and actors in, the performance of their own torture. Thematically, *Would You Rather*'s idea of 'decision-making in its rawest form' may not resurrect torture porn; however, in fusing the iconography of its antecedents with such heavy-hitting moral concerns, the film certainly makes a thought-provoking contribution to an ailing sub-genre.

Gavin Wilkinson

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TELEVISION REVIEWS

Lost Girl: Season 3 (Syfy 2013)

'My love carries a death sentence.'
–Bo in *Lost Girl*

Lost Girl is a female-led Canadian supernatural television series, created by Michelle Lovretta, which was first broadcast by Showcase on 12 September 2010. The show became the highest-rated Canadian-scripted series premiere of all time on Showcase and, following its consistent delivery of stellar ratings, following its consistent delivery of stellar ratings, further seasons are in the works. The show revolves around a succubus named Bo, who feeds (during sexual encounters) on the energy of humans, sometimes with fatal results. Loath to embrace the harsh hierarchy of the Fae, the supernatural clan system into which she has been born, Bo is a fiercely independent renegade who takes up the fight for the underdog (usually humans) while searching for the truth about her own mysterious origins. Ultimately, because of her succubi abilities, she cannot escape the fact that she *is* one of the Fae, a group made up of multiple races of supernatural entities who align themselves either with the Light or the Dark. Bo struggles to remain neutral, a choice which allows her to vacillate from one side to the other at will, particularly when in search of information, though doing so often places her in grave danger. With leather-clad ferocity, Bo therefore explores a world teeming with sex, death, swordplay, and mythical creatures, rendering *Lost Girl* a satisfying concoction of dark romanticism, urban terror, and gleeful gothicism, of suspense, horror, humour, and eroticism.

Set in downtown Toronto (although not explicitly), the show is largely focused on a deeply divided society (somewhat similar to that depicted in *True Blood* [2008–present]) and on the horrors that pervade the show's supernatural reimagining of the city, lingering as it does on abandoned urban lofts and post-industrial wastelands. Anna Silk gives an impressive and meaningful performance as Bo, while well supported by the consistently spirited sidekick

Kenzi (Ksenia Solo); the ever-sensitive rogue detective Dyson (Kris Holden-Reid); and her intermittent love interest, scientist Dr Lauren Lewis (Zoie Palmer). What's more, beneath the superficial playfulness that permeates much (but by no means all) of the screen time, the show actively confronts issues of racism (by exploring the tensions between different supernatural races), slavery (some humans are owned by the Fae), and class struggle (several species are subjected to discrimination due to an inflexible class system).

In typical gothic fashion, *Lost Girl* is about family, albeit not the nuclear-family togetherness of blood relatives, but the messy, dysfunctional, incestual dynasty that occurs between friends and acquaintances. Steeped in Celtic iconography, the 'Dál Riata', a Fae-exclusive Irish pub, frequently functions as a welcoming and neutral ground, where the Fae on both sides come to escape the cannibalism, curses, insanity, and mind control of everyday life. Indeed, the Fae society is on the brink of upheaval in Season 3, as new alliances forged between the Light and Dark are broken. While the wicked Morrígan (leader of the Dark Fae) attempts to execute Bo, Kenzi is abducted by a crazed Kitsune (a homicidal human-fox hybrid). All the while, scientist Lauren is being exploited by selfish humans who seek to harness her research on Fae genetics for evil. Brilliantly paced and with a killer cliffhanger, one horrific highlight of the penultimate episode sees Dyson forced to cage-fight to the death with a ravenous wolf-man to the delight of a blood-thirsty audience. While Bo must prepare to endure an evolutionary Fae rite of passage, which finally enables her to explore her past, she alternates between feelings for both Dyson and Lauren as, despite being a murderous succubus, she has a penchant for monogamy, albeit a fleeting one.

Lost Girl builds on elements of fantasy and horror, covering some well-trodden territory in the process, situating itself as it does as part of the supernatural crime-drama subgenre, alongside *Angel* (1999–2004), *Medium* (2005–2011), *The Ghost Whisperer* (2005–10), and *Tru Calling* (2003–05). Bo's own murderous tendencies, as well as the horrifying manifestations of the overarching mythology, which includes The Norn (an ancient and powerful Fae capable of granting supplicants their innermost desires, but for a heavy cost), renders the show weighty. Like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) or *Supernatural* (2005–present), *Lost Girl* explores the burden of knowing that the supernatural exists and the responsibility that comes with it. The first three seasons offer original narratives, intriguing mythology, multifaceted character development, moral ambiguity, and an array of endangered languages (particularly Goidelic). The show also emphasises the diversity of sexuality and gender (advancing LGBT themes), yet refrains from demonising and/or fetishising any particular group. Sexual orientation, such as Bo's bisexuality, is rendered a

non-issue within the programme's diagetic frame, as is the gender identity of other characters, such as the pansexual, cross-dressing Dark Fae Vex.

For viewers who enjoy teetering on the edge between the playful elements of urban fantasy and the sombre, seedy cityscapes of the urban gothic, who have a keen interest in mythology, and a penchant for leather and/or shades of steampunk style, *Lost Girl* is remarkably enjoyable. It is an edgy, witty, adult, and female-centred urban fantasy series, which extracts its horrors from a dangerous dance of supernatural politics. Bo's steadfast stance — to reject the obligatory choice between the Dark and the Light Fae — results in her remaining unaligned as she falls prey to the heavy consequences of a Manichean political system in which the majority rules. It may not be groundbreaking television, but it could function as sufficient padding for those with a Buffy-shaped hole in their hearts.

Victoria McCollum

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True Detective: Season One (HBO, 2014)
(This review contains spoilers)

Right at the end of the twentieth century, the start of a new so-called 'Golden Age' of television coincided with the arrival of Tony Soprano, the first in a long line of anti-heroes that have often dominated the 'quality television' of the last fifteen years. From *Mad Men*'s Don Draper to *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, these conflicted and morally dubious male characters have shot, slept, and swindled their way to widespread critical acclaim and plaudits, and can now count among their ranks two new members in the protagonists of *True Detective*. Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) and Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson) prove to be very 'difficult men' indeed as they undertake a murder investigation in Louisiana in this slice of southern gothic.[1] Over the course of eight episodes (each written by Nic Pizzolatto and directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga) the story of the case and the pair's lives are unravelled in a narrative that flashes back and forward across several timelines. Rust philosophises and Marty philanders, and both men are forced to take a good long look at themselves as they stare into a Nietzschean abyss, but eventually the case gets solved (if not entirely *re*solved, ultimately).

[1] The term is borrowed from Brett Martin's 2013 book about the brand of anti-hero that has characterised such shows as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad*, as well as the creative minds behind them.

It is in its narrative structure that the initial strength of *True Detective* lies, allowing it to reveal its various secrets by degrees in the course of its (re)telling. The first episode establishes the format that most of the series will follow, in which Rust and Marty are interviewed (separately) by two new detectives, who are tasked with solving a murder that bears a marked similarity to an earlier case. Back in 1995, the younger Rust and Marty had investigated the case of murdered prostitute Dora Lange, found naked in a field (apart from a pair of antlers perched atop her head) in a crime scene that suggested possible occult shenanigans were afoot. Since that time, the two men have become estranged, after an inexplicable falling out in 2002 set them on very different routes out of the police force. Now separated from his long-suffering wife Maggie (Michelle Monaghan), Marty has set himself up as a private investigator, while an alcoholic and worse-for-wear Rust has recently resurfaced in Louisiana and is determined to solve the Dora Lange case once and for all. The case has absorbed Cohle in the years following the initial discovery of Lange's body, as he (and Hart) uncover clues that point to a serial killer who has a penchant for iconography borrowed from Robert W. Chambers's 1895 collection *The King in Yellow*, and possibly a broader conspiracy that reaches into the upper echelons of Louisianan society itself. By the end of the final episode, not all of these loose ends will be tied up, but this is in keeping with the tone of the show — after all, 'This is a world where nothing is solved', as Rust tells his interviewers.

The interview and flashback structure of these initial episodes allows for some nice narrative touches about the ambiguity of storytelling itself — most memorably, when the official story of the two men's 'hero moment' when they apparently closed the case in 1995 is described in voiceover, while the visuals reveal the way in which that partially resolved but ultimately botched investigation actually unfolded. It also allows the show to take its time with the development of the plot. The story (and backstory) are gradually layered and pushed slowly forward episode by episode, with occasional bursts of greater urgency (such as the conclusion to the fourth episode, with its already fabled six-minute tracking shot as an undercover Rust escorts a confidential informant away from the elaborate shootout taking place around them). This languid structure, with so much emphasis placed on the spoken word, is particularly in keeping with Cohle's introspective tendencies throughout, characterised at times by his hallucinatory synaesthesia, but more often by his frequent and extended bouts of philosophising about time and the individual's place within the universe. Having taken its time for seven episodes, though, it all unravels in the final instalment, when an unfeasibly tenuous and conveniently verifiable hunch finally leads Cohle and Hart to the

homestead of their southern-gothic-by-numbers bogeyman, an incestuous murderer with severe daddy issues and poor housekeeping skills, who has evidently taken some tips from David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995) in keeping some of the more pungent stenches at bay.

To be fair, it's not just in the final episode that the show descends into clichés as broad as this. Cohle's self-professed pessimism manifests itself in a solitary home-life that is straight out of the rulebook that dictates that cops with troubled pasts must live in under-furnished apartments and own poorly stocked refrigerators; and, like Don Draper and Michael Fassbender's Brandon in *Shame* (2011), he generally demonstrates the depth of his existential angst by staring out of windows (though at least Cohle chooses to do most of his staring out the window of a moving car, so the view's a bit more varied). Hart deals with his own set of anxieties as a family man in a different way, by distracting himself with a string of extra-marital affairs, while trying to maintain an inconsistent sense of morality. Thus, Hart is the kind of man who will give a gift of money to a teenage prostitute to encourage her to get out of the game, and then begin an affair with her seven years later when he runs into her again while out shopping (for tampons for his wife and daughters, suggesting the extent to which he feels 'emasculated' within his all-female family).

As this implies, the show's depiction of women remains its main stumbling block, as Emily Nussbaum (writing in *The New Yorker*) and others have suggested, and it is a problem that it never manages to escape, amassing a collection of tired female stereotypes, from the now-ubiquitous interview with a witness in a strip-club, to the shrewish mistresses, to the put-upon, nagging wife. It's the characterisation of Maggie (as the show's only major female character) that proves the most troubling, though, in particular in the sixth episode, which finally reveals the reason for Hart and Cohle's mysterious bust-up in 2002. Tired of her husband's repeated infidelities, Maggie takes action by doing the one thing she knows will hurt him — sleeping with his partner and best friend, who is a helpless slave to his sexual urges in the moment, incapable of resisting her charms, but who viciously turns on her once the deed is done. In truth, it's a scene that is problematic in its depiction of both its male and female characters, but when viewed in the context of the show as a whole, it serves finally to emphasise just how badly female characters tend to be treated throughout *True Detective*.

Maggie's seduction of Cohle marks a turning point in *True Detective* as a whole, a point-of-no-return in my own growing sense of discomfort with the show's gender politics, but also in its narrative structure. Once the mystery of Cohle and Hart's mutual hostility is solved, the narrative abandons its multiple timelines and, having reunited the pair in the present day, it begins hurtling towards its disappointing (and uncharacteristically optimistic)

conclusion. It's a shame, because there remains a lot to like about *True Detective* — its understated, suggestive creepiness (up until the final episode, at least); its striking visuals; its score and soundtrack (which finally gives The Handsome Family in particular their due). But in the end, these highlights are not quite enough to make the show an undisputed classic. It remains to be seen how the second season will fare, with a new set of detectives, location, and investigation; but let's just hope it proves Rust wrong in his belief that 'everything we've ever done or will do, we're gonna do over and over and over again', and at least manages not to repeat the tired clichés and gender stereotypes that are so prevalent in Season One.

Jenny McDonnell

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Penny Dreadful: Season 1 (Showtime, 2014)
(This review contains spoilers)

It must be admitted that this reviewer came to Showtime's new eight-part series *Penny Dreadful* with a certain degree of scepticism. The show posits a London-set late-Victorian 'Demi Monde' simultaneously inhabited by Dracula, Victor Frankenstein, Dorian Gray, the Wolfman, Egyptian gods, and (most terrifyingly of all) a demonically possessed Eva Green. It's a concept which for many viewers will bring back traumatic memories of the monumentally inept 2003 film adaptation of Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999). Happily, however, *Penny Dreadful*, created and written by *Gladiator* (2000) screenwriter John Logan, has turned out to be a beautifully crafted slab of hokum which easily ranks as one of my favourite new television shows, despite some not inconsiderable problems.

The pilot opens as some unfortunate but disposable tenement folk are bloodily ripped apart by an unknown attacker, prompting fears that Jack the Ripper may be up to his old tricks again. Token American Ethan Chandler (played by token American Josh Hartnett, who is better here than he has been in years) is a womanising, hard-drinking performer in a Wild West show, who may or may not be connected to the murders (a plot thread that runs throughout the series). His gun-slinging talents bring him to the attention of Vanessa Ives (Green), a mysterious gentlewoman who has a talent for showy tarot readings and is in need of some professional muscle to help her investigate the murders. Ives lives in a sumptuous mansion owned by the decidedly Allan Quatermain-like explorer Sir Malcolm Murray (Timothy Dalton), who needs Chandler's assistance in order to help save his daughter Mina

(Olivia Llewellyn). We later discover that Mina's marriage into the middle classes has inevitably resulted in her being kidnapped by a nest of particularly bloodthirsty vampires, and Murray is determined to rescue her, whatever it takes. (The search for Mina is one of the major narrative elements connecting each episode.) Sir Malcolm soon adds to their ranks the reclusive, socially awkward young medical genius Dr Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadwell), whose ease with the undead makes him an obvious recruit for our sombre band of misfits. Also tagging along is Sir Malcolm's African man-servant Sembene (Danny Sapani), who (like every other major character) clearly has 'Terrible Things to Hide', although we don't actually find out what they are in this series. In addition to the very solid main cast, the series also features a number of well-known British character actors in minor roles, among them Simon Russell Beale as an endearingly camp Egyptologist, genre stalwart David Warner as a (criminally underused) Professor Abraham Van Helsing, and Helen McCrory as a spiritualist who may or may not be the real thing.

From the outset, *Penny Dreadful* looks so strikingly beautiful that it can't help but impress even the most sceptical viewer. Both the interior and exterior set designs are by turns grubbily and grandly atmospheric, with the cramped streets of central Dublin proving a creditable stand-in for the slums of Victorian London. The pilot, directed by Juan Antonio Bayona (best known for helming Spanish horror classic *The Orphanage* [2007]) sets the scene nicely. It juxtaposes powerfully eerie interludes (such as a sequence involving Green's character, a tormented Catholic, at prayer, which the more arachnophobic viewer may want to watch out for) with violence so extreme that even a hardened gorehound like myself was surprised that they'd gotten away with it. Yet for all of the action set-pieces and bloody murders on offer here, the show also displays a kind of languid confidence which may either enthral or infuriate, depending on one's televisual inclinations. In short, the pace may be far too slow for the more impatient viewer. As in Brian Fuller's masterpiece-in-progress *Hannibal* (2013 — reviewed in Issue 12), *Penny Dreadful* features a great many scenes in which, on the surface, nothing more exciting happens than a lengthy conversation between two very messed-up people. It often makes for genuinely compelling viewing, precisely because there's room here for both the characters and the story to breathe. One (perhaps inevitable) consequence of the leisurely pacing, however, is that it does sometimes feels as if the story is taking rather too long to get to the point.

It must also be admitted, though, that *Penny Dreadful* rarely errs on the side of subtlety in its evocation of the Victorian age. It comes as little surprise when the seemingly heroic Sir Malcolm is revealed to be an exploitative sexual adventurer whose explorations

have more to do with ego than with the desire for scientific discovery; nor is it entirely surprising that his arrogance has had a devastating effect on his doomed biological children as well as his surrogate daughter Vanessa. (Who knew that British colonialism and the Victorian patriarchy had their downsides?) Equally unsubtle is the depiction of Dorian Gray's (Reeve Carney) omnivorous sexual appetites and scandalous inclinations, which are emphasised by his penchant for silk dressing gowns, orgies, leather trousers, and S&M. In fact, Dorian's main job is to have sex with a sizable proportion of the cast, including one character whose attraction to him is actually particularly surprising (and revealing). Similarly, Victor Frankenstein's strong discomfort with (living) women, and immediate and intense bond with his needy male 'creations', are obviously intended to reflect modern readings of *Frankenstein* as a kind of proto-gay text.

There is one potentially intriguing aspect of the show's representation of Frankenstein's creation (played by Rory Kinnear, and dubbed 'Caliban'); unlike many of his on-screen predecessors, this Creature is as eloquent and well-read as Shelley's original. What's more, his truly startling first appearance provides one of the best moments in the entire series. However, Caliban rapidly outlives his welcome, mostly skulking around London like a melancholy teenager, popping up every now and then to murder whomever Victor happens to be chatting to at the time, glare through windows like a reject from *Wuthering Heights*, and ineffectually stalk silly young actresses. Ultimately, then, although Treadwell's nervy, pallid depiction of Frankenstein as a repressed young nerd is an interesting one, his relationship with the Creature quickly becomes one of the more tiresome elements of the show.

The show's other major problem lies with Chandler's love interest, Brona Croft. While she is a likable actress who shows winning flashes of vulnerability, Billie Piper is sorely miscast as the consumption-ridden young prostitute who quickly enters into a relationship with fellow heavy-drinker Chandler. The main difficulty lies with her Northern-Irish accent, which represents the worst disservice to the Belfast brogue since Julia Roberts tried one on for size in *Mary Reilly* (1996). Piper's accent is all the more unfortunate given the fact that, as noted, the show is filmed in Dublin, and has many Irish off-screen personnel. One would have thought that finding an actress who could realistically portray the only Irish character in the entire cast would not be inordinately difficult. It's a painfully distracting facet of her performance and, most egregiously, it makes almost every scene in which she appears cringe-worthy, a feeling compounded by the fact that Brona must also cough blood into a handkerchief every thirty seconds or so in order to highlight that her days are numbered. In

addition, in what is only one of the most obvious examples of the show's propensity for ham-fistedly telegraphing twists several miles in advance, even the most dim-witted of viewer will rapidly make a connection between her terminally ill state and Caliban's longing for a 'bride'.

Having said that, one of the series' most interesting (and potentially problematic) characteristics is that it so explicitly dramatises the male fear of 'unrestrained' female sexuality and power that informs so many classic horror tropes. There are moments here when it genuinely feels as though Logan has just finished working his way through a beginner's guide to the female gothic, and is eager to demonstrate this fact on screen, principally by channelling his responses through the character of Vanessa Ives. Green has a compellingly eccentric on-screen presence, and has already depicted any number of witches, femme fatales, psychos, and deranged warrior-princess types on the big screen. *Penny Dreadful* may well represent her finest hour in this regard, though. As the series progresses, Vanessa's propensity for dramatic eye-rolling, convulsive fits, levitation, and speaking in tongues increasingly comes to the fore. It's hard to imagine many actresses (literally) throwing themselves into the action in the way that Green does in the remarkable séance scene that provides the climax of the second episode. Her intense physicality is also highlighted in the season's two most Vanessa-centric episodes, 'Closer than Sisters', and 'Possession' (essentially a late-Victorian re-hash of *The Exorcist*), in which we find out just why it is that she feels so very guilty about her friend Mina's terrible fate, and discover the true nature of her unique religious burden. Once again, originality isn't one of the episode's (or the series') strong points, but Green does get to recite a particularly pointed yet compelling monologue in which she discusses the psychosexual reasons behind the Victorian male fascination with dead and dying women. It's a moment that not only underlines Logan's undoubtedly heavy-handed approach to the material, as well as Green's absolute ease with it, but it also explicitly links Vanessa's arc with that of Brona, the show's other major female character. Of course, it could be argued that Logan is trying to have his cake and eat it by acknowledging the horror genre's reliance upon graphic depictions of female suffering, while graphically depicting female physical and psychological torment throughout the series. Certainly, none of the male characters are put through the wringer in the way that Vanessa is. And yet, the fact that she is by far the most intriguing (in part because of her compelling back-story, and in part because of Green's unique performance) and potentially all-powerful member of the group means that, unlike Brona or Mina, Vanessa is ultimately much more than a victim.

Penny Dreadful can be undeniably uneven, illogical, and even rather silly at times. There are quite a few moments where characters suddenly change their minds about an issue for no other apparent reason than it says so in the script (Sir Malcolm's vacillating relationship with Vanessa is a particular offender here). The much-anticipated final showdown between our heroes and the vampires is a definite disappointment, while hints about intriguing storylines (in particular, a plot thread involving Egyptian gods) are dropped into the first couple of episodes only to be apparently forgotten about by season's end. It's also difficult to see what shallow fop Dorian Gray or love-sick bore Caliban add to the proceedings either: they're both catalysts for the dreadful actions of others rather than fully developed characters in their own right. And yet, for all that, I'll certainly be tuning in again next year. The question posed by the final moment of the series, 'Do you really want to be normal?' is one that raises all kinds of intriguing opportunities for *Penny Dreadful*'s future. Every major character in the show is 'monstrous' in some sense or another, and yet Logan's script manages to invest Chandler, Ives, Frankenstein, and Sir Malcolm with a degree of psychological complexity that renders their stories, and their relationships with each other, truly absorbing. For those reasons, I'll tactfully ignore the fact that none of the classic texts that the show has plundered for inspiration — *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* — were, technically speaking, penny dreadfuls at all. It's a good title, and a little creative licence never did anyone any harm — except, perhaps, the unfortunate Victor Frankenstein.

Bernice M. Murphy

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American Horror Story: Coven (FX 2013)
(This review contains spoilers)

American Horror Story: Coven is the third iteration of the *American Horror Story* universe, devising another completely new plot and timeline (interchanging between the present day, the 1970s and 1834), while keeping the series' regular cast list intact (although each plays an entirely new character). With the dawn of each season, *American Horror Story* has been lauded for constantly redefining itself in terms of screenwriting, tone, and cinematography. After criticism of the previous season's (*Asylum*) darker and more ominous tone, *Coven* departs from these overtly macabre tendencies in favour of a far more whimsical tenor. Season Three of the franchise endeavours to tell the tale of a coven of witches, descended

from their Salem counterparts. The addition of eccentric camerawork, often captured through a fish-eye lens, immediately establishes a distinctive visual style, reminiscent of films such as *Suspiria* (1977). Despite this exceptionally commendable visual flair, *Coven* suffers from bouts of uneven scriptwriting and fails to flesh out the characterisations of its large supporting cast. The show as a whole has tended to opt for sprawling plot-lines, with numerous tangents, but in this season that tendency is even more prevalent and the plot is far denser. As a television show that prides itself on horror-oriented narrative, *American Horror Story: Coven* is indeed the most controversial incarnation of the programme thus far.

The season commences by introducing us to the main timeline (which more or less corresponds to the present day) and setting in which events take place: Miss Robichaux's Academy, an academy that is disguised as a boarding school, but is actually a school for fledgling witches, gifted with supernatural powers. Cordelia Foxx (Sarah Paulson), who presides over the institute, takes the young witches under her wing and attempts to nurture their often-unrestrained powers (which include telekinesis, telepathy, and pyromancy, among others). Cordelia's stringent scholastic system for her protégées is soon thrown into turmoil after her estranged mother and 'supreme' of the coven, Fiona (Jessica Lange), arrives at her doorstep. The supreme is gifted with the power to command 'The Seven Wonders of Witchcraft', the complete spectrum of powers that a witch may possess. Students at the academy all have individual powers; however, some of these are more relevant in terms of plot progression than others, while some are included for sensational effect. Zoe (Taissa Farmiga), a young witch under the care of Cordelia, arrives at Miss Robichaux's due to her ability to exterminate men who happen to engage in sexual intercourse with her. This capability is never fully expanded upon and is not even presented as one of 'The Seven Wonders' once the various cast members' powers are properly accounted for later in the season. Misty Day (Lily Rabe), a witch thought to have been burnt at the stake, is granted the more compelling power of necromancy ('resurgence'), but that raises a further problem by allowing the rather arbitrary plot structure to resurrect any deceased cast members. This constant revival of characters means that *American Horror Story: Coven* lacks any significant or meaningful deaths, marring any true sense of horror or foreboding that previous seasons have utilised to a far greater extent. Plot points such as the aforementioned examples prove especially problematic in terms of heightening suspense, and make it difficult for the audience to engage fully with the narrative.

The coven's often-flamboyant powers fail to generate any real sense of horror, then, and instead, the mainstay of the season focuses on a wholly comedic element, which it

executes to varying degrees of success. Series newcomer Kathy Bates, cast as Madame LaLaurie (based on a real historical socialite/serial killer) features in many of *Coven*'s highlights. During the season's retrospective 1834 timeline, LaLaurie is cursed with immortality and buried by the voodoo witch Marie Laveau (Angela Bassett), in revenge for the murderous blood-letting rituals that she practiced upon her slaves in New Orleans in order to create a youth-bestowing wrinkle cream. In the present day, Fiona releases the Madame from her burial site in a quest to even the score with the opposing voodoo faction that plagues the coven with violence, fronted by the similarly immortal Marie Laveau. Once LaLaurie becomes a maid at the academy, African-American witch Queenie (Gabourey Sidibe) soon entraps the inherently racist torturer, forcing her to watch the mini-series *Roots*, which results in her renouncement of her bigoted past. Other realisations about the way in which society has developed during her entombment produce equally comical results, such as LaLaurie's reaction to the news that an African-American president now resides in the White House. Cameos from Fleetwood Mac singer Stevie Nicks similarly provide amusement, but quickly become overcooked, only adding to the assortment of incongruous plot devices employed throughout the serial.

Despite its endearing comical quirks, *Coven* ultimately fails to sustain its overly ambitious plot, presenting a particularly lacklustre conclusion. Cordelia, for example, is blinded by acid during a dispute with the voodoo faction that is warring with the academy. She eventually regains her sight but consequently gouges out her own eyes, finally regaining her vision for a second time during the final episode, in just one example of the season's tendency to pursue over-the-top and over-involved plotlines. Fortunately, sensational performances by Jessica Lange and Lily Rabe manage to offset the at-times farcical whims of the screenwriting, thoroughly captivating the viewer. Lange's depiction of a youth-obsessed, abusive mother lies at the true core of the production, counter-balancing the comedic aspects of the show with enthralling dramatic devices. After her arrival at the academy, we learn of her deteriorating health as she is diagnosed with cancer, forcing the selection of the new supreme of the coven from among Cordelia's students. Rather than the lengthy process of the student witches sparring to become the next supreme, though, the main merit of *Coven* lies in Lange's depiction of a woman who is haunted by her lost youth and the quest to retain her supremacy. This is the one true power that the script truly possesses.

Overall, the strength of *American Horror Story*, as a show, lies within its depiction of the human emotions of its characters, in the face of the horrific circumstances which are portrayed on-screen. Sadly, in this instance the opposite is true, with *Coven* deviating too far

towards clichéd comedic devices, resulting in the de-humanisation of many of the characters it sought to bring to life. The preceding and more successful season *Asylum* humanised its characters to far greater effect, suggesting that it is more appropriate for a horror serial to take a more solemn tone. With this in mind, it's good to hear that the forthcoming season *Freakshow* will purportedly return to the formula that made earlier seasons of *American Horror Story* so much more successful than this one.

Oisin Vink

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EVENT REVIEWS

Report from 'Remarkable Reynolds: Dickens's Radical Rival' symposium, Westminster City Archives, London, 26 July 2014

This symposium, presented by the University of Roehampton and the Westminster City Archives, was put together by Mary L. Shannon to commemorate the bicentenary of the birth of the novelist, journalist, and radical George William Macarthur Reynolds (1814–79). Now no longer a household name, Reynolds was perhaps 'bigger than Dickens' in his day. He wrote fifty-eight novels, eleven works of translation, several political tracts, and edited eight journals (four of which he had also founded); it has been estimated that he wrote between thirty-five and forty *million* words over a twelve-year period.[1] Reynolds's serial fiction *The Mysteries of London* was 'almost certainly the most widely read single work of fiction in mid-nineteenth century Britain', attracting more readers than the novels of Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, or Trollope.[2]

After some opening remarks from Mary Shannon, the first talk was given by Adrian Autton, Head Archivist at the Westminster Archives. Autton outlined the vast resources available in the Archives (dating from 1256 onwards) by showing a selection of images: everything from West End theatre ephemera and archives of the Liberty department store to some great gothic representations of the 'Devil's Acre' slum and one or two of the Archive's numerous images of Wilkie Collins.

[1] Anne Humpherys, 'The Geometry of the Modern City: G. W. M. Reynolds and *The Mysteries of London*', in *Browning Institute Studies*, 11 (1983), 69-80 (pp. 80, 81).
[2] Louis James, foreword to G. W. M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, vol. 1 (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2013), pp. v-xi (p. v).