

Exit Will Gardner

“The Good Wife,” CBS, Sundays 9:00 pm

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Spoiler alert. If the March 23rd episode of “The Good Wife” is still in the queue of recorded shows on your TIVO or DVR, watch first—read next.

Wow! Last night, network TV actually pulled off a whammy with some emotional heft—a side-winding wallop worthy of the generally superior drama series that have populated cable fare in recent years. But since its inception six years ago, particularly as the series coalesced in Season 2, “The Good Wife” has distinguished itself with superior writing, casting and direction. For most of its five-season run, it has been the best drama on network television, and certainly no red-headed stepchild to its more lauded cable cousins.

For the uninitiated, “The Good Wife” stars Julianna Margulies as Alicia Florrick, the dutiful wife of Chicago Attorney General Peter Florrick (Chris Noth), disgraced by infidelity and imprisoned on corruption charges that are later overturned. Spurred by the need to support their two young children, Alicia resumes an earlier aborted law career, landing a job at a firm co-helmed by a former lover from law school, Will Gardner (Josh Charles).



The series launched amidst this story arc, but quickly progressed through an inevitable, rekindled Alicia & Will affair and Peter Florrick’s attempt at redemption as father and husband, and an ultimate run for governor of Illinois. Meanwhile, the brilliantly scripted Machiavellian machinations of Alicia’s employer, the Lockhart-

Gardner law firm, has provided some of the best star-making turns for veteran and unknown actors alike—the likes of which we have not seen since the heyday of 1960s dramatic TV. By all accounts, hundreds of Hollywood’s elite have lobbied for guest roles.

Season 5 resumed this past September with Alicia and fellow associate Cary Agos (Matt Czuchry) having exited Lockhart-Gardner, amidst great recrimination, to start their own firm. Pitting former colleagues against one another as adversaries (stolen clients, opposing counsel scenarios, etc.) helped ramp up the drama this season. But the holidays, the Super Bowl and other programming conflicts had bumped the show from airing anything but reruns for two months, and had threatened the momentum of the show.



But CBS and the “The Good Wife’s” producers indicated that they had pulled new episodes from the schedule because they had a story arc that was so powerful, they didn’t want any preemptions in its midst. So when the new broadcasts resumed two weeks ago, expectations were high. But the series had *always* delivered in the past.

The central theme of the touted, first three returning episodes appeared to hinge on a special prosecutor’s attempts to engage the now adversarial former lovers, Alicia and Will, in testimony, to help indict the newly-minted Governor Florrick on charges of voter fraud. And while this is a legitimate thread that will certainly be tied up soon, it clearly was a smoke screen to help blind-side the viewing audience to last night’s shocker.

And again—spoiler alert! Don’t read further until you’ve viewed the episode.

The unexpected, violent response of a client that he was defending that resulted in Will Gardner’s death could not have come as more of a surprise. “The Good Wife” has eschewed the ratings stunts that have become commonplace among network TV series. Even Julianna Margulies’ lauded prior series, “ER,” fell victim to the syndrome. Having killed off its first cast member, the body count ran amok, finally jumping the shark by having one of its principals injured and later killed in two separate, freak helicopter accidents.



"Paging Dr. Romano! Your ride is here!"

The fact that Josh Charles was not only the show's Number Two principal, but that the turbulent dynamic between Alicia and Will Gardner was a central thread of the series—and one that cleverly, deceptively appeared to be thawing—made Will's sudden, violent and wholly unexpected departure last night one of the great surprises in the history of episodic television.

Both actor Charles and his character's exit will leave a huge void in "The Good Wife." An absence that the show's producers have, no doubt, planned to use to good effect. The trailer of upcoming scenes from future episodes provided compelling glimpses of the effect that Gardner's death will have on Alicia Florrick and her already strained, tenuous reunion with her husband, and the impact upon Gardner's co-managing partner in the law firm, Diane Lockhart (the remarkable Christine Baranski). Also, regular viewers will be delighted by the return of recurring opposing counsel, Lewis Canning—one of the finest roles of Michael J. Fox's career.



New twists and turns notwithstanding, given Will Gardner's significance to the show – and in one of the oldest time-honored Hollywood traditions—don't be surprised to see him pop up in the occasional flashback or dream sequence. One can't help but

imagine him turning up as a disembodied voice of conscience whispering advice in Alicia's conflicted ear.



The restrictions imposed by the FCC on conventional broadcast networks precludes the five major players from presenting the quirky, profane or explicit entertainment of a "Breaking Bad" or "True Detective." But "The Good Wife" has proven again and again –and no more so than last night—that superior quality drama is not the exclusive province of the high-number channels of the cable box.

Josh Charles appears on "Late Night with David Letterman" this evening (3/24, 11:35 pm EST) to discuss, no doubt, his recent unemployment.

