

Is *30 Rock* the New *Taxi*?

by Brandon Kruse

A few weeks ago, the NBC sitcom *30 Rock* made headlines by becoming the 11th show in TV history to win the Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series in consecutive seasons. In doing so, *30 Rock* joined such notable programs as *I Love Lucy*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *All in the Family*, *Cheers* and *Frasier*, as well as one it often gets compared to, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

But the show on that list of former consecutive-season winners that really caught my eye was *Taxi*, the Judd Hirsch/Danny DeVito comedy from the late 70s and early 80s. *Taxi* was named Outstanding Comedy Series for its first three seasons (who knew?), then was cancelled by ABC after its fourth season for poor ratings, picked up by NBC for a fifth season, then cancelled once and for all after that. For fans of *30 Rock* who thought that back-to-back Emmys might grant the show immunity from ratings-based cancellation, this was knowledge worthy of a heartfelt "Blurg!" And it left me wondering... is *30 Rock* in danger of becoming the new *Taxi*?

The thing is, *Taxi* didn't have ratings problems in its first two seasons. It was actually a Top 20 show in 1978-79, finishing 9th out of about 75 shows, though that was largely thanks to a sweet Tuesday at 9:30pm Eastern time slot where it could ride the coattails of *Happy Days*, *Laverne & Shirley* and *Three's Company*, which were the jewels of the ABC crown at the time, and three of the four most popular shows on TV. (I know, I know, but come on... are we really in a position to throw stones when we've got *Dancing with the Stars*, *Two and a Half Men* and like 379 police procedurals in our own Nielsen closet?)

Taxi came in 13th in 1979-80, not bad considering that *Happy Days* slid to 17th that year (possibly a residual aftereffect of the infamous "Jumping the Shark" incident, which happened on September 20, 1977), and *Laverne & Shirley* was moved to another night and replaced by the forgettable *Angie* (Robert Hays! Doris Roberts! Donna Pescow? Look, I know *Saturday Night Fever* was a hit a few years earlier, but really, Donna Pescow?), which would be cancelled later that season.

Drunk on their own power, ABC executives decided to say "Who gives a fuck about giving fans of a show a time slot they can count on?" (a sentiment that proudly lives on today) and moved their fledgling Top 20 hit and two-time Emmy winner from Tuesdays to Wednesdays for the 1980-81 season, where it was slotted behind the dying, bloated corpse of *Eight is Enough* and opposite *Diff'rent Strokes*, which was a key part of a kick-ass NBC Must-See TV lineup bolstered by *Real People* and *The Facts of Life*, all Top 30 shows (and I can tell you, at ten years old, that was a great night of TV). *Taxi* plummeted to 53rd place, though it did manage to corral its third consecutive Outstanding Comedy Series Emmy, as

well as the awards for Lead Actor in a Comedy Series (Hirsch), Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series (DeVito), Directing in a Comedy Series (James Burrows), Writing in a Comedy Series (Michael Leeson) and even Film Editing in a Comedy Series. Plus two more writing nominations and a Lead Actress nomination for Eileen Brennan, which was odd, because she was just in one episode (it appears that the Guest Actor category wasn't made official until a few years later). Ratings aside, it was a very good year.

The show stayed in 53rd place for its fourth and final season at ABC. NBC decided to give the show a second chance, outbidding HBO for the rights (interestingly enough, I believe that would have made *Taxi* the very first episodic show to air on the famed cable network). They paired it up with the first season of *Cheers* on Thursday nights. Unfortunately, *Cheers* was a ratings disaster in its first season, finishing 75th out of 75 shows, and *Taxi* wasn't much better, finishing 73rd and ending its five-year run.

(Side note: Can you believe that *Cheers* finished dead last in the ratings and still lived to see another season? There's no way a show like that even sniffs a seventh episode today.)

(Additional side note: Can you believe people didn't watch that first season of *Cheers*? I mean, come on, that was one of the best first seasons of any show ever! What is wrong with people?!!)

(Not you people. The people back in 1982-83. When we develop the ability to travel back in time, the first thing we're going to do is find those people that didn't watch the first season of *Cheers* and we're going to take away their TV sets. Okay, okay, maybe not the first thing. I don't know. I probably shouldn't be in charge of this project. Those people just make me so mad! I mean, they were watching *Simon & Simon* – ranked 7th – over on CBS instead!!)

Anyway... all of this is a roundabout way of explaining that while *Taxi* had a better ratings history than *30 Rock* has thus far, a lot of that seemingly had to do with the inability of the typical American television viewer to simply change the channel when the shows they actually liked were over. So it's fair to say that ratings problems, critical praise and boatloads of awards (18 wins out of 31 Emmy nominations for *Taxi*, and 9 wins out of 27 noms for *30 Rock*, plus *Taxi* won the Humanitas Award in 1979, and *30 Rock* won a Peabody Award in 2008) are things the two shows have in common.

But despite the similarities between the two shows, there are reasons to believe that *30 Rock* can avoid *Taxi*'s fate. For starters, the stature of the talent involved in the production of *30 Rock* is greater. Make no mistake, *Taxi* had a wealth of TV geniuses at its disposal; it's just that the vast majority of them were at a very early stage of their career. *Taxi* was created by four guys who had served as the producers and executive producers of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*: Stan Daniels, David Davis (who also co-created *The Bob Newhart*

Show), Ed. Weinberger (who would later go on to co-create *The Cosby Show*, and yes, that's how you spell his first name) and James L. Brooks (who would, of course, later go on to write and direct *Terms of Endearment*, *Broadcast News* and *As Good As It Gets*, as well as develop and produce *The Simpsons*).

In addition, the first four seasons featured writing and producing from Glen & Les Charles and direction from James Burrows (who directed two-thirds of *Taxi*'s episodes), all three of whom would go on to create *Cheers*. And the writing staff included, at various times, Barry Kemp (future creator of *Newhart*), Sam Simon (who would later help Brooks develop *The Simpsons*) and David Lloyd, one of the best TV writers ever, who has probably written some of your favorite episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (including the infamous "Chuckles Bites the Dust"), *Cheers* and *Frasier*. He also wrote for Johnny Carson and *The Tonight Show* from 1963-70.

It was an impressive collection of talent, but as I said earlier, the majority of their best work still lay ahead of them. They would seem to have lacked the power to successfully fight against *Taxi*'s later ratings problems and keep it on the air. This is not necessarily the case with *30 Rock*, thanks to two people: Lorne Michaels and Tina Fey.

The relationship between Lorne and NBC is now over 30 years old and fairly complex, since he is now the executive producer of their venerable Saturday night comedy institution/talent factory (and, in this election year, one of their chief sources of watercooler moments), their soon-to-be-flagship late night talk show, and their two-time Emmy-winning primetime comedy. His clout with the network may be as high now as it has ever been, and you have to figure that would make NBC think twice about pissing him off.

So then the question becomes: would Lorne even care if *30 Rock* got cancelled? It has seemingly been a long time since Lorne wore his passion on his sleeve for anything, the way he used to do back in the early days of SNL (as documented in the beyond excellent 1986 book *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live* by Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad). Still, never underestimate the power of Lorne's desire to be even loosely associated with anything that has the whiff of "comedic genius" about it. He was front and center when *30 Rock* won the Emmy in 2007, clearly waiting to pounce on the statuette and make sweet, sweet love to it (or perhaps, in tribute to Tracy Jordan, to take it out behind a middle school and get it pregnant). He was conspicuously not front and center for the 2008 award acceptance, possibly because they're still trying to get the stains off of the 2007 statuette.

As for Fey, can you think of an NBC star with a higher profile right now? A year ago, you might have been able to make the case for Steve Carell, maybe Hayden Panettiere

(too bad about those ratings, yikes), but not now, not when, in the last six months, Fey has starred in a movie that opened #1 at the box office, won multiple Emmy Awards, made a multi-million-dollar book deal and turned an impression of Sarah Palin into perhaps the most notoriety of her entire career. If the events of these last six months don't bring a larger audience to *30 Rock*, it's likely nothing will. (Clearly, I'm not the only one who thinks this.) And at the very least, you have to figure that all of this has increased NBC's desire to stay in the Tina Fey business, and keeping the show she created and starred in on the air despite mediocre ratings would be a good way to keep her happy.

30 Rock has two additional feathers in its cap. One, during its second season, it was the fourth most-watched show among viewers with income of \$100,000 or more. That's a demographic that any network wants to capture. And two, the cachet of the show's guest stars. As if that list wasn't already bursting with greatness and inspiration (from Jerry Seinfeld to Carrie Fisher to Ghostface Killah), in the upcoming season they'll be adding Steve Martin, Jennifer Aniston, Salma Hayek and, in the biggest coup of all, Oprah Winfrey. (I say that with tremendous apologies to Steve Martin. His is the guest spot I'm most looking forward to, but Oprah's is the one that has the potential to bring in massive ratings. Well, massive for *30 Rock* at least.)

Is *30 Rock* the new *Taxi*? In terms of winning a third straight Emmy, yes, I think it can be. In terms of getting cancelled despite that, I'm not yet convinced that it is. However, much like the third season of *Taxi* was pivotal in that it was the show's first chance to prove itself ratings-wise outside of its cushy time slot, this third season is crucial for *30 Rock*. For better or worse, the expectations have been raised.

When the Peabody Board announced *30 Rock*'s award back in April, they praised the show being "a great workplace comedy in the tradition of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*." That show also won three consecutive Outstanding Comedy Series Emmys, but unlike *Taxi*, it ran for seven seasons until the producers – not the network – decided to end the show on their own terms while it was still creatively and commercially successful. Let's hope that a year from now, the question is no longer whether *30 Rock* is the new *Taxi*, but rather whether it's the new *Mary Tyler Moore Show*.
