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Nostalgia takes wing

Joe Ferullo | Sep. 28, 2011 NCR Today

Each new TV season is a bit like a national Rorschach test: the shows that audiences choose to check out often reveal or confirm something deeper about who we are and where we are. So far, this season has brought us mass psychology delivered in a package stamped "Pan Am."

The ABC series is set in 1963 and focuses on the glamorous lives of four jet-setting stewardesses who fly the international skies of the now-defunct, then-supreme Pan American Airways. The show draws inspiration from the cable hit "Mad Men," set on Madison Avenue in the same era -- but with crucial differences that provide some interesting insights.

"Mad Men" takes a skeptical and skewed look at the early '60s: drinking, smoking, and racial and gender attitudes are all played with a "can you believe people acted this way?" attitude that seeks to show us how far we've come, even if the suits and haircuts then looked much hipper.

But there's nothing like that raised-eyebrow in "Pan Am."

The show is stunningly shot, bathed in a golden glow, with impossible vistas and stunning horizons. Everyone looks gorgeous, and sexism is treated as a fun artifact, almost cute and quaint and certainly nothing that would stand in the way of the wonderful stewardess at the center of the story.

The score provides a tour de force of early '60s classics, from Buddy Greco's "Around the World" to Bobby Darin's "Mack the Knife."

None of this is by chance. The "Pan Am" pilot (which aired last Sunday) was directed by Thomas Schalmme, who directed episodes of and created the look for the NBC hit "The West Wing." That show poured a similar golden light onto American politics at a troubled time.

"The West Wing" debuted in September 1999, just a few months after the Clinton impeachment trial ended, and served as an antidote to the toxic politics that led up to that sad spectacle. In the NBC show, people of good will tried to do what was best for the nation they loved, accompanied by stirring music and a patriotic color scheme.

"Pan Am" feels like an antidote to hard times and a nagging national sense of decline. It flies through a clear blue sky of nostalgia, painting 1963 as a much, much better time: America was at the height of its world power; we were a glamorous people with a Midas touch. The Cold War (which enters the series through a subplot) gave us a now-comforting fight between good and evil with no shades of grey -- and the music was happy, confident, lively and clean.

The show found nearly 11 million viewers last Sunday at 10 p.m., one of the more impressive debuts this fall. For a whole hour, we were able to travel back five decades in time and relive what it felt like to be at the top of our game.

Times are tough right now, and prosperity does not seem to be around the corner. It will come; it always does.

But in the meantime, thank goodness, we have "Pan Am."

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