

The Really, Really Good Wife

CBS' LEGAL DRAMA OFFERS A TOUGH DEFENSE AGAINST THE COMPETITION, AND VIEWERS ARE TUNING IN EN MASSE

★ Last summer, as the story of South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford's extramarital affair began to break, the political world took notice. *The Good Wife's* creators and executive producers, Robert and Michelle King, meanwhile, took notes.

For the Kings, Sanford is just the latest in a long line of prominent politicians whose adulterous activities provide inspiration for their instant-hit drama, which has drawn up to 14 million viewers a week since it debuted as part of CBS' Tuesday lineup last September. With *The Good Wife*, the Kings—themselves a married couple—bring us behind the scenes of such a scandal from the point of view of Julianna Margulies' lead character, Alicia Florrick, a lawyer-turned-trophy wife who must return to the courtroom to provide for her family after her state's attorney husband is arrested.

"*The Good Wife* has tapped into the zeitgeist, and really struck a chord with viewers," says CBS Entertainment President Nina Tassler. "Its success



indicates that audiences have a hunger for complex, smart character drama."

THE HOLY GRAIL OF CRIME DRAMAS

Thanks to its juicy courtroom plot twists, *The Good Wife* continues in the CBS tradition of cutting-edge procedurals. But it's also much more, notes *Los Angeles Times* TV critic Mary McNamara. The show "is the Holy Grail of crime dramas because you have the procedural element in an interesting legal case every week, but then you also have an overarching story of a marriage and a family surviving—and a very smart, very real depiction at that," McNamara says.

Within each episode of *The Good Wife*, the Kings aim for a 50/50 split between life and law—which can sometimes seem like an awful lot of puzzle pieces to jam into a 42-minute frame. But as Robert King explains: "If there's one thing we're proud of, it's probably the ability to tell a procedural story in a shorter period of time. After all, if you watch TV and movies these days, they're all prizes and very few Cracker Jacks. Viewers just want the best stuff and not all the boring stuff in between."

Luckily, the show's writers learned early on that they can get away with creatively cutting some corners in the courtroom to bring us that emotional scene at home between Alicia and her kids. "If you were to lay out one of our stories, you would realize that maybe we never showed the breakdown of



The Good Wife star Julianna Margulies, flanked by show creators and executive producers Robert and Michelle King.

Margulies: Kings; Songtao/Fleming/CBS; Wife: Elke Schrotter/CBS



THE GOOD WIFE
AIRS TUESDAYS AT
10 P.M. ET/PT ON CBS.



the bad guy, or we never showed the verdict,” King explains. Partly from perusing viewer feedback on Internet chat boards, he says, “we’re finding that our savvy audience fills in a lot of the blanks.”

BRING ON THE HEAVY HITTERS

From the moment she viewed the *Good Wife* pilot, the *Los Angeles Times*'s McNamara developed high hopes for the show.

“I think a lot of people deal with adultery, or betrayal of one sort or another, in a marriage. And it’s interesting to see that being dealt with incrementally, in small portions of each episode, as opposed to that being the whole centerpiece of the show,” she says. “In Alicia Florrick, both the writers and Margulies have created a kind of sensible yet emotional, really smart everywoman that viewers can relate to.”

The Kings, too, give Margulies and the rest of the heavy-hitting cast much of the credit for bringing humanity to Alicia’s world. With so many capable performers at their disposal, the writers say, they have had fun creating new combinations of characters and observing the resulting, often unpredictable, chemistry.

“When we wrote the pilot, we didn’t have a cast. But now that we have these incredible actors, we’re writing for *them*,” Michelle King notes. “And I think it has been easier to keep up the quality, knowing how spectacularly good they are.” In fact, Margulies

won both a Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild Award for her role.

OPENING NEW DOORS

Over the course of the season’s 23 episodes (an additional installment was added to the customary 22 when the show proved so popular), Alicia has reclaimed her career and at least some equilibrium in her home life. But the Kings promise they won’t ever let the lady get too comfortable: Just as they strategically planned “tentpole” events this year to keep their heroine guessing—her husband goes to prison, then comes back out—they foresee that “the deeper we go into the character, the more story doors we’ll keep opening up,” Michelle King predicts.

Robert King promises that *The Good Wife*'s second season “will be even more interesting than the first, because the law has a corrupting aspect to it.” Alicia, he discloses, will begin to worry that in success, “she’s not as good of a person, and that that may be having an impact on her kids.”

“We want to use that to dirty Alicia up a bit,” he says. “After all, no one loves a saint—to live with, or to watch.” — *Jim Colucci*

The Kings use real-life political scandals such as that of South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford, above, as inspiration for events on their hit drama, which stars Julianna Margulies as the wife of a disgraced politico (Chris Noth).