

12 Underappreciated Comedy Actors and Actresses

by Brandon Kruse & Jameson Simmons

If you're a student of comedy like we are, you spend all your time consuming comedy, talking about comedy, deconstructing comedy, and watching *30 Rock*. And you start to notice a few trends – some top-notch performers who just never seem to get their due. And nothing says "I have noticed a trend!" quite like making a list about it.

We're not saying these are the most underappreciated people working in comedy (that honor, of course, belongs to Mr. Danny Gans). We're just saying that if you were to make a list of comedy practitioners whose talents garner less appreciation than they should, these people would be on it. And thus, twelve nominees for the Alec Baldwin Award for Underappreciated Comedy Genius:

(In alphabetical order, so as not to play favorites – and so you can tell right away that Woody Allen repertory player Caroline Aaron missed the cut. We're pursuing truth here, people – not popularity.)

HANK AZARIA

The fact that Hank Azaria doesn't get more attention for providing the voices for some of the funniest characters on *The Simpsons*, one of the greatest shows in TV history, is just bizarre. The breadth and variety of his voice work is astounding, from the gravelly whine of Moe Szyslak to the pitch-perfect stereotype of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon to the sad sack intonations of Kirk Van Houten to the overacting bark of Duffman. His voices heighten the emotional depth and personal world view of his characters, like in the Season 8 episode "Homer's Phobia," where the weariness and utter despair in Moe's voice when he says "Oh boy, looks like it's suicide again for me..." elevates an already-great line into something that should be commemorated with a statue and a limited-edition plate set. He also does a fantastic job of singing in character, particularly with Apu (the paper boy song in "Streetcar!" and "Who Needs the Kwik-E-Mart" being a couple of standout examples). As Matt Groening once said in a Season 5 DVD commentary, Azaria possesses the ability to turn unfunny lines into some of the best in an episode. We agree.

Azaria has also displayed his comic chops in *Eulogy*, *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*, and, of course, *The Birdcage*, which he stole from Nathan Lane and Gene Hackman (possibly because Robin Williams was distracting them). His Agador wasn't flamboyant in a hacky, spiteful way; he was loud and proud, but also real. Azaria did great work playing Sir Lancelot, the French Taunter, and other characters (naturally) in the Broadway musical "Spamalot." And he brought humor and charm to the lead role in the Showtime series *Huff*, which, by also featuring Paget

Brewster and Oliver Platt, and by getting cancelled after two seasons, created a veritable vortex of underappreciation. Sigh.

May We Suggest: Put Azaria's proven mimicry talents to use on his own Carol Burnett-style variety show, where he can play a multitude of characters and revive the genre, which now lies approximately 900 feet further below ground thanks to Rosie O'Donnell (shudder).

ALBERT BROOKS

As a Jewish writer/director/actor who used to be a stand-up comic, Brooks often gets compared to Woody Allen (film critic Rex Reed once referred to him as a "West Coast Woody Allen"), but he does not share Allen's level of success and fame. And that's a shame, because Brooks is as funny and talented as Allen. Brooks's films are underappreciated enough (just look at *Entertainment Weekly*'s recent "25 Great Comedies From the Past 25 Years," which, by failing to list Brooks's *Lost in America*, rendered itself nearly irrelevant), but his work as a performer is beyond underappreciated; it's overunderappreciated. (You're welcome, Webster's.)

Start with Brooks's voice acting work as Hank Scorpio in the classic episode of *The Simpsons*, "You Only Move Twice." Not only is his manic, rapid-fire delivery perfect for a time-crunched evil genius trying to put on a friendly face, he did it while improvising many of his lines. His comic portrayal of neurotic, sweaty TV reporter Aaron Altman in *Broadcast News* practically stole the movie (and earned him a Best Supporting Actor nomination). Likewise with his opening bit alongside Dan Aykroyd in *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (the movie-stealing part, not the Oscar nomination). If you're one of the many people who has never seen *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, you must see it simply because the "improv" sequence at the center of it is pure Brooks-ian delight. And if you can imagine anyone but Brooks delivering the overflowing list of dialogue gems in *Lost in America* (the "nest egg" lecture, for one), then your imagination is a liar.

May We Suggest: Cast Brooks in a supporting role in a goofy Will Ferrell/Adam McKay or Judd Apatow comedy, with free rein to improvise.

DAVID DUCHOVNY

When we say "David Duchovny," the first thing on your mind is probably not "comedy genius" – but that's just how underappreciated he is! Pigeonholed by his high-profile work as Fox Mulder on *The X-Files*, his talent for dry, understated comedy is usually overlooked. (Odd, since those talents are part of what elevated Mulder above the typical hard-nosed G-man.) His appearances on *The Larry Sanders Show* were

the stuff of legend, and he followed them up with equally riotous cameo work in *Zoolander*, and as weatherman Johnny Volcano on the semi-improvised Bonnie Hunt sitcom *Life with Bonnie* (a show which seems as close as we're going to get to a physical manifestation of "comedy underappreciation"). He was admirable in larger parts in movies like *The TV Set* and *Evolution*, but was stymied by scripts that fell short of greatness.

These days, he's pushing a "charming douchebag" vibe as Hank Moody, the oversexed and undermotivated author at the center of Showtime's *Californication* (a role which apparently hits closer to home than we first realized). The laughs are split between his misanthropic *bons mots* and his deviant antics, and it's impossible not to love Duchovny through it all. But even if none of this had ever happened, he deserves a slot in the Comedy Hall of Fame for his exacting portrayal of Jeff Goldblum in one of SNL's "Celebrity Jeopardy!" sketches.

May We Suggest: More sitcom cameos would always be welcome, but let's get Duchovny a relatively prominent role in the Christopher Guest ensemble and see what he can do with it.

CHRIS ELLIOTT

Chris Elliott is comedy spice. His uniquely bizarre comic style adds flavor to any project he appears in (he was perfectly cast as Peter MacDougall in *Everybody Loves Raymond*), and even when he plays a seemingly normal character like Dom in *There's Something About Mary*, the weirdness finds a way to seep through. His spice is generally most effective in small amounts – we're not going to claim that *Get a Life* or *Cabin Boy* are for everyone, though once you've got a taste for Elliott, you do find portions worth savoring in those two particular meals ("fish stick kitties" comes to mind, for starters). The point remains, however: most comedies could only be improved by adding a dash of Elliott.

But the best Elliott has historically come to us via David Letterman's late night talk shows. Elliott started out as a writer on Letterman's NBC show, but made a name for himself by appearing in bits, creating such characters as "The Fugitive Guy," "The Guy Under the Seats," and a freewheeling, barely-there impression of Marlon Brando. His goofy, sometimes caustic, man-child persona was a predecessor for the work of Adam Sandler and Will Ferrell (Elliott was taking off his shirt to revel in his white, flabby flesh long before Ferrell), and his work as a writer/performer on Letterman seems to have served as a blueprint for the vast majority of the in-studio bits on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. Elliott continues to make regular appearances on Letterman, along with former writer Gerard Mulligan, doing bits that routinely outshine most of the work done by the current Late Show writing staff.

May We Suggest: Give Elliott a Robert Smigel-style blank check to submit digital shorts to *Saturday Night Live*, to be rotated with the work of Andy Samberg on those rare occasions when Samberg has a funny idea.

NATHAN FILLION

As Capt. Mal Reynolds in the ill-fated Fox space western *Firefly* and its ill-fated big-screen adaptation *Serenity*, Nathan Fillion crafted the postmodern smartass wit of Joss Whedon into an entirely new and glorious creation. If he and the rest of that ensemble had been properly appreciated, we'd have a Firefly Day across North America, with parades and bank closings. Fillion started on ABC's *Two Guys and a Girl*, which was slightly better than it looked, but slightly less than the sum of its parts – mainly because two of those parts were Fillion and Ryan Reynolds (who finally seems to be graduating from dumb comedies that underestimate his considerable talents). Since then, he's kept the laughs coming in roles as varied as the overconfident sheriff from James Gunn's gorefest spoof *Slither* and the befuddled small town OB/GYN in Adrienne Shelly's charming romance *Waitress*. He's capable of carrying off the charming dunce-in-beefcake's-clothing humor of Brendan Fraser, but his precision timing and his flinty glare take it so much further. None of this excellent work matters, though: If you need a reason why Nathan Fillion should be a comedy superstar and a household name, look no further than the Internet sensation *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, in which his Captain Hammer perfectly skewers the self-important superhero while still tugging at the heartstrings a little.

May We Suggest: Throw some money at Joss Whedon to build the world's greatest action-comedy movie around Fillion. (And actually release it with some solid marketing support.)

DAVE FOLEY

Just as no one from *The State* has ever gotten the full recognition they deserve, neither have the five likable chums from *The Kids in the Hall*. It's hard to say why Dave Foley's underappreciation hurts more than the rest – maybe because his style had the best chance of "going mainstream;" maybe just because the brilliance of *NewsRadio* deserved so much more attention than it ever got. He shares a talent for straight-man work with greats like Bob Newhart or David Hyde Pierce, but with just a little more sarcasm and an occasional twinge of the surreal. And, though it hardly qualifies as a career highlight, he stepped into the formidable shoes of Kevin Pollak hosting *Celebrity Poker Showdown* and simply dazzled. The ability to be biting funny off-the-cuff is a rare and precious skill. Few can be as edgy as he can and still come off so damn charming. CPS was the perfect showcase for that kind of wit: like *Dinner for Five* (and *Match Game*, years before), it was a fly-on-the-wall

look at celebrities getting drunk and making each other laugh.

Though they wouldn't recognize him, most audiences are familiar with his excellent work voicing Flik, the star of Pixar's *A Bug's Life*. But he best represented his unique absurdist style as the star and co-writer of *The Wrong Guy*, a manhunt-thriller spoof (and, incidentally, the funniest comedy you've never heard of – another innocent victim of studio politics sidelining a perfectly good project). This decade, he's showcased his talents in guest appearances on sitcoms like *Scrubs*, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, and Bruce McCulloch's *Carpoolers* – but in a just world, people would be guest starring on *his* sitcom.

May We Suggest: His talents would shine in a talk show format with occasional comedy sketches. Put him on at 10pm every night and let him crush Leno.

JUDY GREER

Judy Greer is the pretty blonde with the geeky charm in guest roles on *My Name is Earl* and *Two and a Half Men*. She added a layer of madcap chaos to *Arrested Development* in a series of appearances as Kitty, the secretary screwed and tossed aside by two generations of Bluth men. Greer has played the bubbly supporting role on *Love Monkey* and in *13 Going on 30*, both of which were better for having her – she undercuts the typical sidekick tropes with an edge of her own, making them interesting characters in their own right instead of so much window dressing. We even found ourselves rewinding that Mac/PC ad where she cameoed as a yoga instructor – when she's on the screen, it's hard not to love her.

She got a shot at headlining her own sitcom, starring on *Miss Guided* as Becky Freeley, a guidance counselor who returns to work at her old high school. Greer and an able supporting cast (including the oft-underappreciated Chris Parnell) delivered quality laughs that overcame a slightly flawed format, but ABC, no stranger to undersupporting excellent programming, dumped all of *Miss Guided* in a quick two-week stint last spring. The average critical score on Metacritic was 63/100, which puts it among the top ten network debuts that season. So obviously that had to go!

May We Suggest: She and Lisa Kudrow and Christina Applegate play a trio of ultra-competitive sisters. Sitcom or movie, you ask? Why not both?

BONNIE HUNT

At this point in her career, Bonnie Hunt deserves some kind of lifetime achievement award for underappreciation. She's been underappreciated by TV audiences (*Davis Rules* and the unfairly cancelled *Grand* – release the damn DVDs, put them

on Hulu, do SOMETHING already!), moviegoers (the criminally underrated *Return to Me*, which she co-wrote and directed) and even Lorne Michaels – Hunt turned down a chance to be on SNL because Lorne told her she wouldn't be able to improvise (because god forbid somebody try to inject some life into the parade of stilted cue card readings). And she must hold the record for cancelled TV shows. In addition to *Davis Rules* and *Grand*, four, count 'em, four shows that she created and executive produced were canned, with shelf lives ranging from just a pilot episode (*Let Go*) to two seasons (*Life with Bonnie*, which so deserved better). These were smart, funny, original shows... ohhh, wait, we just figured out the problem.

If you've ever seen one of her appearances on *The Late Show with David Letterman* or the old *Late Late Show with Tom Snyder*, you've seen how potent her quick-witted, self-effacing sense of humor can be, and how her down-to-earth style makes it impossible not to love her. Her current daytime talk show isn't a bad showcase for this, but it's not the ideal fit.

May We Suggest: Build a smart, traditional three-camera family sitcom around a loose adaptation of her persona, à la *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and don't dilute her unique style with network meddling.

KEN MARINO

Ken Marino tends to sneak up on you, probably because he's never the biggest name in any project he works on. But he's been delivering big laughs since his days as part of The State (speaking of DVDs that desperately need to be released, and right fucking now!). He played slimy and unethical for laughs as Vinnie Van Lowe in *Veronica Mars*, and provided comic relief as a fast-talking, foul-mouthed, desperate father in *Diggers* (which he also wrote). And if you haven't seen *The Ten* (first of all, go watch *The Ten*), you haven't seen the beauty of a segment where Marino's Dr. Glenn Richie tries to deal with an angry husband whose wife he killed by leaving a pair of scissors in her abdomen after surgery just for laughs ("As a goof, guy! As a goof!"). It's dark, dark comedy (we won't tell you where the rest of the story goes), but Marino brings a vibrant, goofy energy that keeps the whole thing rolling along. And that's really what he does best.

May We Suggest: It's time to promote Marino to co-lead roles – cast him and fellow underappreciated actor Nathan Fillion as brothers (look at them – how has this not happened already?), and they'd surely make it the funniest movie ever to gross less than three million domestically.

PAUL RUDD

With the runaway success of last year's *Role Models*, some would say Paul Rudd has attained about as much

appreciation as he's going to get, but for us it won't be enough until he's carved on Mount Rushmore. For someone who captured the hearts of a generation of teen girls in *Clueless* almost 14 years ago (and turned in a funny performance to boot), it sure has taken long enough for him to headline a decent-sized studio comedy. Still recognized mainly as "that guy from *Friends*," Rudd has tirelessly churned out a decade of memorable comic performances from all over the map. (Not that he wasn't fantastic on *Friends*, too.)

He stole scenes as Andy, the petulant camp counselor in *Wet Hot American Summer* ("You taste like a burger. I don't like you anymore.") – and he brought sarcastic balance to the sillier moments of *Anchorman* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. He added memorably to the flavor of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and his brief cameo as John Lennon in *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* left us wanting more. He elevated the otherwise half-baked indie sex comedy *The OH! in Ohio* and can always be counted on to bring laughs to an episode of *Reno: 911!*. Proving the adage that if you can truly do comedy well, drama is easy, Rudd has also excelled in films like *The Shape of Things* and Ken Marino's *Diggers*. And, while it may not contribute to his evaluation as a comedy actor, it's worth noting that he's a fantastic talk show guest. He's always a riot on *The Daily Show*, and his *Dinner for Five* appearance is the stuff of legend. Plus, he's not an asshole; anyone will tell you he's as generous and friendly on set as he appears on screen. All this, and the highest he's climbed in 2008 is sharing a lead with Seann William Scott? Seth Rogen is having a moment, and – due respect to Rogen – that moment should be Paul Rudd's. And it should have come five years ago.

May We Suggest: A Jim Carrey-sized studio comedy with Paul Rudd alone in the lead. Oh, and the Mt. Rushmore thing.

PETER SCOLARI

Peter Scolari has been underappreciated for far, far too long; almost three decades, in fact. He was excellent as Henry Desmond in *Bosom Buddies* – in fact, he and Tom Hanks were so good in that show, they were on a different plane than the rest of the cast (with the possible exception of Holland Taylor, who at least knew how to properly sell the over-the-top acting style so prevalent in early 80s sitcoms), and together they elevated the show into an end product worth watching. Hanks gets the lion's share of credit for that now that he's a superstar, but the people that do that are just plain lazy and wrong; Scolari held his own, and the chemistry between the two of them was beautiful. Just a few years later, Scolari went on to help save *Newhart*, a show that can be broken up into the first two seasons without Scolari's Michael Harris (very hit-and-miss, occasionally dull) and the last six seasons with him (classic TV). Having Bob Newhart and Tom Poston at the core of your show is

great, and adding Julia Duffy in Season 2 helped, but when Scolari arrived in Season 3, the difference in energy and humor was exhilarating. Michael Harris was a terrific creation, played to comic perfection by Scolari, and without him there never would have been a Niles Crane.

1995's *Dweebs* was a perfect vehicle for Scolari, but it wasn't given time to mature and is now apparently being held against him while lesser talents are being given second and third chances to find a toehold in sitcomdom. That's just not right. He's a consummate sitcom performer, a man built for the medium, yet almost no one takes advantage of this (his last TV appearance was a 2006 voice over guest spot, as himself, in an episode of *American Dad*). There isn't a show on the air today that couldn't be made at least a little better by even a guest spot from Scolari.

May We Suggest: A series of cameos – let him drop by *30 Rock* as Liz's rival on the writing staff of a TGS competitor, *The Office* as an old college buddy of Michael's, and *How I Met Your Mother* as a principal who tussles with Lily. We smell a couple Guest Actor in a Comedy Series Emmys!

PATRICK WARBURTON

Best known as David Puddy, Elaine's on-again/off-again boyfriend on *Seinfeld*, Warburton is currently providing (along with David Spade) the hilarious line-readings you fast-forward through the rest of CBS's dingy *Rules of Engagement* to get to – an assignment he performs admirably, but clear proof that he's not getting the appreciation he deserves. Though he's excelled in a number of comic roles, for Warburton's style and appearance, it's hard to imagine a better fit than The Tick – muscular, goofy, and affable, the unlikely superhero bumbled through nine unusual episodes before Fox pulled the plug and he joined the pile of Barry Sonnenfeld TV casualties. He also brought a menacing presence to *Men in Black* and *Get Smart* and added great laughs to the cruelly overlooked *Big Trouble*, alongside many people who belong on a list like this one, including Andy Richter, Janeane Garofalo, and the masterful Stanley Tucci. But, for a performer who makes such a memorable physical impression, it's amazing the variety of characters he's successfully inhabited. He's big and chiseled, but he's also cuddly and charming. Is it any wonder Lisa Miller gave in to his "evil" Johnny Johnson on *NewsRadio*? Could you resist those piercing stares? And in *The Dish*, he played against type as a NASA bureaucrat dispatched to oversee the Australian arm of the moon landing telecast. It's a different style of comedy, but it's also his biggest role, and a peek at the potential he has on offer.

His soothing baritone has also enriched the comic performances of all manner of animated characters, from the TV version of Buzz Lightyear to Brock Samson, the lethal bodyguard on Adult Swim's sardonic adventure-toon send-up *The Venture Bros*. The Warburton/Spade chemistry was

POOP READING

great in *The Emperor's New Groove* and he was funny in the Jerry Seinfeld Superman ads for American Express and again in *Bee Movie* (clearly Seinfeld agrees with us that the man is irresistibly funny). He kills as wheelchair-bound cop Joe Swanson on *Family Guy* and on Disney Channel's *Kim Possible* (where he shares the recording booth with greats like Gary Cole, Stephen Root, Christopher McDonald, Neil Flynn, Patton Oswalt, J.K. Simmons, and the always side-splitting Maurice LaMarche).

May We Suggest: Put him at the center of a madcap single-camera sitcom and watch his energy elevate everyone else's game.
