

The Top Ten TV Shows of the 2007-2008 Season

by Joe Mulder

Here now, the best TV shows of the 2007-2008 season, under the rules delineated on a website where my friends and I usually post our Best Of lists, but my friend Brandon doesn't want me to link to because he's weird. Those rules are:

These are shows that have been airing new episodes in the last year, so no syndicated or old shows. It's open to reality shows, news programs, talk shows... any television show that is currently producing new content. And the rankings are based on how good or bad they were **this** season – career excellence is ignored.

Before we get started, it should be noted that it is possible to make up a Top Ten from last TV season consisting of nothing but shows whose entire name is only one syllable, as long as you accept the premise that the person making the list would be a big fan of procedurals, would ignore some obviously great shows that any TV fan would have on his or her list, would tend to rank some newer shows higher than other people might, and would be a huge fan of James Woods (who isn't, though?). That list, in no particular order:

"House"
"Lost"
"Weeds"
"Chuck"
"Bones"
"Shark"
"Scrubs"
"Monk"
"Life"
"Psych"

That was quite fun for me, if not for anybody else. Moving forward:

10. "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" (FX)

I completely turned the corner on this show, from not really getting it to really looking forward to every new episode. Since I've made no secret of the fact that I'm more than willing to plagiarize myself, I'll repost what I wrote about the show elsewhere:

It's like someone asked, "What if the characters from Seinfeld were slightly younger, slightly dumber, slightly less classy, several times more selfish and lived slightly farther to the southwest?"

Indeed, Charlie, Dee, Dennis, Mac and Frank are essentially misanthropic sociopaths who run a Philadelphia bar called Paddy's. Each week they get involved in a scheme that

escalates out of control, getting more and more ridiculous, the protagonists unfettered by any sort of moral code (one would guess they would stop short of murder or out-and-out rape, although deceiving people into sex is all in a day's work). I've often said that people will buy almost anything in a story, as long as the story adheres to the rules it has set up; i.e., if an alien showed up on "Everybody Loves Raymond" you'd be pissed, because that show was not set in a world where such things happen, whereas when aliens showed up on "Night Court" it may not have been the best thing they ever did, but it's not like you stood up and shouted, "this is an outrage!" as your monocle popped out and fell into our cognac. "Night Court" was "wacky," so it wasn't that hard to swallow.

That's the long, annoying way of saying that "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" has set up a world in which there are essentially no rules governing the behavior the main or peripheral characters, which makes for unpredictable plotlines at least. That's how you go from three of the characters trying out for the Philadelphia Eagles (a team staffer says they've been forced to hold open tryouts due to fan reaction from "that New Kids on the Block movie." And if jokes like that aren't what you're looking for, then, a) I don't know what to tell you, except b) don't watch "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia") to Danny DeVito on acid, "tripping balls," standing in a trash can that he pooped in and playing around with firearms.

In the end, I'd compare the show to a weird food that almost no one likes right away (I didn't really care much for the show at first; I couldn't tell you why I kept watching it anyway, but I'm glad I did). Some people will acquire a real taste for it; others – like a friend of mine who wondered "do the characters always bark every line like they're reading a comedy sketch at its very first table read?" (yes, they do, and it's part of what I've come to like about the show) – will not. I did.

9. "Chuck" (NBC)

"Cute." It can sound condescending to call a show "cute," but I think in the case of "Chuck," the description is apt. The titular Chuck is Chuck Bartowski, a college dropout techie nerd who works with Best Buy's Geek Squad – sorry... "Buy More"'s "Nerd Herd" – and whose old college buddy, now an international super spy, emails him what seems to be the entirety of the United States's intelligence material, a program called "The Intersect." The Intersect is then destroyed, leaving Chuck's brain as the repository for all U.S. intelligence knowledge.

Two handlers are then assigned to Chuck, both to protect him and to carry out whatever super-secret spy missions might pop up (luckily, almost every terrorist, rogue arms dealer or wanted fugitive in the world happens to operate within a couple miles of the Buy More's Burbank location). They are Sarah (Yvonne Strahovski, Non-American Who Does a

Spot-On American Accent #1), a smoking hot blonde CIA agent who poses as an employee at the hot dog place next door, and Casey (Adam Baldwin), a no-nonsense NSA operative (not to imply that Casey is an aberration, and that the NSA is typically awash in nonsense) who gets a job at the Buy More with Chuck.

"Chuck" is a fun diversion of an hour every week, little more than that but certainly no less. It knows exactly what kind of show it is, and balances the wacky minutiae of 21st century dork culture with the high-stakes nature of Chuck's national security importance quite well. In fact, it might mix the silly and the deadly serious better than any show since "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," and, if you knew how much I loved "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," you'd know that I do not say that lightly.

8. "How I Met Your Mother" (CBS)

One episode out of six may end up being a bit of a dud, but when this show is good, it's the best traditional sitcom on TV (not to damn it with faint praise). They've created a mythology that rewards loyal and even repeat viewings, they've given us many new and exciting catchphrases ("Legend – wait for it – dary!"), they've introduced us to the "Slap Bet" and, perhaps more importantly, the concept of the Slap Bet Commissioner; best of all, they've reaffirmed my theory that an actor who is typecast as a certain character need only wait until he no longer physically resembles the character with whom he's identified. It was true for William "Captain Kirk" Shatner on "Boston Legal," and it's true for Neil Patrick "Doogie Howser" Harris on "How I Met Your Mother."

7. "Life" (NBC)

"Life" is a procedural cop show, one of approximately 6,000 currently airing on primetime network and basic cable TV (not that there's anything wrong with that; I tend to enjoy procedural cop shows). What sets "Life" apart is the backstory of main character Charlie Crews (Damian Lewis, Non-American Who Does a Spot-On American Accent #2), a cop who was imprisoned for several years for a series of grisly murders he didn't commit.

Exonerated, newly rich (thanks to a multi-million dollar wrongful-imprisonment windfall), and back on the job, with a Zen attitude and a taste for fresh fruit, Crews helps his ridiculously attractive partner (Sarah Shahi) solve the mystery of the week while looking into who set him up for the murders for which he went to prison, and why.

It's nothing revolutionary, but it's a very well done show; the ongoing murder mystery and the Sarah Shahi factor push up into the middle of the Top Ten.

6. "Damages" (FX)

I've never quite seen a show like "Damages;" the entirety of Season 1 follows trial lawyer Patty Hewes (Glenn Close) as she and her firm pursue litigation against crooked CEO Arthur Frobisher (Ted Danson). The first moments of the pilot show us Ellen Parsons (Rose Byrne, Non-American Who Does a Spot-On American Accent #3) wandering the streets of New York, dazed and covered in blood. Season 1 is spent revealing how it came to this, from her hiring at Hewes & Associates to the very messy conclusion.

A few subplots (the firing and rehiring of Tate Donovan's Tom Shays) seem to exist only to fill time and pad out the length of Season 1, but for the most part every episode brings us closer to finding out what happened, who did what to whom, and why. It's a fascinating look at rich, powerful people (namely Hewes and Frobisher) who honestly regard themselves as better than others, and thus can justify doing horrible things to achieve their goals. It's never easy to predict what anyone will do next, and always easy to believe that they would have done what they did. Great writing, great acting, great characters, great mystery... Netflix it at once if you haven't seen it.

Coming soon: shows 5 through 1. Stay tuned!

(Get it? "Stay tuned?" Because, TV...)
