

The Best Show On TV

by Joe Mulder

"The Office"(NBC) – 2/9/2006 - 4/2/2006
"Huff" (Showtime) – 4/2/2006 - 8/26/2006
"Big Brother" (CBS) – 8/26/2006 - 10/4/2006
"South Park" (Comedy Central) – 10/4/2006 - 11/30/2006
"The Office" (NBC) – 11/30/2006 - 1/14/2007
"24" (FOX) – 1/14/2007 - 4/5/2007
"30 Rock" (NBC) – 4/5/2007 - 4/10/2008
"House" (FOX) – 4/10/2008 - 10/5/2008
"Dexter" (Showtime) – 10/5/2008 - 11/18/2008
"The Shield" (FX) – 11/18/2008 - 11/24/2008
"How I Met Your Mother" (CBS) – 11/24/2008 - 1/8/2009
"30 Rock" (NBC) – 1/8/2009 - present

The first weeks of 2009 find the Best Show On TV title returning to what may well be the place it always belonged: "30 Rock." But I come here not merely to sing the show's praises; everybody does that (including the Golden Globes, just last night). Everybody mentions how great Alec Baldwin and Tina Fey are, and most even remember to give some love to the quite possibly one-dimensional – but quite certainly perfectly cast – Tracy Morgan (whose fictional filmography – with the addition this week of his *An Affair to Remember* remake, *A Blaffair to Rememblack* – is beginning to rival that of Troy McClure). So I won't bore you with more of that. What I will do is ask you to take a moment out of your busy (though not too busy, if you're reading this) schedule to stop and appreciate John Riggi.

"Who is John Riggi?" you are no doubt asking. Well, until a few years ago, I knew John Riggi (rhymes with "squeegee") only as a moderately successful standup comic from the late '80s and early '90s whom I hadn't seen on TV in quite a few years, and whose name only stuck in my head because when an elementary school friend of mine named Jameel got tired of calling people "rejects," he shortened it to "reegees," and this happened around the same time I first saw John Riggi on TV.

A few years ago, though, I caught John Riggi's name in the credits of "30 Rock;" I assumed it was the same John Riggi (it is), and I was interested to see that he was still around (it was a little bit like when I saw the trailer for *Sideways* for the first time and thought, "Good Lord, that's Thomas Haden Church! Where's he been?," although quite a scaled-down version of that).

IMDb tells us that John Riggi is a writer and co-executive producer on "30 Rock," and maybe it was only because I remembered his name from before (I was quite a connoisseur of the guy-in-front-of-a-plain-brick-wall, "hey-did-you-ever-notice" school of standup back in my younger days, when that stuff was on TV all the time), but I slowly began to realize that a "Written by John Riggi" credit was generally followed by a particularly good episode. After "Gavin Volure," the November 20 instant classic that

guest-starred Steve Martin, I was compelled to go back and look at all of John Riggi's episodes. Check it out:

"Blind Date" – October 25, 2006

The show's third-ever episode, this is the one that made me a "30 Rock" fan for life. I liked the pilot just fine and I enjoyed Episode #2 enough that I knew I'd be a regular viewer, but "Blind Date" played like a top-notch episode of a great show that had already been on for a couple of seasons and had completely found its mark.

After she's set up on a blind date with a lesbian, we learn that Fey's Liz Lemon is straight but romantically clueless (and perhaps showing early signs of desperation). Baldwin's corporate boss Jack first encounters Jack McBrayer's NBC page Kenneth and, after an encounter at a poker table, memorably declares that "in five years we'll all either be working for him, or be dead by his hand." Pete (Scott Adsit) tells Liz that she looks like "a fancy prostitute." A memorable, classic episode, and although the entire "30 Rock" writing staff undoubtedly contributed, the sole writing credit – for the first time – is John Riggi's.

"The Head and the Hair" – January 18, 2007

Co-written by Tina Fey, "The Head and the Hair" still represents a – if not *the* – high-water mark for the show, at least as far as I'm concerned. Liz Lemon finally finds a man with whom she clicks on every possible level, only to have him turn out to be her third cousin. Meanwhile, in what could have been lame B-story but proved to be very funny thanks in particular to a look inside Brian Williams's dressing room, Jack and Kenneth switch jobs as part of General Electric's "Bottom's Up" program. An absolute masterpiece of an episode.

"Corporate Crush" – April 12, 2007

As we ramp up toward the season finale, we meet Phoebe (Emily Mortimer), Jack's future fiancée and almost-wife. Tracy Jordan becomes determined to pull an Eddie Murphy and play all the parts in a new movie, only this movie will be a serious biopic about the life of Thomas Jefferson. And Liz and Floyd (Jason Sudeikis) are happy together, but we've got to figure it won't last. An excellent episode, although John Riggi might get a bit of extra credit he didn't quite earn, just based on Jason Sudeikis's presence. Without verging into man-crush territory (hopefully), I think that when all is said and done we'll look back on the Jason Sudeikis episodes of "30 Rock" as particularly special. Sort of like the Gary's Old Towne Tavern episodes of "Cheers." Except that Sudeikis was only on a few episodes, all in a row, and then wasn't really on the show anymore. So, not that much like Gary's at all, I guess. But still.

"Cougars" – November 29, 2007

POOP READING

The exception that proves the rule; this might be my least-favorite "30 Rock" episode. Although, to be fair, I've watched most episodes at least twice, and I only watched this one once. Someday, I'm sure I'll take another look. Still, no matter how many times I watch it, I can't imagine it'll ever magically become "The Head and the Hair."

"Succession" – April 24, 2008

Co-written with Andrew Guest; Liz goes corporate when it looks like Jack is going to be promoted, but guest star Will Arnett complicates things by marrying the CEO's daughter. Also, Tracy attempts to make a porn video game in a plotline that mirrors the Academy Award-winning film *Amadeus*. The entire episode is nothing short of brilliant.

"Gavin Volure" – November 20, 2008

If there has been one criticism consistently leveled at "30 Rock" (*if*, mind you), it would be in regard to the show's penchant for "stunt casting." It hasn't bothered me at all, though; the guest stars they've had on have been extremely well suited to their parts (to wit: in the Season 2 premiere, they had Jerry Seinfeld play himself).

And no one's been better than Steve Martin. I mean that in general, by the way; not just as it pertains to "30 Rock." After watching him in the "Gavin Volure" episode, it was difficult not to attempt to orchestrate situations in which I would be justified in shouting out, "I miscounted the men!" In the end, though, I managed to stay composed and not do that.

And there you have it, as far as John Riggi the "30 Rock" writer is concerned: six episodes written or co-written, five good (and, like I said, maybe I'll like "Cougars" more the second time), and four that have to rank among the show's all-time best. I don't mean to suggest that he's the only one who's penned a classic; Tina Fey's episodes all tend to be gems, and Matthew Hubbard ("Hard Ball," "The Collection") and Jack Burditt ("Jack Meets Dennis," "Rosemary's Baby") have also had a hand in multiple episodes that could possibly lay claim to being at or near the top.

So far, though, I think John Riggi's got the highest batting average out of anybody writing on what was once, and is now again, The Best Show On TV.
