‘Stumptown’: Portland-set series is one of fall TV’s best

By KRISTI TURNQUIST
The Oregonian

It’s never easy to tell from just one episode whether a TV series will be worth sticking with. But ABC’s new “Stumptown” starts off strong, quickly introducing us to characters we want to get to know better, avoiding the usual private investigator clichés, and giving us a setting that’s fresh and brimming with story possibilities.

OK, so we’re a little biased. “Stumptown” is set in Portland, and it’s inspired by graphic novels written by Portland-based author Greg Rucka. But “Stumptown” looks like it will be good enough on its own to make us forgive the fact that the show – despite some scenes filmed locally – will be produced in Los Angeles.

Cobie Smulders, best known for “How I Met Your Mother” and Marvel movies, is a perfect fit for Dex Parios, a military intelligence veteran who’s not exactly keeping it together in Portland.

After the first episodes gets off to a literally flying start with a stunt involving Dex, two thugs, and a car we see soaring in the sky with the Broadway Bridge in the background, we come crashing down to earth. Dex is gambling at a Native American-operated casino, and though she’s enthusiastic, she’s not particularly lucky.

Dex is shrewd enough to instantly spot a fishy come-on from a guy hitting on her with a made-up story, but she’s also gotten herself in deep debt to the Whispering Winds casino. Which is why she reluctantly agrees to do a job for the cool, tough-minded boss of the casino, Sue Lynn Blackbird (played with steely charisma by Tantoo Cardinal).

Dex hadn’t really thought of turning her military skills into a career as a private investigator, but when Sue Lynn’s granddaughter goes missing, Dex might just be the right person to find the young woman.

As Dex pursues leads, we meet the other people in her life. She takes care of her younger brother, Ansel (played by Cole Sibus), who wears a Portland Timbers shirt to display his loyalty, and who has Down syndrome. Dex’s friend, Grey McConnell (a winning turn by Jake Johnson, of “New Girl”), also pitches in when it comes to looking after Ansel, even as Grey is opening his own bar.

Once Dex starts tangling with bad guys – like the ones who lock her in that car trunk we see in that opening action sequence – she gets beaten up, lied to, and meets members of the Portland police force, including Detective Miles Hoffman (Michael Ealy) and Lieutenant Cosgrove (Camryn Manheim).

Along the way, we learn that Dex has enough demons to populate a Halloween haunted house, and that her self-destructive impulses are at war with her yearning to make things right, even after she messes them up.

‘STUMPTOWN’ IS SET IN PORTLAND, AND IT’S INSPIRED BY GRAPHIC NOVELS WRITTEN BY PORTLAND-BASED AUTHOR GREG RUCKA.

For Portlanders, there’s fun in seeing the scenes filmed on location (the pilot also includes scenes filmed in Vancouver, B.C.); meeting Dex’s friend, Tookie (Adrian Martinez), who owns a taco food cart (how Portland can you get?); hearing references to Old Town, Bend and more Oregon spots; and, once again, seeing the “Portland, Oregon” neon sign in Old Town, letting viewers know where this is supposedly taking place.

Even better is how executive producer and showrunner Jason Richman’s script mixes suspense with Dex’s self-deprecating jokes, and the expert performances from everyone in the cast.

It’s particularly satisfying to see Smulders flex muscles we maybe didn’t know she had. She makes Dex both a deeply human, self-sabotaging mess, and a brave, gutsy heroine we’re willing to follow down dark alleys, in Portland, or anywhere else.

“Stumptown” premieres at 10 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 25, on ABC.

Kailey Schwerman/ABC

Cobie Smulders delivers a sharp, sexy performance as Dex Parios in “Stumptown,” based on comics-turned-graphic novels by Portland-based author Greg Rucka.

Matthias Clamer/ABC

The cast of “Stumptown,” including, from left, Camryn Manheim as Lieutenant Cosgrove, Adrian Martinez as Tookie, Michael Ealy as Detective Miles Hoffman, Cobie Smulders as Dex Parios, Jake Johnson as Grey McConnell, Cole Sibus as Ansel Parios and Tantoo Cardinal as Sue Lynn Blackbird.

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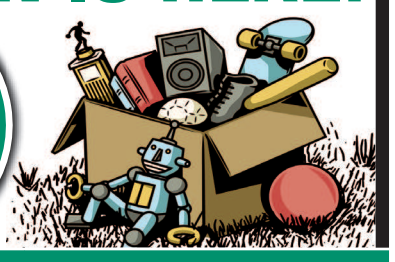

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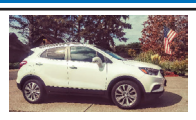

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