



A fine madness

Set in 1960s New York, the Emmy award-winning 'Mad Men' follows the lives of the ruthlessly competitive men and women of Madison Avenue advertising

screen savors

• By JONATHAN AMERIKANER

In a time when "Reality Television" succeeds in convincing us that nothing we see is truly real, *Mad Men* comes along and makes us believe again in the real rewards of good old-fashioned writing, acting, directing and photography. Now in its third season, AMC's original series *Mad Men* remains one of TV's most unapologetically provocative, sexy and stylistic shows.

There is always more than meets the eye on this show. Even its title has more than one meaning. On one level *Mad Men* refers to advertising executives working on New York's Madison Avenue; but the multiple, metaphoric meanings of the word "mad" are made even more explicit by the Saul Bass, Hitchcock-type animated opening of a man slowly falling from a skyscraper. The show is set against the backdrop of 1960's white, middle-class America and revolves around the exploits of the team at ad firm Sterling-Cooper. The center

of that team is Creative Director Don Draper (Jon Hamm) who is dangerously handsome, smooth, seductive and secretive. Although he appears to fit in with his firm's upper crust colleagues, Don harbors a secret past. This past, revealed in flashbacks, occasionally threatens Don's seemingly "perfect" life. But Don always covers his tracks. As the series progresses, however, Don's web of lies begins to unravel. His wife Betty (January Jones) is catching on. Betty evokes the classic Grace Kelly ideal of beauty. Gorgeous, rich and moving up, on the surface the Drapers are the embodiment of the American Dream, circa 1962.

The firm has many other fascinating people, all with secrets and angst. Roger Sterling (John Slattery) is terrific as the senior partner who leaves his wife to marry a 22-year old – younger than his daughter. Then there is Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser), the ambitious young account manager who will do anything to get ahead. Pete cheated on his wife Trudy (Alison Brie) and fathered a child with another of Don's former

secretaries, Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss). Peggy is now Sterling-Cooper's only female copywriter, promoted by Draper. Ms. Moss is convincing as the brave and fragile single girl trying to make it in a man's world.

LED BY series creator Matthew Weiner, the writers re-create 1960s America. Working through a present day prism, the show hits on many Sixties issues that still pack a punch – civil rights, communism, homosexuality, sexism, the birth of consumerism. *Mad Men* masterfully mixes cultural history with its plot lines. Some of the best moments are those when we move away from the characters' personal lives for a bit and watch Don and his creative team at work creating print or TV ads, such the one in which Don brilliantly comes up with the name "Carousel" for the circular Kodak slide projector that became a smash success. This season features a plot line that has Don working with the iconic and eccentric Conrad Hilton, who calls Don at all hours of the night to service his hotel accounts.

Much has been commented on *Mad Men*'s verisimilitude of 1960s America. The production designers go to great lengths to create the look and feel of the era. For viewers old enough to remember, *Mad Men* is a nostalgic feast for the eyes and ears: typewriters click-clacking, elevators with human operators, a switchboard with operators taking calls. An early episode had the office in a buzz over the arrival of the company's first copy machine. Even the camera style seems grounded in techniques of 60s American cinema, relying heavily on dollied camera movements instead of today's more common Steadicam and hand-held techniques. The audio design of the show revels in the past with tinny sounding phone calls and scratchy, rough intercom calls.

Things unfold slowly with the emphasis on character – not action. Herein lies *Mad Men*'s only weakness: the pace leaves many storylines hanging. Some viewers complain that "nothing happens." But American television has had other shows "about nothing" that still compelled us to watch. Personally, I find the show addicting and deserving of its ever-growing fame. *Mad Men* is a fine madness.

The third season of Mad Men airs Saturdays on HOT Channel 3 at 10 p.m.

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