

Review – ‘Ratched’ is Pretty but Poorly Paced

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[Editors Note: this review contains minor spoilers for Ratched]

Ryan Murphy, the creator of hit television shows like *American Horror Story* and *Pose*, certainly has a signature style. Glossy, expensive-looking sets; deliciously garish colour schemes; bold and surprising plotlines. Murphy’s latest television development, *Ratched* (released on Netflix September 18th), is no different. Despite all the visual splendour this psychological thriller has to offer, Season One isn’t completely dazzling.

Ratched, created by Evan Chomsky, centres the eponymous Nurse Mildred Ratched (Sarah Paulson), a character taken from the pages of Ken Kessey’s 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. The plot of Season One follows Mildred’s quest to infiltrate a psychiatric hospital called Lucia State and ultimately attempt to free her murderous brother, Edmund Tolleson (Finn Wittrock).

At first, it was easy to pick up hints of *American Horror Story: Asylum* from the show; perhaps it was the returning cast members and the 1940s hospital setting, maybe just the Murphy-esque nature of it all. However, this feeling quickly disappeared as *Ratched* shifted from mysterious to downright bizarre.

Ratched follows some intriguing storylines that often suggest that there’s more to each character than meets the eye. However, satisfying conclusions are regularly sacrificed in favour of cartoonish gore or illogical twists. The backstory of Lucia State Hospital’s head honcho, Dr. Hanover (Jon Jon Briones), is an example of this. In Episode Three, *Angel of Death*, a tragic mistake from the doctor’s past comes back to haunt him. What could have been a tantalising thread to pull on across Season One ends up being asked, solved, and answered within a rushed forty minutes.

At the end of the episode, a flashback depicts Hanover's bloodily over-the-top mistake in a drug-fuelled scene that wouldn't be out of place in the 1998 film *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (only it's not as substantial). Though I'm a fan of a good gory scene, it's difficult to truly relish in the payoff when the story it centres feels flat. Still, it is quite fun as a spectacle.

The show is stylised as a prequel to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, so the Nurse Ratched we meet on-screen has more humanity than the chilling, unforgiving character penned by Kesey. A touch more, anyway. Sarah Paulson, who's also a producer for the show, successfully manages to teeter the razor-thin line of playing an unlikeable character who has a fair few redeemable moments. She could be speaking clandestine words of comfort to a young patient in one episode whilst offering to help assassinate her boss in the next. Whatever her character's up to, Paulson does a brilliant job of slowly bubbling Mildred's darker traits up to the surface. Her performance as the haughty almost-villain is a saving grace in this show.

Another redeemable factor for *Ratched* has to be Cynthia Nixon (of *Sex and the City* fame) and her portrayal of Gwendolyn Briggs, a witty government worker. For a show that clearly has a pacing issue, one place it gets it right is with the slowly budding romance between Briggs and Ratched. Nixon plays the character so confidently that it's easy to see why Mildred is drawn to her – despite her initial denial. Whilst sex and desire are themes that are handled rather brazenly throughout the majority of *Ratched*, it's refreshing to see this couple receive a proper romance arc.

Between *Ratched's* jumbled plotline and excellent acting, we end up at the midway mark with a show that is worth a watch – but try not to take it too seriously. If you're a fan of medical gore, beautiful set design, and bizarre plots, then *Ratched* might leave a more impressive mark. If you're after a slow burning, creepy psychological thriller with a satisfying conclusion, it's not the show for you. Above all, it's a show that will unearth in you a love of red lipstick.