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It remains to be seen if Kit Walker's encounter with that one, grotesquely overlong extraterrestrial hand was in fact the result of neuroses, but with one season of AMERICAN HORROR STORY behind—and considering all they crammed into one house of horrors there—the premiere of AMERICAN HORROR STORY: ASYLUM certainly felt in line with the tone and energy Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk hath previously set.

"Welcome to Briarcliff" was, if not an overwhelming one, a welcome indeed. The episode weaved not only through the many halls, rooms and woods of Briarcliff Manor, but time itself as our wraparound for the season saw a honeymooning couple, visiting a slate of haunted locales across America, find themselves in the worst possible one. I was already harsh on the opening five minutes when they were previewed online, and the intro played no different on a second viewing. What amounted to little more, than "Oh, a haunted asylum! Do me on it!" the episode got off to a grating start that expectedly, thankfully, turned itself immediately around in 1964.

Much like last season, it seems everyone within Briarcliff's walls has an agenda; except, of course, the aforementioned Kit Walker (Evan Peters, already improving from the insufferable Tate of season one). Well, at least not at first. Our first pre-21st century face, Kit is a small-town mechanic hiding a what-shouldn't-be-shameful secret in his dungarees: the race of his wife. Having already had a run-in with local riff-raff that night, he believes the headlights that show up outside his home later on to be the same. One grotesquely overlong extraterrestrial hand later and he's in Briarcliff, accused of all sorts of murder and slapped with the moniker Bloody Face. Much of his journey then was a disorienting, chaotic immersion into the asylum, from Sister Jude's (Jessica Lange) righteous indignation, to Grace's (Lizzie Brocheré) sympathies, to Shelley's (Chloë Sevigny) advances and finally into the menacing hands of Dr. Arthur Arden (James Cromwell).

Kit has a through line/kindred spirit with characters like Shelley and Sarah Paulson's Lana. They're each living with a private and unnecessary shame (Shelley is quite sexually liberated, while Lana a lesbian whose girlfriend is caught in an all too relevant case of "no legal standing"), but seemingly good people. Naturally, this is contrasted with those in charge and the judgment, manipulation and hypocrisy they feel free to dole out. Sister Jude seems ever ready to fall off the cliff of Nunsploitation, whipping cane in hand and extra lustful thoughts of

Monsignor Timothy Howard (Joseph Fiennes) in mind. Dr. Arden, meanwhile, who fancies himself the picture of progress is a menacing presence, all too ready to lobotomize and murder his way through patients, and then feed their dismembered bodies to *something* in the woods. Sister Mary Eunice (Lily Rabe) remains a frightened mouse caught in between the two.

What carries over from last season is an intense sense of reverence and style. Briarcliff is a place to behold and returning director Bradley Buecker explores every inch with a colorful (dig those blues and yellows in the opening), intoxicating eye. Everything in Briarcliff feels off-balanced, as it should. It's a sordid place of minds pushed to the extreme; religion and science collide, as does squalor and godliness. As does original story and horror history.

The nods are plentiful. Those colors of the opening are straight Eurohorror, as is all the sisterly sleaze from Jude (and perhaps unintentionally, her ever-shifting New England accent). Meanwhile, bits of Pino Donaggio's CARRIE score found its way into some of AMERICAN HORROR STORY's running time, and the forever decaying confidence in reality sure is something out of De Palma. Funny enough, SISTERS star Jennifer Salt serves as a producer on the series and in the climax of that 1972 film, found herself a reporter confined to an asylum (much like Lana) for digging too deep. Of course, that particular narrative thread also harks back to Samuel Fuller's wonderful SHOCK CORRIDOR, produced just a year prior to ASYLUM's 1964 setting. Then there's the clear nod to 1932's FREAKS upon our arrival at Briarcliff, another tale of misunderstood outcasts extracting their vengeance upon a society (or just a woman) who deems them undesirable. Could that be where ASYLUM is headed?

AMERICAN HORROR STORY: ASYLUM's first hour was a packed one. Bed shackles and bare asses, aliens and the alienated, disfigured killers and mad scientists, and of course, always towing the line of absolute trash (the rest of the episode's dialogue was only slightly better than its prologue's). We've got a ton of set up and much like its first go-round, the promise for that pay-off and beyond.