checked out far earlier than the producers probably would have liked (I only watched 3 episodes). Since this pilot was top-notch, and since Tracy Middendorf’s fine work will be featured – as well as the mysteries surrounding her character of Maggie – I will give it some time to fully grab me.

I mentioned to the gracious Ms. Middendorf following the screening (as I ambushed her in the lobby for a photo) that for me, she was the big selling point.

An interesting anecdote from a couple of the actors during the Q&A – they didn’t initially know that this was actually related to the film franchise. Obviously it is (and they know that now).

I bring that up to tell you that the series (at least the pilot) will provide you with the scares, the laughs and familiar joy of the films, but I don’t know how long that will last. It feels like once they reel you in (they did a pretty good job here) the hard-core gore fans and horror nerds might stray away as the story unfolds. Much like the soap-operatics and far-too infrequent zombie incursions of *The Walking Dead*, I sense that this might test the patience of the gritty, down-n-dirty horror freaks.

But still, let’s give this the benefit of the doubt. It is *Scream* after all. And the pilot certainly provides plenty of Ghostface promise.

Originality: 7

Impact: 7

Scares: 6

Visuals: 9

Story: 8

Script: 8

Favorite: 5

Longevity: 0

Category: Beginner’s shelf, Remake

Genre: Thriller/Suspense, Slasher, Psychotic

Overall Freakhead Rating: 3.5