

Pooping My Pants With "Glee"

by Joe Mulder

A show cannot claim the title of The Best Show On TV based solely on the strength of a pilot episode; a show needs to prove its greatness over more than one installment, and a cooling-off period is wise no matter how good a debut might be (this is known around here as the "Psych" rule).

It is for that reason that you are about to read a relentlessly effusive review of FOX's "Glee," and not a new installment of my ongoing The Best Show On TV series. But be assured that if Tuesday night's pilot episode – and the few seconds of "Coming this fall on 'Glee'" we saw afterwards – are any indication, "Glee" could take the The Best Show On TV title quite decisively as soon as the closing credits of Episode 2 begin to roll.

When I was a kid I played the trumpet. Also, I loved *Back To The Future*, "Quantum Leap" and anything having to do with time travel, although I was not a sci-fi fan in general. I was quite active with my church's Bible quiz team, partly because I was in love with Mandy Swanson, but partly because I was into it for its own sake. And, in a fit of pique borne of the 1994 baseball strike and the lack of a relationship with a Dad who would likely (and rightly) have shamed me into giving up such nonsense, I had briefly abandoned my beloved Minnesota Twins and switched allegiances to the Chicago Cubs (I'm deeply embarrassed by that, obviously, but if I can help just one young fair-weather fan avoid a similar mistake, then exposing my shameful behavior is worth the blow that my otherwise sterling reputation is sure to suffer in the wake of such a revelation).

I tell you all of that to tell you this: I was browsing through the local bookstore one day, and I came upon a book called *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* by W.P. Kinsella, a name I recognized as being that of the author of *Field of Dreams*. I looked at the blurbs on the flap of the paperback edition, and one from USA Today read as follows:

"Whether or not you like baseball, read the Bible, play a musical instrument, like Indian folklore, time travel, or the Chicago Cubs, you will like *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy*."

Needless to say, I bought the book and plowed through it in a matter of hours. Then, I plowed through it again. And, at least with certain passages of the book, again.

I bring this up so that you may, if you choose, regard my enthusiastic praise of "Glee" with a bit of a grain of salt, as "Glee" is, as it pertains to me, essentially the *Iowa Baseball Confederacy* of TV shows...

My high school experience was largely defined by the close group of friends I made while participating in marching band, swing choir and school plays (and speech, although that's an individual activity and doesn't quite pertain to the subject at hand). Luckily at Marshall Senior High in general, and in my class in particular, the typical "caste system" wasn't as rigid as is at other schools, or at least as it is at the schools on TV. Our marching band always marched with ten or fifteen holes in it during halftime at the football games, because the marching band always had ten or fifteen football players in it (the Friday night halftime show was really just a "dress rehearsal" for the big marching band competitions on Saturday afternoons, at which ten or fifteen cross country runners and/or swimmers would always arrive from a morning meet just in time to march). The homecoming king and captain of the football team was also on the speech team. Several basketball and football standouts were in the swing choir as well. The hottest cheerleader in school acted in the spring play. More of the "popular" kids were in the marching band than weren't. Geek that I was, during my senior year I sang in a just-for-shits-and-giggles, four-person *a capella* group that consisted of me, the quarterback of the football team, the football team's tailback, and our school's biggest basketball star (well, maybe second-biggest. Arguably).

And I loved it; loved performing for a full grandstand at the marching band competitions, liked singing in the swing choir (and loved the occasional days off from school it afforded me), *loved* being in the plays, and dearly loved the people with whom I was able to engage in all of these activities. Other than with my wife and kids, which isn't really in the same category, I don't know if I've ever been happier than when I was watching my friend Garrick make his "applause, people!" gesture to the crowd after finishing his trumpet solo, or while hearing an auditorium full of people laugh uproariously as Aaron, Emily, Rick and I did a scene from "The Nerd," or when I was joking around with Tiffany and Luke in the back of the bus on the way home from a choir performance. Which brings us to this TV show...

"Glee" is about, in part, a man roughly my age, a man who had roughly my high school experience, and who has found adult life to be roughly as much of a relative letdown as I have (with the exception of satisfaction in marriage and family, which I've found and "Glee's" protagonist hasn't quite). This man gets a chance to recapture the sort of passion he felt back then, the sort of natural high that came from working with a close-knit group to achieve something special.

Yes, it's safe to say that the show's concept resonated with me immediately.

The basics: high school Spanish teacher Will Schuester (Matthew Morrison) takes over the glee club at Lima, Ohio's McKinley High School, his alma mater, in hopes of returning

POOP READING

it to its former glory (and glorious it was; he himself was a member of the 1993 choir that took home the national championship under the direction of the late, legendary Lillian Adler, whose picture adorns a plaque in the school trophy case along with the quotation, "By its very definition, Glee is about opening yourself up to joy").

Now, though, Ms. Adler is 12 years deceased, and the sad-sack glee club consists only of five members (one of whom, as the school's principal points out, "is a cripple!"). Is there any hope? Well, maybe; at the behest of glee club star Rachel Berry (Lea Michele; more on her later), Mr. Schuester recruits (well, blackmails) a male counterpart in the person of Finn Hudson (Cory Monteith), the school quarterback. He's a tall drink of water with an inherent distaste for jock culture and a long-dormant love of music that needs only a Journey song to trigger it. Of course, since it's not the mid-'90s and this is not Marshall Senior High School, Finn's decision to play quarterback *and* sing in the glee club is bound to upset the natural order of things. I could go on recapping the plot, but at some point you're going to have to watch it for yourself. That shouldn't be too hard; apparently the pilot episode will be available online all summer long.

Now, to our female lead. I'm not quite sure that network TV has ever seen anything like Lea Michele as Rachel Berry; bursting with talent – and depending on what sort of top she's wearing, occasionally just bursting – Michele is a real-life seasoned Broadway vet at only 22 years old (yes, I Googled her. So sue me), and she inhabits a character who might become one of the more memorable in recent television history.

Rachel has been working hard all her life (she tells her glee club mates that she won her first dance competition when she was three months old, and seems to sincerely believe it), and as of yet sees no payoff for all of her tribulations ("Everybody hates me," she tells Mr. Schuester). The character could have come off like a generic Costco knockoff of Reese Witherspoon's Tracy Flick from 1999's *Election*, but she doesn't; Lea Michele plays Rachel with an earnest desperation so heartfelt that it's impossible not to hope she succeeds. When she tells Finn that he's really talented, "and I should know, I'm really talented too," you don't want to smack her*, you want to give her a hug and tell her that it's okay, Rachel, you can let up a little. She lets us know that she tries to post on the internet at least one video per day of her singing, determined to carry on despite the cruel online comments with which the school's cheerleaders invariably respond. Better to be known and hated than to be anonymous, after all.

Basically, it's like this: imagine if Lisa Simpson was in high school, looked a little like the actress from *Slumdog Millionaire* but with a sexier body, and was as good at

musical performance as LeBron James is at basketball. That'll give you some idea what we're dealing with when it comes to Lea Michele as Rachel Berry. I'm still not sure I've processed what I saw from her in the first episode, to be honest. I don't know whether people are going to be able to handle her; she might break the internet.

Also, this is probably a good time to mention that I'm very much in love with my extremely sweet and beautiful wife.

*I mean metaphorically smack her; I would never so casually refer to physically smacking even a fictional woman.

So we've got all this, and if that weren't enough, we've got musical numbers. Oh, but we've got musical numbers. And if you like musical numbers even half as much as I do, then you won't even come close to being able to contain yourself when you watch "Glee." The show is not actually a musical, mind you; characters don't break into song, accompanied by an unseen backing orchestra. Rather, the musical numbers happen naturally, as they would be expected to occur on a show about a glee club. For instance, on a field trip to see a "rival" show choir in action, our intrepid heroes witness a balls-out performance of Amy Winehouse's "Rehab" that leaves them literally slack-jawed.

Then, the premiere episode concludes with a rapturous version of Journey's "Don't Stop Believing," the use of which is by now unambiguously cheesy... but I think that may have even been the point. Toward the end of the show Finn, the quarterback, is asking back into the group after having quit, and he tells his fellow glee club members, "I used to think that this was like the lamest thing on earth, and... maybe it is. But we're all here for the same reason. Because we want to be good at something."

For those of us who haven't had that feeling in a while, or who have never had it at all, "Glee" offers us a chance at least to experience it vicariously through this glorious television show, and that, *mis amigos*, is better than nothing. Much better, in fact.
