figure, that Howe welcomes a modicum of reprieve from his life's hardship, all of which serves to portray him as an intriguing, sympathetic, but ultimately troubled soul.

Gavin Wilkinson

***

TELEVISION REVIEWS

Wayward Pines (Fox, 2015)
(This review contains spoilers)

Several factors influenced my decision to start watching Fox's *Wayward Pines*, not least the fact that it came recommended as a mix of two ground-breaking cult television series, Patrick McGoohan's *The Prisoner* (1967–68) and David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–91). Moreover, M. Night Shyamalan's involvement as series producer and director of the opening episode suggested the show was likely to offer an eye-opening experience and an entertaining ride, even if the quality of this experience was far from certain. The most compelling motivation, though, was the discovery that the show was based on a series of novels — Blake Crouch's *Wayward Pines Trilogy* (2012–14) — and as a result would be a self-contained, ten-part series.

It's certainly tempting for any television mystery series to hold off on a conclusion for as long as possible. Here *Lost* (2004–10) and even *Twin Peaks* spring to mind as series that started off with strong premises but forgot that suspense requires a proportional payoff. Thankfully, due to its limited running time, *Wayward Pines* did not have the opportunity to go similarly astray and manages to deliver a flawed but entertaining thriller.

The action begins with our protagonist, Special Agent Ethan Burke (battle-hardened Matt Dillon) coming to terms with his surroundings, and opens with a close-up shot of Ethan's eye as he regains consciousness on a forest floor. We soon learn that Ethan and his partner were involved in a serious car crash while investigating the case of two missing colleagues, but neither partner nor car — nor, indeed, any signs of civilisation — are to be found. Trekking through the surrounding forest, Ethan discovers a quaint mountain-side town by the name of Wayward Pines. The town's innocent façade soon begins to crumble, however, when several unsettling elements become apparent: none of the phones have

outside lines, there are cameras everywhere, and the entire settlement is enclosed by a five-metre high electric fence. Even more disturbingly, anyone caught trying to leave is sentenced to a 'reckoning', also known as death without trial. These mysteries are further compounded when Ethan's own family turns up in Wayward Pines. While out searching for him, Ethan's wife Teresa (Shannyn Sossamon) and son Ben (Charlie Tahan) are victims of a similar car crash and awake to find themselves in Wayward Pines hospital. The Burkes are gifted a house in the town's leafy suburb, Ben is enrolled in the local school, and the family is constantly reminded that they must forget that they ever had a life outside of Wayward Pines.

These early episodes are some of the most successful ones, when the nature of the surveillance is a mystery and it's unclear how far the townspeople are prepared to go to maintain the status quo. The psychological horror often reaches impressive heights, such as the unexpected and gruesome public reckoning of one high-profile cast member early in the series. There is also a suitably disturbing chase sequence in which Ethan attempts to escape from Wayward Pines hospital, pursued by Melissa Leo's Nurse Pam (for all intents and purposes, part-Nurse Ratched, part-Terminator), who seems to thrill in the hunt even more than she relishes keeping her patients captive. A third knuckle-biting moment occurs when Ethan's wife and son encounter Wayward Pines' Sheriff Pope (Terrence Howard) when stranded on a country road. Pope's behaviour up to this point in the series has been a mixture of polite and murderous, so what exactly is coming next is anyone's guess.

It's this air of uncertainty, bolstered by great performances, that makes *Wayward Pines* so engaging. Certainly there is little nuance to be found — the townspeople wander around in packs *á la Village of the Damned* (1960) and the surveillance cameras appear and disappear as is relevant to the plot, allowing Ethan to conduct secret meetings without getting in trouble, while other townspeople are caught for much smaller transgressions — but the story unfolds at such a rate that you can almost forgive its lack of subtlety. There is little filler in each episode and there is a satisfying feeling that it is all building towards something worthwhile.

Which brings us to the middle of this ten-episode arc. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of Shyamalan's work will be unsurprised to hear that there is a twist. Indeed, it would be far more surprising if there were *not* a twist of some sort. Shyamalan twists are known to range from ones that enrich the narrative in works like *Unbreakable* (2000) or *The Sixth Sense* (1999), to the downright ridiculous and often unnecessary, as in *Signs* (2002) or *The Happening* (2008). *Wayward Pines*' twist rests somewhere in the middle, both structurally and in terms of quality and, while it does answer some questions, it also creates

significant plot holes that are never satisfactorily explained. It acts more as an addendum which allows the narrative to change genre rather than to deepen our appreciation of what we have already seen.

The twist is a particularly big one: it is now the year 4028 and Wayward Pines is the last bastion of human civilisation, built as a home from which the repopulation of the human race can begin. The world is dominated by aberrations or 'abbies', humans that have mutated into murderous carnivores. Considering there are only a handful of *Homo sapiens* left in the world, it seems reasonable to assume that the abbies have a varied diet, but their relentless pursuit of human meat suggests they have acquired a taste for it. Wayward Pines exists only because genius scientist David Pilcher (Toby Jones) had recognised the threat that these abbies would pose in the future, and made preparations for the survival of mankind: namely, by building and protecting Wayward Pines. Ethan, his family, and all the other residents of Wayward Pines are all abductees who were cryogenically frozen for two thousand years, only to be woken when Pilcher believed the time was ready to start repopulating the world.

While this is a lot to take in, the reveal itself is handled well. Over two episodes, the camera switches deftly between scenes with Ben as he learns the shocking secret from the town's school principal and resident brainwasher Megan Fisher (Hope Davis, with a maniacal glint) and scenes with Ethan, who has climbed over the fence and is experiencing the alien world first hand. However, almost straight away there is the uneasy feeling that *Wayward Pines* has bitten off more than it can chew. The Southern-gothic atmosphere of the opening episodes is quickly replaced with a far more clinical, post-apocalyptic tone and this sudden switch from small-town life to futuristic wasteland is not only disorienting but also forces the show to once again begin its world-building from scratch. The overt threat of flesh-eating monsters is sadly much less effective than the air of uncertainty that typified the early instalments. The abbies, which were reasonably threatening as a mostly off-screen presence, are a serious disappointment once they take centre stage. It seems like the show's creators were aiming for primordial vampires, what with the abbies' grey skin and pointed teeth, but it doesn't take long before they start to look like what they are: large naked men, running around trying to look scary.

The shift in genre at the show's halfway point also has the unfortunate effect of rendering what we have already seen less convincing. In particular, the explanation for the reckonings becomes rather sketchy. The townspeople, Pilcher claims, can't be trusted with the realisation that they have been frozen for 2000 years and that the world as they knew it is gone, so they are kept in line with the threat of capital punishment. Yet Pilcher's project is

supported by a team of volunteers that *chose* to be cryogenically frozen and have devoted their lives to keeping the townspeople safe and oblivious. This crack team manage to monitor the townspeople via surveillance cameras twenty-four-seven in order to quash any signs of rebellion, while simultaneously ensuring that all Wayward Pines residents are able to maintain a twenty-first-century lifestyle. How they are able to provide an endless stream of food, fuel, textiles, and everything else the town requires is never touched on, but it is hard to imagine Pilcher achieving such a feat without a large group of devoted followers. As such, it is difficult to understand why Pilcher went to so much effort in kidnapping hundreds — perhaps even thousands — of unstable individuals so he could indulge in a spot of glorified babysitting.

The second half of the series is a race against the clock, with Ethan joining Pilcher in his attempt to stop the rebels (a group of Wayward Pines abductees who have been covertly planning to escape for years) from destroying the fence that surrounds the town. It's rather disappointing to see the otherwise discerning Special Agent become so willing to trust the very people who have deceived him for so long, but he's not the only character suddenly to start acting uncharacteristically. Nurse Pam, it's revealed, is actually the kind and devoted sister of scientist David Pilcher. Her abrupt change of demeanour is difficult to reconcile with her earlier enthusiasm for terrorising patients. (We also never learn the source of her near-superhuman invulnerability, or where she gets the time to go to the hairdresser so often. She's an enigma for the ages.)

Ultimately, it becomes clear that characters no longer matter, as it's the overarching themes of individuality versus totalitarianism with which we should now be concerned. This debate is dealt with reasonably well until Pilcher becomes tired of his toys and shuts down power to the fence himself, making his position rather hard to defend. His claim, that he is singlehandedly preserving mankind, is hard to accept in light of his decision to allow whole swaths of the town to be butchered by abbies as the show approaches its climax. The subsequent dash to save the human race offers some effective moments of shock and splatter; it is a hurried mix of *30 Days of Night* (2007) and *Die Hard* (1988), with a gory shootout against the abbies followed by a last stand in an elevator shaft.

When the smoke finally clears we are left with a truce. In an uplifting moment framed by the cryogenic tanks which have the potential for so much good and evil, Nurse Pam and the leader of the rebels, Kate Ballinger (Carla Guigno), agree to work together towards a better future, without the oppressive structures that Pilchard had put in place in a misguided attempt to ensure the future of the human race. This moment is undercut straightaway by the

series's final twist. Suddenly, three years have passed and the younger generation have taken over the town. The adults have been forced into cryogenic sleep and reckonings are back on the menu. Since we get no explanation as to how the younger generation could so successfully overpower the experienced older characters, it's a rather jarring final moment. The perfunctory nature of the three-year skip and the lack of characterisation for the younger characters throughout the series renders what could potentially be an elegant commentary on how the past repeats itself as little more than a disappointing moment of sequel-baiting. On the other hand, this final scene is so innocuous and so unlike the novels' ending that it can almost be dismissed as the pilot of an unsuccessful spin-off show: *'Pines: The New Class*, perhaps?

Whether or not a sequel is likely, in this season at least, Shyamalan delivers his own brand of off-the-wall entertainment, characterised by unusual concepts that fall apart when probed too deeply. *Wayward Pines* is to be praised for its opening act, which boasts strong performances and an eerie gothic atmosphere. It should also be admired for its innovation in attempting to alter the direction of the series. Although the central twist turns out to be too ambitious, it's nevertheless refreshing to see shows prepared to take such risks. It is harder to praise the direction in which the show chooses to go, however. As is often the case, with the mystery dispelled, the second half of the series proves unable to match the compelling and truly chilling nature of the first. With too many inconsistencies and under-explained ideas, *Wayward Pines* ultimately falls short of its potential.

Sarah Cullen

***

***The Originals*: Seasons 1 and 2** (The CW, 2013-15)
(This review contains spoilers)

The Originals, a show about vampire-werewolf 'hybrids', is itself something of a strange beast. A spin-off from the compulsively watchable *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–present), *The Originals* is to its parent series what Joss Whedon's *Angel* (1999–2003) was to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), in that it swaps the small town for the big city, and a female lead for a male one. This last statement is, however, slightly misleading, since it is by no means clear that *The Originals* can be said to have a central protagonist at all, to the point where it is difficult to tell whom, if anyone, we as viewers ought to sympathise with or root

for. Many of the main characters (the family of 'original', centuries-old, practically death-proof vampires back to whom all other blood-suckers can ultimately trace their monstrous lineage) are far from likeable, having been established as villains in *The Vampire Diaries*. In a programme that revolves so closely around knotty dilemmas and standoffs, therefore, narrative tension springs largely from sustained uncertainty as to which equally nefarious plan or individual will win out, and how much damage their enemies (or indeed their allies) will sustain as a result.

This crowd of mutually destructive quasi-bad guys is the inevitable outcome of the recent mania (both on TV and in film) for elaborate back-stories and 'origins' narratives, which are now *de rigeur* for age-old demons and comic-book heroes alike. The series begins as Klaus Mikaelson (Joseph Morgan) and his brother Elijah (Daniel Gillies) arrive in New Orleans, where they had first landed in the New World centuries before. Klaus, a vampire/werewolf hybrid, has fled the idyllic town of Mystic Falls, Virginia, after his various plans for world domination (by building an army of hybrids like himself) are foiled by the protagonists of *The Vampire Diaries*. He and Elijah hope to reconnect with their family's chequered past in New Orleans, though Klaus, predictably, also plans to regain control of the city that he supposedly founded, and from which the Mikaelsons had fled in 1919 (as a result of some particularly tangled daddy issues). This basic premise provides plenty of opportunities for flashbacks, complete with the theatrical costuming and 'old-fashioned' dialogue familiar from *Buffy* and *Angel*, and indeed the Civil-War sections of *True Blood* (2008–14). Aside from the obvious visual pleasures of such flashbacks, they also offer some respite from the rather frenetic pace of the present-day sequences.

In Season 1, the Mikaelson brothers (joined intermittently by their sister Rebekah, played by Claire Holt) find the city's French Quarter in the grip of a harsh regime, imposed by the new self-styled king of New Orleans, Marcel (Charles Michael Davis), Klaus's ward whom he 'rescued' from slavery in the early 1800s, and subsequently turned into a vampire. The vampires rule the city, while the werewolves are cursed to take human form only once a month. Meanwhile the witches, a group of powerful mortals (whose ancestors have been established in *The Vampire Diaries* as inextricably linked to the creation of vampires), also live in fear of Marcel. He has outlawed all witchcraft, on pain of death, though many witches continue to meet and practice clandestinely, living in fear of Marcel's 'secret weapon', a young, powerful witch named Davina who can sense when magic is being performed. Much of Season 1 is, consequently, devoted to Klaus's battle with Marcel for control of the French Quarter, a battle which weaves in and out of related struggles and uneasy alliances with (and

indeed between and within the ranks of) the witches and the werewolves. Into this already complex mix is added the return from death of Klaus and Elijah's father Mikael (a thousand-year-old Viking and a vampire so ashamed of his tainted offspring that he has become a cannibalistic hunter of his own kind); the spectre of their mother Esther (an equally filicidal witch); and the fallout from Klaus having somehow impregnated Hayley, an orphan werewolf looking for her pack in the bayou just outside the city.

Season 2 focuses primarily on the ongoing consequences of this pregnancy, and on Klaus's unending desire for more and more power, which continues unabated, even when he seems to have established himself as top dog, as it were. Indeed, his obsessive-compulsive need for total control, and his inability to trust anyone, even his own immediate family, is what drives the plot of both seasons. His foil is a mortal woman named Camille (or Cami, played by Leah Pipes), who he meets just after his arrival, and who is studying for a PhD in psychology (though she becomes so embroiled in the Mikaelsons' intricate machinations that one wonders when she gets any writing done). Cami is positioned as Klaus's potential love-interest, despite the fact that she repeatedly attempts (very unwisely) to psychoanalyse him. While neither the fiendish (if occasionally rakishly charming) Klaus nor the hyper-empathetic Cami can be identified as the main protagonist, both seem to have some claim on audience sympathies, and their personal battles (and indeed demons) are vital to the plot of the show as a whole. However, the ensemble cast ensures that no single individual remains as the central focus for long. Equal narrative and affective weight is therefore given to the sharp-suited, broodingly moral Elijah, whose own psychological demons burst free of his buttoned-up subconscious as Season 2 unfolds; and to expectant/new mother Hayley, whose divided loyalties to vampires and werewolves alike are just as important to the latter season's development.

While somewhat less focused in terms of overall plot development than Season 1, Season 2 is notable, as mentioned above, for the rapid pacing of individual episodes, in a manner that mimics the near-hysterical momentum of *The Vampire Diaries*. Both original and spin-off pitch each episode as if it were the season finale, constantly ratcheting up the tension as friend becomes foe, and vice versa, at breakneck speed. Consisting entirely of plot arc with almost no stand-alone episodes, in Season 2, *The Originals* increasingly resembles its predecessor, as the cast of characters are given no chance to rest between the onslaughts of one major enemy after another. Indeed, so many people are repeatedly killed and then magically resurrected (not to mention transferred into other bodies — of which more below) over the course of the season that it can be just as difficult for the audience to keep up. We

can only assume that, for the protagonists, vampire super-strength is invaluable in helping them to withstand the gruelling pace set by their own monstrous appetites, fraught inter-personal relationships, and byzantine local politics.

One consequence of this relentless plotting is that the viewer is permitted only brief glimpses of what appears to be a fascinating supernatural world surrounding the central vampire family — a world apparently governed by multiple power dynamics that are not always vampire-related. This is particularly evident in the case of the witches, who are depicted as very much a part of New-Orleans culture, and who are themselves seemingly divided into an endless array of factions, cults, and ethnic groupings. Season 1 raises the spectre of a powerful witch-doctor named Alfons Delgado, or 'Papa Tunde', a figure who recalls (but is not quite as impressively terrifying as) Lance Reddick's stellar performance as Papa Legba in *American Horror Story: Coven* (reviewed in *IJGHS* Issue #13). While Papa Tunde's knife (a supernatural torture instrument) plays some part in the action of Season 2, the man himself, who made a highly theatrical entrance in the previous season, is entirely absent, and apparently all but forgotten amid the increasingly confusing family feuds. The same can be said of Cami's uncle, Father Kieran, and the arsenal of 'dark objects' that he bequeaths to his niece, which are allegedly a vital part of her family's Irish Catholic heritage, and which are referenced only when they can be made useful to the Mikaelson-centric plot. Finally, a small number of Season 2 episodes feature an abusive psychiatric asylum for disturbed witches, in which Kol (another Mikaelson brother) temporarily locks his sister Rebekah, and which is barely mentioned again after she makes her escape, despite hinting at some further complexities in the witch hierarchy.

The asylum episodes stage the escalation of a rash of serial body swapping (which begins early on in the season when Esther Mikaelson, the matriarch, takes over the body of a local witch), a motif which provides Season 2 with some narrative coherence. When he traps her inside the asylum, Kol (played by Nathaniel Buzolic *and* Daniel Sharman) simultaneously uses one of his mother's favourite spells to transplant Rebekah into the body of a notorious witch, Eva Sinclair (Maisie Richardson-Sellers), who has been killing children, and who is the former girlfriend of yet another witch, Vincent (Yusuf Gatewood) who Finn (the final Mikaelson brother, played by Casper Zafer) has been inhabiting. Meanwhile, their mother Esther (Alice Evans) takes over the body of the witch Leonore (Sonja Sohn). With the exception of Kol's new 'host', all of these witches, whose personalities are violently suppressed when the various Mikaelsons take them over, are African- and/or Asian-American, while Mexican-American witches are central to Season 1. Skin colour and

ethnicity are therefore implicitly related to magical ability, an element of the show (and of *The Vampire Diaries*) that, while perfectly visible on screen, is never directly discussed or even acknowledged. The imaginative universe inhabited by both shows is most problematic in relation to the troubled and troubling racial issues that haunt the American South's past and present. The shows seem to be aiming for a kind of post-racial colour blindness that is, for some reason, most glaringly apparent when it comes to the witches whose personal and political problems are always subordinated to those of the vampires they effectively serve.

Plagued by less-than-progressive racial politics, and by a tendency to side-line its female characters in favour of the existential angst of its undead male protagonists (both Hayley and Rebekah are effectively reduced to secondary characters for much of Season 2), *The Originals* is far from perfect. It is, however, entertaining and gripping enough for me to hope that Season 3 (which CW confirmed in January 2015) resolves some of the issues that it has thus far been neglecting. The programme certainly hints at the tantalising possibility of vampires and witches of colour, as well as female vampires, being given story arcs of their own — the under-used Marcel is surely due some action after an entire season on the outskirts of New Orleans and of the plot. If it can manage this much, then the thought of *The Originals* rising from its ornate coffin once again might elicit screams of excitement (and not just from teenage vampire fans) rather than groans of irritation.

Dara Downey

***

Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell (BBC, 2015)
(This review contains spoilers)

Magic returned to the small screen this year, when *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* made its debut on BBC television in May. Like Susanna Clarke's 2004 novel from which it is adapted, the seven-part serial is an alternative history that takes place during the Napoleonic Wars, and follows the travails of Gilbert Norrell and his apprentice Jonathan Strange as they attempt to re-establish the practice of magic in an England that has long since lost touch with its supernatural heritage. The novel unfolded over the course of about 1000 pages, and undertook a pastiche of nineteenth-century literary conventions that came complete with lengthy explanatory and contextual footnotes. By contrast, director Toby Haynes and screenwriter Peter Harness are faced with packing as much as possible into just over 400

minutes of screen-time, necessarily undertaking some revisions and excisions of the source material along the way in an attempt to maintain narrative urgency and coherency. These efforts aren't always entirely successful, but nevertheless, there's plenty to admire here in an adaptation that largely stays true to the spirit of Clarke's much-loved and much-lauded fantasy novel.

That it manages to do so is due in no small part to the pitch-perfect casting of Eddie Marsan as Gilbert Norrell, who ably embodies the bookish and reclusive practical magician, determined to return his chosen field of study to a state of respectability in England (largely from the safety of his library). In this, he is nicely counter-balanced by Bertie Carvel's engaging performance as Jonathan Strange, the trainee gentleman-magician who is destined to become Norrell's student and eventual rival, after the inevitable development of a schism between the pair. Both are given stellar support by Enzo Cilenti's gruffly northern John Childermass, the trusty companion who aids Norrell in his endeavours, but whose real commitment ultimately seems to be the cause of magic itself.

The emergence of both Norrell and Strange as the leading magicians of their age sets them on course to fulfil a prophecy recounted to each by the scruffy street-magician Vinculus (Paul Kaye), and seemingly passed down from the legendary Raven King. Once the ruler of kingdoms in both Northern England and in Faerie, the Raven King has long since departed from England, leaving magic to decline into the dormant state from which Strange and Norrell seek to revive it. Perhaps inevitably, this mythos is less fully realised here than in the novel, and lacks the depth provided by Clarke's explanatory footnotes; in particular, the Raven King's significance in a national narrative that pits the north of England against the south seems underplayed. Instead, references to the figure largely seem to function as shorthand for the evolution of the differing belief systems espoused by Strange and Norrell, prompted by their differing attitudes to and experience of the practice of magic. While Norrell remains in England and sets about keeping a stranglehold on the scholarship of magic, Strange's training takes him further afield: first to mainland Europe to lend a hand in the war against Napoleon, and then to Faerie where he traverses the 'King's Roads', once used by the Raven King himself to travel between Faerie and England. These experiences ultimately convince Strange to value precisely the kinds of practices that Norrell purports to reject in his continued insistence that there is no place for so-called 'Faerie' magic and fairy servants in respectable, modern England.

Of course, the irony behind Norrell's position is that his initial acquisition of celebrity status as the nation's foremost magician is entirely contingent upon his recourse to 'Faerie'

magic at the conclusion of the first episode. Determined to convince MP Walter Pole (Samuel West) of the potential benefit of enlisting the services of a magician in the Napoleonic War, Norrell is granted an opportunity when Sir Walter's sickly fiancée succumbs to a fatal illness just days before their intended marriage. One swift spell later, Norrell has briefly reneged on his commitment to so-called respectable magic and summoned the Gentleman with the Thistledown Hair (Marc Warren), with whom he makes an obviously ill-advised and one-sided bargain to resurrect the future Lady Pole (Alice Englert), in the process promising half her life to the Gentleman. Once struck, this deal has ramifications for the entire plot, as more and more characters fall victim to the Gentleman's duplicitous actions and become frequent (or permanent) guests at his Faerie home of Lost-Hope. These include Strange's wife Arabella (Charlotte Reilly) and Sir Walter's servant Stephen Black (Ariyon Bakare), whose fates will shape the final episode's climactic scenes, with Lady Pole herself playing a more substantial role in the proceedings than that afforded her in the book. Indeed, the Lady Pole storyline remains central throughout each episode as an effective means of linking the various narrative threads, and provides frequent opportunities to cross from the 'real world' into the fantasy landscape from which the Gentleman hails.

These regular encounters with the Gentleman certainly keep the supernatural front and centre throughout *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, but in truth, this characterisation of the main representative of Faerie ultimately remains quite one-note and rarely manages to prove truly disconcerting. That said, he does play a key role in one memorably unsettling sequence at the end of the fourth episode, 'All the Mirrors of the World', in which he puts in motion his plans to steal Arabella away from Strange and replace her with a decoy shaped from a moss oak which takes her form, but whose wild eyes and strangulated gasps betray her inhuman origins. Shot in cold, washed-out hues, it's a scene that stands out as perhaps the most genuinely chilling moment of the entire series. Elsewhere, the creepiest moments are usually brought about by Jonathan Strange, whose time on the frontlines of the Napoleonic War confirms him to be a much more hands-on magician than his mentor (literally — he dispatches with one French soldier by conjuring up a giant hand from the surrounding muddy soil). His decision to raise from the dead a group of Neapolitan soldiers to aid Lord Wellington (Ronan Vibert) and his troops proves especially haunting, both for the character and the audience, while his retreat to Venice after the apparent death of his wife sees him concoct a potion made of distilled crazy-old-cat-lady in the belief that by driving himself insane he will finally be able to summon a fairy servant to his aid.

These striking sequences can't fully distract from the main challenges that the show must negotiate, though. At just seven instalments, it often feels too truncated to be entirely satisfying, and there are (as many observers have noted) persistent issues with pacing throughout. This becomes especially apparent in the race to resolve things within the last couple of episodes. For example, Strange's Venetian encounter with Dr Greysteel (Clive Mantle) and his daughter Flora (Lucinda Dryzek) is so fleeting that it makes his subsequent selection of Flora to aid him in retrieving Arabella from Lost-Hope seem almost entirely random. More problematically, the blink-and-you'll-miss-it climactic appearance of the Raven King is a real misstep, right down to the unfortunate styling of him as a reject from an industrial metal band.

If the closing episodes prove at times frenetic in their efforts to reach the finish line, however, the opening two episodes in particular are actually a little too slowly paced. In between the larger set-pieces in which Norrell fools French troops into believing that they are under imminent attack by fashioning some illusory ships out of rain, or that in which Strange restores a beached ship with the aid of some horse-shaped sand, the scene is slowly set in ways that may well prove pleasing to fans of the novel. This leisurely pace likely contributed to declining viewing figures as the weeks continued, though, in particular for viewers more accustomed to the extravaganzas on display in that more dominant contemporary fantasy show, *Game of Thrones* (2011–present). Although the ante is upped by the fifth episode, 'Arabella', which opens with a reimagining of the Battle of Waterloo, even this pales in comparison with such brutal and breath-taking sequences as the Battle of the Blackwater with which the second season of *Game of Thrones* culminates.

In the end, though, such comparisons are probably unfair, as *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is by its very nature a much more genteel affair. This is a tale of two *gentleman* magicians, after all, and the final episode, 'Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell', finally reunites the pair in scenes that might make the viewer wish there had been space for just a little more interaction between the two throughout the series as a whole. Once again, Marsan shines here, whether it's acknowledging the value of his friend's book which he had once tried to suppress ('the most beautiful book of magic I have ever read'); making the ultimate sacrifice in giving up his much-loved and hard-earned collection of books in order to generate the magic needed to defeat the Gentleman with the Thistledown Hair; or looking on the land of Faerie with absolute glee when he finally finds his way out of his library and crosses the threshold into a world he has only previously read about. Ultimately, it's in such instances

that *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* manages best to capture some of the charm of Clarke's original; when it succeeds in doing so, it conjures up moments of genuine magic.

Jenny McDonnell

***

American Horror Story: Freak Show (FX, 2014–15)

In 2011, *American Horror Story* (abbreviated here to *AHS*) exploded onto television screens, offering a blend of chilling terror, gruesome violence, raunchy sex, and general mind-bending weirdness explicitly designed to outrage and disgust audiences. Three thoroughly nasty but hugely entertaining series later, and this lurid combination has managed to keep viewers tuning in, and in ever greater numbers. Just when film and particularly television horror appeared in danger of becoming too predictable and bland for most devotees, *AHS* has single-handedly restored its capacity to shock and revolt. Indeed, possibly not since the decadent dying days of Hammer studios has so much objectionable material gone into a production intended for a mainstream audience. *AHS*'s astonishing worldwide popularity has proven that being relentlessly sickened is something not only horror fans enjoy.

For the uninitiated, these are the essential facts. Created by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuck, each series of *AHS* is a thirteen-part, stand-alone narrative featuring a large regular cast, along with several guest stars. To date, there has been a series chronicling the morbid history of a haunted house in Los Angeles, one charting the unspeakable goings-on in a lunatic asylum in 1960s Massachusetts, and another following a bloody power struggle in a witches' coven in present-day New Orleans. Since almost every episode is the work of a different writer, *AHS* is remarkable for the spectacularly freewheeling, twist-laden nature of its storytelling, and for a format so flexible that it has incorporated pastiches, parodies, and even song-and-dance numbers. Finally, the show's ethos seems to be that excess is something to be embraced for its own sake, and that nothing (from visuals, to music, and most of all acting) can be sufficiently over the top.

A huge part of the show's success has been due to the casting of Jessica Lange, whose phenomenal performances in the first three series have earned her two Emmy awards. Indeed, the *AHS* repertory cast features an unusually strong female presence, with Kathy Bates, Angela Bassett, Sarah Paulson, and Frances Conroy all receiving award nominations for their turns in the show. *AHS* has also attracted an impressive array of male actors, including such

big names as Zachary Quinto, Joseph Fiennes, Ian McShane, and James Cromwell, as well as showcasing such outstanding young talent as Emma Roberts and Evan Peters. The variety of actors in each series, and the rich range of their performing styles, is one of *AHS*'s great delights.

In *Freak Show*, the fourth season, Lange is Elsa Mars, proprietor of Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities, a travelling freak show camped in Jupiter, Florida in 1952, whose marvellous performers include Paul the Illustrated Seal (Mat Fraser), Legless Suzi (Rose Siggins), giantess Amazon Eve (Erika Ervin), and Ma Petite (Jyoti Amge), the smallest woman in the world. Utterly ruthless and fame hungry, Elsa thinks nothing of kidnapping innocents to add them to her troupe, and her latest additions are the conjoined twins Bette and Dot Tattler (Sarah Paulson). What is more, where Elsa goes, murder and mayhem inevitably follow and her show quickly attracts a host of very unpleasant characters. Repellent wannabe star Dandy Mott (Finn Wittrock) is denied a part in the troupe and exacts a sadistic revenge, a pair of confidence tricksters has evil designs on the freaks, and Twisty (John Carroll Lynch), a serial-killer clown, is on the prowl.

It would require several times this space to give even a basic account of the convoluted storyline of *Freak Show*, but suffice to say it takes a pleasing number of unexpected turns. While not as random or as inventive as *Murder House* or *Asylum*, it avoids the tangle of confused plot devices which made last year's *Coven* a muddled and lacklustre affair. Although many scenes are desperately lacking in clarity, *Freak Show*'s dialogue is lively and contains the occasional surprising touch of subtlety. Its production values are also easily as high as before. In fact, the skewed cinematography, sumptuous art direction and costume design, and impeccable period detail make this possibly the most beautiful series yet.

AHS's offbeat characters are integral to its appeal, and this series boasts a vivid collection of grotesques. As the imperious Elsa, Lange presides over all and delivers first-class insults in a hilariously strangulated German accent. Bassett, as the fearless intersexual Desiree Dupree, Bates, as the wise bearded lady Ethel, and Conroy, as Dandy's appalling mother Gloria, are fantastic, while Paulson gives a pair of fine performances as the quarrelling telepathic twins Bette and Dot. Having previously played an unbalanced teenage ghost with a fondness for latex bondage suits and mass murder, a victim of extra-terrestrial torture locked up in a madhouse, and a 'perfect boyfriend' made from the spliced remains of mangled frat boys, the ever-astonishing Evan Peters almost seems normal here as 'Lobster Boy' Jimmy Darling, the reluctant leader of the troupe.

Also making a welcome return for more punishment are Denis O'Hare and Emma Roberts. O'Hare gets his best *AHS* role yet as Stanley, a despicable charlatan out to pickle the freaks and sell them to the local Museum of Morbid Curiosities. It's an outrageously loathsome part which he's clearly enjoying immensely, while rising star Roberts is superb as his conflicted accomplice. Of the *AHS* newcomers, Finn Wittrock makes the strongest impression as the psychopathic and Cole Porter-obsessed rich boy Dandy, who imagines he has become a godlike immortal after bathing in the blood of his enemies. As written, the character is ridiculous, but Wittrock makes the petulant, unhinged Dandy equally terrifying and pathetic (what a perfect Joker he would make in a new *Batman* movie) and he contrasts well with John Carroll Lynch's Twisty, who is truly the stuff of nightmares. Of this season's guest stars, the standout is Wes Bentley as Edward Mordrake, a spectral, aristocratic madman born with two faces, who returns from the grave every Halloween to claim another soul for his legion of the damned. Mordrake is a terrific creation, and Bentley's beady-eyed, intentionally theatrical performance is so wonderful you wish he had been given more screen-time.

Although it doesn't scale the same epic heights of perversity as the unforgettable *Asylum* (surely one of the most mesmerisingly demented things ever shown on television), *Freak Show* has its share of stomach-churning moments and violates good taste at an alarming rate: there is a horrible botched suicide attempt, a young hustler is slowly butchered in nauseating detail, a luckless morbidly obese girl becomes both a substitute mother and an object of lust, Peters uses his outsized digits to perform an unorthodox form of massage on Jupiter's bored housewives, and sex and death are indivisibly linked. Unfortunately, too many of *Freak Show*'s ideas simply don't work (the use of contemporary songs, for example, ruins the period atmosphere), and it lacks the scathing social commentary which was the most disturbing aspect of earlier seasons. An effort is made early on to connect the cruel treatment of the victimised 'freaks' with the oppression of other groups marginalised at this point in history, but it's a half-hearted gesture which mostly fails to convince.

These glaring flaws aside, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* is never less than riotously enjoyable hokum. Indeed, it's hard not to admire its shameless, hucksterish attempts to offend by every conceivable means. It's also exciting to observe the tell-tale signs that all four series have taken place in the same universe and are intricately interconnected, something which Murphy and Falchuck have at last begun to reveal in *Freak Show*. How many permutations the same format can undergo before it really does become exhausted is anyone's guess, but for now *AHS* gives no indication that it's running out of energy. For all

its irksome clumsiness and deplorable sleaziness, it remains a shrewd, campy, and bloodthirsty rollercoaster ride which is difficult to resist.

Norman Osborn

***

Errata

The editors wish to correct a typo on p. 151 of Issue 12, in which Eddie Marsan's name was misspelled.

***