

### 2009 Upfronts Quiz

by Jameson Simmons

The television networks (or, what remain of them) held their annual "upfronts" presentations last week. This is where they introduce their upcoming fall shows to the TV press and media buyers to set expectations for the new season and start to sell advertising time. For the last few years, we've been told the upfronts would be canceled – for reasons ranging from the WGA strike to Hulu – but each year, they return. It seems the entertainment industry can't resist throwing itself a party.

Which is a good thing, because I have a delightful little tradition going, in which I present the titles of the new shows and see if you can distinguish between my half-assed, ridiculous pitch for each show versus the show's *actual* half-assed, ridiculous premise. The original goal was to mock the lame predictability of network television, where every program is forced to have some high-concept "hook," but over time the exercise has become more than a little depressing, as I accidentally cook up ideas that I'd much rather watch on TV than the real shows. This year, I also tried to make the quiz more challenging – doing my best to add some realism to my fake answers. Nothing says "fun" like toning down the satirical exaggeration, right?

In the same vein, I've left out a few of the well-known shows, since the answers to those would be obvious. I also skipped all the offerings from the CW network, since they're all essentially the same show. They do have a show in the works called *Parental Discretion Advised*, which is just masterful. As soon as the Janet Jackson Super Bowl happened, networks started offering advisories before every single show, to the point where it just became part of the noise – if every show requires discretion, then none do. CW has squared off against the preposterous Parents Television Council, using the PTC's complaints against *Gossip Girl* as part of the marketing for its second season launch, so it's great to see them stepping it up.

**Fox** has a lot of returning shows, including *Dollhouse*, a surprising renewal that has dealt a blow to the Los Angeles hitman industry, as overzealous Joss Whedon freaks no longer have to contract the assassinations of Fox programming executives. Here are the shows they'll use to fill in the remaining slots.

#### Brothers

A: One brother just retired from the NFL, the other runs a struggling restaurant – so the footballer *moves in* to help get things on track.

B: Twin brothers – one gay, one straight – share a Manhattan apartment and get into familiar Patty Duke-style shenanigans.

#### Human Target

A: *My Own Worst Enemy* meets *Burn Notice*: a covert ops assassin must use himself as bait to lure out those in his agency who are secretly trying to have him killed.

B: *Quantum Leap* meets *Burn Notice*: a security expert embeds himself with clients to help keep them safe, endangering himself in the process.

#### Past Life

A: Dating reality show in which contestants share a house and go on dates with each other, but must be chaperoned by one of their exes at every date.

B: *The X-Files* meets *The Ex List*: a reincarnation believer and her skeptic partner mine people's past lives for clues to help them out of their present-day jams.

#### Sons of Tucson

A: *My Three Sons* meets *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead* (remember when titles were so simple?) – three boys hire a guy to pretend he's their dad while the real father serves a prison sentence.

B: *Sanford and Son* in an Arizona bauxite mine, but in this case a conglomerated mining concern is trying to take over the family business.

**ABC** seems like a network with plenty of hits, so I wasn't expecting such a long list of new shows. I guess when some of those hits are *Dancing with the Stars*, you need mid-season replacements to take over afterwards. Then again, most of these shows won't survive through November, so they'll need replacements for those, too.

#### Hank

A: A deadbeat dad *moves in* with his family after losing a cushy job as a titan of industry, and is forced to face the realities of raising a normal, messy family.

B: *Ed* in a beachside tourist community. Hank returns home to *move in* with his ailing parents and manage their care. Along the way, he reconnects with old friends and high school flames.

#### The Middle

A: *Deal or No Deal*-style game show in which contestants are given two integers and must guess closest to their

average to win money.

B: *Roseanne* meets *Malcolm in the Middle*: a **middle**-class mom raises a crazy family in the **mid**west, with **middle**-child issues and **average** IQs all around.

### Modern Family

A: Dramedy following the family of a Rick Moranis *Honey I Shrank the Kids* inventor type who is forever seeking the next great innovation, creating no small number of garage fires and frustrated children.

B: Same-sex couples, May/December romances, interracial marriage, step-parenting – the modern family comes in so many shapes and sizes, and their idiosyncrasies will keep you laughing.

### Flash Forward

A: *The Happening* meets *Minority Report*: A global event gives people brief glimpses of the future, and they struggle with their newfound knowledge. Can they change their fate? Do they want to? Will *Chuck* still be on?

B: *Click* meets *That Was Then* – remember how great *That Was Then* was? – a man finds a device that lets him fast-forward his life, then undertakes a *My Name Is Earl* meets *It's a Wonderful Life* overhaul of his personality to make things better.

### Shark Tank

A: Reality competition in which investors hear business pitches from a series of entrepreneurs hoping to win cash and mentoring to start their dream company.

B: Follows the exploits of a family who operate a scuba diving business, when a messy divorce means catty Aunt Monica suddenly gains a minority stake in the company, and *moves in* to take over.

### The Forgotten

A: A special consultant to the Milwaukee police force has the ability to forget things. This enables him to continually look at the evidence with fresh eyes, sparking ingenious deductive leaps.

B: *Cold Case* meets *The Profiler* – an elite squad analyzes the details of unsolved murders to piece together the lives of John and Jane Doe victims.

### Happy Town

A: What at first looks like a cheerful small town actually masks a gruesome murder mystery. Is anything what it seems?

B: Reality show following an entire TV season in the city of Boston, where the local affiliate will not be airing *The Jay Leno Show*.

### The Deep End

A: Sitcom following the staff at a community pool over the summer, with crushes and infighting between the cliques of lifeguards, concession workers, and administrative staff.

B: First-season *Ally McBeal* meets fifth-season *Ally McBeal* as steamy sexual intrigue and relationship drama dominate the courtroom and the boardroom of a powerful law firm.

**NBC** overlord Jeff Zucker has publicly announced that his network is giving up on being a ratings leader. (So presumably the only media buyers at his upfronts table were the "I've fallen and I can't get up" people.) Zucko didn't need to proclaim this on the record, of course – he'd already done it by announcing *The Jay Leno Show* at 10pm every weeknight starting this fall.

### Trauma

A: A young woman joins a paramedic unit as her first real job, and discovers she's strangely connected to each new person she rescues.

B: San Francisco paramedics struggle to save lives and keep their personalities in check as *ER* meets *Trauma: Life in the ER*.

### Day One

A: *Groundhog Day* meets *Worst Week*: a group of twentysomething friends on vacation at a ski lodge wakes up to the same day over and over again. Once the nonstop hookups subside, things start to get interesting.

B: *Jericho* meets *Melrose Place* as the tenants of an apartment building must repopulate the planet after a cataclysmic event. Once the nonstop hookups subside, things start to get interesting.

### Mercy

A: *ER* meets *Nurses* – inside the drama of a working hospital from the nurses' perspective.

B: When the executives at a top-tier television network foul things up so terribly that it can never recover its onetime glory, the government steps in to shut it down and end everyone's misery.

### The Jay Leno Show

A: The absolute worst humanity has to offer.

B: Legally admissible as evidence for the responsible programming executive's insanity plea in case he should ever need it.

CBS rules the ratings roost these days, with the powerhouse CSI franchise and the giddily delightful *The Mentalist*, last season's top new show and only real breakout hit. From the sound of these pitches, they're really tired of being on top.

### Accidentally on Purpose

A: Comedy involving a newly-divorced personal injury lawyer seeking new romance. Dates with his clients work out just about as well as his court cases on their behalf – which is to say, badly.

B: A casual hookup leads a right-to-lifer to an unwanted baby, but things get funny as she tries to make it work with the unwitting father while he tries to finish high school.

### Three Rivers

A: Surgeons in the Three Rivers area of Pennsylvania specialize in organ transplants, making them the last hope for their patients to stay alive.

B: The Rivers sisters – Saffron, Delilah, and Mystic – operate a small-town deli and co-host a weekly AM radio chat show in this *Northern Exposure*-style comedy/drama.

### Undercover Boss

A: Reality show in which managers and supervisors take a personal day then show up in disguise as a temp to see what their employees say about them behind their backs.

B: Trippy sitcom in the style of *Being John Malkovich* meets *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*: a secret tactical force recruits people to impersonate Bruce Springsteen at his concerts while the real Bruce is off performing covert assassinations.

[Ed. note – That's the **second**-most-ridiculous concept I could think up for that title. The first had to be discarded when it turned out to be exactly the same as the real show.]

### The Good Wife

A: A neuroscientist at a leading university hospital contemplates killing his wife, until he stumbles upon a discovery that allows him to rejigger her personality and get back the gal he married (or maybe a slightly more "adventuresome" version).

B: A long-suffering lawyer-turned-homemaker comes out of retirement when her disgraced husband is sent to prison and it's up to her to restore dignity to her family name.

### Miami Trauma

A: A co-launched spin-off of NBC's *Trauma*, this one starring David Caruso.

B: *Private Practice* meets [any doctor show] – it's fun in the sun for doctors, nurses, and patients.

### Arranged Marriage

A: Reality show in which singles allow their friends to choose prospective spouses for them, and then they marry in a legally legitimate ceremony. Kind of takes the wind out of that whole "sanctity of marriage" argument against gay marriage, doesn't it?

B: *Yes, Dear* meets *Slumdog Millionaire*: an Indian couple whose parents forced them to marry move into a California beach town and struggle to make things work. Answers:

Fox: *Brothers*: A; *Human Target*: B; *Past Lives*: B; *Sons of Tucson*: A

ABC: *Hank*: A; *The Middle*: B; *The Modern Family*: B; *Flash Forward*: A; *Shark Tank*: A; *The Forgotten*: B; *Happy Town*: A; *The Deep End*: B

NBC: *Trauma*: B; *Day One*: B; *Mercy*: A; *The Jay Leno Show*: Both A and B

CBS: *Accidentally on Purpose*: B; *Three Rivers*: A; *Undercover Boss*: A; *The Good Wife*: B; *Miami Trauma*: B; *Arranged Marriage*: A

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