

Top Ten TV Shows, 2007-2008 Season

by Jameson Simmons

As Joe mentioned, the rule for these lists has historically been as follows:

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.

Where "2007-2008 Season" may be confusing – may in fact be archaic and outdated in principle – allow me to add the following: with half-seasons, mid-seasons, strike-foreshortened seasons and summer cable seasons, it's impossible to know what falls under which season. The Emmys prove it: shows from last summer are often in competition with shows from this fall. All the following shows produced new episodes since the previous year's list was compiled (fall of 2007); that's good enough for me.

You may disagree that these are the best shows of the last year. As always, you are welcome to go straight to hell.

1. *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*

Ka-pow! Welcome to the future, bitches! iTunes calls this a "TV Show," and who am I to disagree? In terms of profitability and server-clogging popularity, it's hard to name a bigger show this year. It was so huge it even managed to capture a mite of media attention outside the Joss Whedon fan universe where its exaltation came pre-assured. To top all that, it was fucking incredible – I watched it like nine times all the way through. Funny, touching, exciting, suspenseful; and with fantastic, catchy songs to boot! It's a good thing Neil Patrick Harris conquers comedy weekly on *How I Met Your Mother*, or else Dr. Horrible would stand as his most memorable and enjoyable character ever. (And it's a good thing Nathan Fillion exists, because he is like the frickin' king of everything.)

Still, at only 3 episodes and 40 minutes of total running time, does *Dr. Horrible* really deserve to be vaulted to the very top of the list? (Obviously it does, because look where it is.) It does, because it represents a paradigm shift in the television model. It proves that, with talent and dedication, television can be profitable in a post-network marketplace. Spawned at the heart of the disheartening 2007 WGA strike, the show was artist-financed and artist-owned, and with minimal marketing it became a sensation and turned huge profits. It represents a bona fide slap in the face of network executives who whined that online TV would be impossible or unprofitable; that their meddling, arcane influence was somehow pivotal to the act of entertaining people with screen-based storytelling.

Most of all, though, it represents damn fine television. That's what we're here to talk about, in whatever form and through whatever means.

2. *30 Rock*

I've got high hopes that this is the year for *30 Rock*. Its first year proved it was something special; its second proved that it could grow its format and incorporate the fantastic guest stars that flocked to it. This year, it meets an audience. The one good thing that will ever come from Sarah Palin hitting the national stage is that 45% of Americans immediately said to themselves, "Hey, it's Tina Fey," as soon as they saw her. Timing couldn't have been better. Freshly exposed to a broad audience via *Baby Mama* and her Emmy wins, Fey is riding her pitch-perfect Palin impersonation through heralded appearances on SNL and SNL's Thursday night edition, which in a couple of weeks will yield its time slot to *30 Rock*. America, if it knows what's good for it, will stay tuned in.

If it does, it will reap the benefit of a strikingly charming and hilarious show – one that manages to cover workplace foibles, relationship drama, political issues, and backstage celebrity antics all in a power-packed half hour of genius. Fey delivers Liz Lemon perfectly, and Alec Baldwin has flourished in his role as Jack Donaghy, her insane, mercurial boss and perpetual comic foil. The supporting cast has fleshed out with the sort of variety not seen outside the good years of *The Simpsons*: any supporting player (or grouping thereof) can be depended on for solid material and great laughs, and there's a mastery of throwaway jokes and running gags that nearly rivals that of *Arrested Development*. This show is an example of what televised comedy should be.

3. *Dexter*

Dexter may be the most impressive show on television, and it loses a slot to *30 Rock* only because of the inherent differences between comedy and drama. *Dexter* is intricately engineered and takes bold risks, but *30 Rock* covers those bases, too, while also being funny – which I'm convinced is harder. Also, while I generally prefer thought-provoking drama at the movies, when I watch TV I prefer to laugh. Dramatic writers are doing magnificent things with the television format, but my love of TV was born in half-hour sitcoms, so there it remains.

Leaving that slight bias aside, *Dexter* is damn near perfect. For about four episodes of its second season, I thought it had lost me, but I came to realize that was only part of its brilliance – it refuses to stagnate; it reinvents itself on a continuous basis. This is tremendously difficult to do in television. (In recent years, *Lost*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *My Name Is Earl* have fumbled their attempts to varying degrees.) But it's what makes Dexter Morgan, the serial killer at the center of *Dexter*, so fascinating – he's unpredictable, not in some phony Hollywood twist-ending way, but in a

real, human way. He's brilliant and principled, intensely devoted to his adoptive sister and his work as a forensic analyst, as well as his murders which are – it's hard to say "justified," but they fit the reality of the character in a satisfying way. It's impossible not to become enthralled with his world view – so foreign yet filled with familiar urges.

The strength of television drama over film drama is its ability to evolve over time. This enables a more nuanced story, and *Dexter* has taken (and continues to take) full advantage of such opportunities. Just as *30 Rock* represents the very model of what televised comedy should be doing, so does *Dexter* represent the dramatic ideal.

4. *Life*

On most network shows, you just don't get characters as interesting as Charlie Crews (Damian Lewis, your favorite *Band of Brothers* alum), the detective whose life is the stuff of *Life*. Crews was wrongly convicted of murder a dozen years ago, but he's just been exonerated and received a settlement in the millions of dollars from the City of Los Angeles, which has also agreed to reinstate him on its police force. As a result of incessant prison beatings, he sought refuge in a Zen paperback on the inside, and he emerges a changed man. He's enthralled by sunlight, fanatical about fresh fruit, and thoroughly perplexed by the idea of a portable telephone with a camera built into it. *Life* was his sentence, say the NBC promos, and life is what he got back.

With today's TV dial saturated by police shows, a great character is pivotal to a new show's success. (Kyra Sedgwick plays one such character on *The Closer*, the highest-rated show in cable history.) Crews is such a character, and Lewis inhabits him perfectly. He swims through scenes with a childlike curiosity, but retains a detective's keen eye, and always gets results. This often irks his partner, Dani Reese (Sarah Shahi of *The L Word* and many, many lustful fantasies). She's a career cop, the daughter of a career cop, and a bit of a burnout, having recently been busted for a drug problem. She gels reluctantly with her new partner, but their shared outsiderhood bonds them, and their interplay adds crackle to *Life*.

They solve crimes together – and do it well – but the crime-solving takes a back seat to the character work on *Life*, as well it should. There are excellent shows for straight-up procedural police work (see #9); if we're going to have additional cops on TV, they may as well be interesting. Crews and Reese are interesting, and as he digs deeper into his wrongful conviction and its interconnection with Reese's dad, they're getting more interesting with each episode.

5. *The Office*

It's almost criminal that *The Office* should barely crack my top five, considering it's the show I mention when people who don't "know TV" ask me my favorite show. It just goes

to show that, if you know where to look, there's some truly amazing television out there. Which, in turn, strengthens my resolve to personally dismember anyone who refuses to own a television set on some haughty, misguided "principle."

The Office took an unenviable situation (following Ricky Gervais's brilliant BBC version) and spun gold from it. The show that has evolved is different from its namesake in many key ways – especially the foibles of frontman Michael Scott (the unstoppable Steve Carell) – but retains its humanity and awkward hilarity. In the past year or so, it has ventured outside the office more and more, resulting in new perspectives on the characters (and of course many laughs). Having surmounted with aplomb the craggy precipice on which so many modern sitcoms have been dashed to pieces (the inevitable romantic "will they"/"won't they"?), the show has proved that it can do just about anything. Now only one hurdle remains: retiring with dignity before the material becomes stale. Fortunately, that's a few years off, and with this team on board, we have no reason to doubt another victory.

6. *Pushing Daisies*

This show walks a tightrope of gooey sweetness – one misstep and it feels saccharine and cloying – but never loses its footing. Set in a fairy tale world where its protagonist, Ned the pie-maker, can bring things back to life with his touch (but only for one minute), *Pushing Daisies* catches up with Ned just before his reunion with his childhood sweetheart: a girl named Chuck. But Chuck is dead, and if Ned wants to keep her alive longer than 60 seconds (which, of course, he does) it means someone else will perish. And, if he ever touches her again, she's dead for good. These are the bizarre and fanciful conditions for their love story, and the show follows as they build a relationship around these screwy constraints, while getting to know each other and also solving mysteries in which one last interview with a key eyewitness (the deceased) can give them a head start on the case.

Pushing Daisies manages to corral all its sweetness and whimsy into something charming and unique without becoming tedious. The chemistry between Ned and Chuck (Lee Pace and Anna Friel) does most of the heavy lifting. If their affection for each other were any less infectious, the show would probably fall flat – instead, it works tremendously well. And it's absolutely unlike anything else on TV, which makes it a welcome respite.

7. *Psych*

This show is another high-wire act. The goofy antics of fake-psychic detective Shawn Spencer (James Roday) and his sidekick Gus (Dulé Hill) must balance between charming and irritating, and they work right on the edge of that split. But, just as forward momentum keeps a unicycle upright, that's what makes it work. If Roday half-assed it, the antics

would feel affected and dull. Since he's always on – pathologically incapable of restraining himself from inserting a silly comment or '80s movie reference – it feels true to the character, and leaves you wanting more. The whodunit aspect of each week's case is pretty well plotted, too (although, of course, getting there is all the fun). Shawn's powers of perception were honed at a young age through constant grilling by his detective dad (Corbin Bernsen, who delivers a remarkable performance, considering you thought you never wanted to see him again). When Shawn pitches in to solve a case in the first episode, his knowledge of the details makes him a suspect; he adopts the psychic ruse to avoid suspicion, and now he has to keep it up. Shawn is glad to: it's another arrow in his quiver of silly behavior.

All of this makes Gus roll his eyes, but he can't deny the thrill of the hunt. He has a real job (as a pharmaceutical rep), but he gets caught up in the excitement whenever Shawn finds a new case. They're lifelong friends, so Gus has plenty of experience with Shawn's quirks, and despite his constant resistance, you know he loves it. They bicker like a married couple, and it reveals a side of Dulé Hill you never would have expected after *The West Wing*: gifted comic actor. His pratfalls, freakouts, and frequent hissy fights with Shawn are pitch perfect. Gus tries to act like he's a grown-up, but he's really just a geek like Shawn, and the show is at its best when they're reluctantly embracing their deep friendship.

8. *Mad Men*

Like *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* is a show you watch partly because of the hype – people won't stop talking about how good it is. Like *The Sopranos*, it can't live up to that level of enthusiasm entirely. (Fortunately, since it's not on premium cable, its Emmy haul is somewhat less unsightly, which checks the hype a little.) But it's still a great show, unique in tone and style. Its story lines are often slow to unfold, but the show's main draw is its examination of its characters and their time period – and in this, it excels.

Don Draper (Emmy nominee Jon Hamm) is the creative director at Sterling Cooper, a mid-size Manhattan ad agency, during a tumultuous period in the history of advertising and the culture in general. The sexual revolution is kicking in the door; the earliest post-war Baby Boomers are entering their consumer years; TV is hitting the scene; plus there's those wacky 1960s politics. Watching Draper and his cohorts (from Messrs. Sterling and Cooper of a bygone generation to Peggy Olson and Pete Campbell of the rising one) navigate these changes at home and at the office is an intriguing window into an alien world. There probably wouldn't be much reason to beat a path to your TV set for this material if it weren't so well written and produced; but it is, so: top ten TV and an armload of Emmys.

9. *CSI*

I came late to *CSI* because I'm a TV snob I assumed that it

must have been crappy, artless fare to capture a broad audience and spawn so many dull procedural knock-offs. Turns out, that's a stupid way to think about anything: if a bunch of shows are trying to imitate something, that thing must be pretty amazing. And – at least in the case of *CSI* – it is. While never aspiring to be a "prestige" show, it has nonetheless quietly chipped away at the shackles of its populist appeal. You might assume such a high-rated show would be averse to taking risks (I did), but *CSI* will surprise you. It explores bold and often disturbing material, and it's not afraid to shake things up with its central cast. Plus, for the last few seasons, it carried on a romance arc so chaste it made *The Age of Innocence* look like a Bob Guccione key party.

This year, it spun William Petersen out of the show for a few episodes and replaced him with a magnificent turn from Liev Schreiber, then pursued an ongoing mystery arc with a couple of false resolutions. The coming season promises even more surprises: huge corruption scandals are brewing, a longtime member of the team is murdered, and Petersen is leaving the cast, to be replaced by Laurence Fishburne. As the granddaddy of procedural shows, the focus is necessarily not on the ongoing character arcs, but somehow *CSI* wrings plenty of enjoyment out of those in slow, steady drips. Speaking for one viewer, this makes me crave the little morsels even more.

10. *The Colbert Report*

We need *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as a reality check – and really the two shows should be considered together as one 60-minute block – but, forced to pick just one, Colbert is far more entertaining from a comedy standpoint, and often more incisive as well. Colbert's character mocks a "bloviating pundit" archetype, which means his targets are often right-wing hard-liners (mainly because their opponents have failed to make an industry out of barking their viewpoints into microphones, but partly because their opponents hew closer to Colbert's own viewpoint). Regardless, the target is the media more often than political figures, which makes Colbert a fairly equal-opportunity offender. And, because the whole show is wrapped around an intricately constructed character, there are countless opportunities for fun to be had with that character's foibles and idiosyncrasies. His feuds with celebrities from Barry Manilow to Korean pop star Rain; his tortured breakup with Charlene; his pathological fear of bears; his fetish for tall women lifting heavy things; his payola deal with fictional Prescott Pharmaceuticals, whose products will probably kill you but will definitely humiliate you first.