

Brandon's Top Ten TV Shows of the 2008-09 Season

by Brandon Kruse

Welcome to this, the second entry in our Top Ten TV Shows from 2008-09 series, guaranteed to highlight the best that TV has to offer right now, except for when we bitterly disagree. As was previously established, here are the ground rules:

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.

As an added bonus (because I obviously care more about you, the reader, than the disreputable band of drunken hobos that are my fellow PoopReading.com contributors), I will also give you what I thought was each show's best episode from this period (essentially September 2008 through August 2009). Unfortunately, since several of these shows are serialized, I can't necessarily offer up these best episodes as a sampling recommendation; but if you were to try the show out, I guess what I'm saying is don't make your final judgement until you've at least watched that particular episode.

So let us revel in the ability to parse and rank favorite things, which is what separates us from the animals (and Nicolas Cage):

10. *South Park*

I can't imagine ever doing a Top TV list and not including *South Park*. As I said last year, it's a lot more hit and miss these days, but the comedic voice of Trey Parker and Matt Stone remains blessedly unique. Still, this was probably their weakest season. Most of the episodes these days tend to be good, not great; watchable, but not memorable. They're not quite living up to the standard set by *The Simpsons*, who were still in the midst of a pretty strong Season 9 by the time they hit 188 episodes, which is where *South Park* is right now.

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: "Pinewood Derby." I love Randy Marsh. He has become my favorite character on the show, so if you put him front and center, mix in the usual plot that takes a hilarious turn to the bizarre and plenty of genre parodies, I'm happy.

9. *Eastbound and Down*

Let's see... I'm a fan of baseball, comedy, and Will Ferrell & Adam McKay, so an HBO comedy about a washed-up baseball pitcher executive-produced by Ferrell & McKay (with an acting appearance by Ferrell and an episode directed

by McKay) was pretty much a shoo-in to make this list. It didn't quite live up to my admittedly high expectations, which is why it's ninth, but it did deliver solid laughs every week. And if you ever get your hands on a copy of the DVD, the outtakes are a must, if only for a series of loosely improvised Ferrell takes that build to the sort of inspired comic lunacy he does best. (They didn't make the final cut because no one could keep a straight face.)

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: "Chapter 5," which had Ferrell, a terrific guest appearance by Craig Robinson, and an outlandishly brilliant ending. Plus, the best use of the Kenny Rogers song "Love Will Turn You Around" EVER. (Of course, the only real competition for that title is the 1982 Kenny Rogers acting vehicle [yes, you read that right] *Six Pack*, which I thought was pretty awesome when I was 11, but I recently caught it on cable as an adult and found it to be atrocious. Take that, 11-year-old self's beliefs!)

8. *The Late Show with David Letterman*

Fellow PoopReading.com contributor (and yes, drunken hobo) Mike Wagner, in a moment of inspiration (possibly while high), once coined the wonderful phrase "Dave is my TV friend." Dave is my TV friend, and all these years later, I still enjoy spending time in his company. Fun Facts is always a great bit, and his recurring remote segments with San Francisco 49ers coach Mike Singletary were hilarious. And his post-monologue chats with Paul Shaffer and the studio and home audiences have become one of my favorite parts of the show, just Letterman working a little off the cuff and being himself.

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: Dave's interview with a mumbly, disinterested Joaquin Phoenix was a fascinating train wreck (unless it all turns out to be a bit) capped off by the Letterman's great line "Joaquin, I'm sorry you couldn't be here tonight," but I thought the February episode where he brought on the mother of the late comedian Bill Hicks to apologize to her for a 1993 incident where the show removed a Hicks stand-up segment from the broadcast episode because of controversial material was an example of what sets Dave apart these days. Ever since his heart bypass and the birth of his son Harry, he's not afraid to run contrary to what most people would expect from a late night talk show, nor to mix moments of seriousness in with the show's regular doses of comedy. It makes the show richer, and oftentimes riveting.

7. *Party Down*

Funny, smart, and with a cast to die for, *Party Down*, about a team of Los Angeles caterers and Hollywood wannabes, deserves a wider audience than it will ever get on Starz. Adam Scott and Lizzy Caplan do some of the best work of their esteemed careers, Jane Lynch is as dependably laugh-out-loud funny as ever (though sadly, she will not be returning for the second season), and Ryan Hansen and

Martin Starr make for a wonderful modern-day *Odd Couple*. I thought the show didn't use Ken Marino to the full extent of his abilities, but that's nitpicking, because he's terrific in this, and frankly, I shouldn't be trying to pigeonhole him as an actor. And the show's excellent use of guest casting was second only to *30 Rock* (and if you're a fan of *30 Rock*, you know that's really saying something).

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: "Taylor Stiltskin Sweet Sixteen," which featured a beautifully foul-mouthed guest appearance by the ever-reliable J.K. Simmons, was their finest and funniest half-hour. Each of the six regular cast members was given a moment to shine, not always easy to achieve in a single episode of an ensemble comedy.

6. *The Office*

Maybe I'm too hard on *The Office* sometimes. I've railed against the hourlong episodes before, and this year, I thought the whole Michael Scott Paper Company storyline was poorly-executed, and to at least some small extent, a waste of our time (not that they weren't still very funny while doing it). I'd also like to dock them for not opening up the vault and doing whatever it took to keep Amy Ryan as a permanent member of the cast, but I also have to commend them for casting her in the first place, so I guess that's a wash. I don't think the show is quite as good as it once was, but it's still the third-funniest show on TV, and I echo the sentiments of fellow PoopReading.com contributor Jameson "Hobo Whiskeytrain" Simmons that their handling of the Jim and Pam storyline continues to be exemplary. It should serve as the gold standard for all such storylines in the future.

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: And that storyline is why "Stress Relief" is my choice for last year's best episode. Seeing Jim and Pam's relationship cast against the marital troubles of Pam's parents was, in my opinion, the high point of their romantic storyline. But the episode also gave us the hilarious fake movie *Mrs. Albert Hannaday*, and the roast of Michael Scott, not to mention Dwight's fire drill antics. Just stuffed to the gills with goodness. And yes, I realize I just picked an hourlong episode as my favorite. Wild card, bitches!

(I know it's weird to quote a line from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* at the end of my review of another show, but fellow PoopReading.com contributor and hobo boxcar enthusiast Joe Mulder knows that I really had no choice.)

5. *Pushing Daisies*

Cancelled just as it was getting really, really good, and with rushed, limited closure for fans of the show. As I said last year, it was unlike anything else on TV right now, with its mix of a dark central concept (reviving the dead) with a light, whimsical tone and style, and the fact that it was canned likely means we'll never see anything like it again. For me, just another in [a long history of reasons](#) to say "Fuck you, ABC."

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: "Comfort Food," which served as a showcase for the pint-sized powerhouse that is Kristin Chenoweth. If you can watch Chenoweth, in the context of her character Olive, sing a cover of The Bangles "Eternal Flame" without being moved, then I'm not sure you're capable of being moved.

4. *Mad Men*

(I originally included the second season of *Mad Men* in my TV list from last year, but our date guidelines weren't as concrete then, so I'm relocating it here.)

I thought there were times that Season 1 of *Mad Men* was a little slow-paced and guilty of keeping a frustrating distance between you and the characters, but after seeing Season 2, it now seems like that first season was spent putting story and character foundations into place, as they were paid off beautifully this season (particularly with Don Draper, the central character). Creator Matt Weiner seems to have a well thought out vision for the show, and when it comes to serialized shows, there is no better feeling than placing your trust in a show-runner with a long-term plan.

BEST 2007-08 EPISODE: "A Night to Remember." A showcase for two of the best characters on the show, Betty and Joan, as well as two of the best actresses (January Jones and Christina Hendricks). They both deserved Emmy recognition, but of course, got none.

3. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*

Last year, I was self-deprecatingly apologetic about having *Sunny* on my list. No more. If you're not watching *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, you're missing out. Yes, it has the occasional clunker (last season's "Paddy's Pub: The Worst Bar in Philadelphia" and "The Gang Cracks the Liberty Bell" being two of them), but mostly, it's a comedic force of nature. It's a show with a enjoyably dark voice and a twitchy, offbeat energy. It features one of the funniest characters (Charlie Kelly) in the history of television comedy being performed by an actor (Charlie Day) who is simply doing thrillingly brilliant work.

I understand there are people who won't find humor in the sight of Danny DeVito rushing into the dingy flophouse apartment he shares with his illegitimate son to wolf down a can of cat food in order to help him sleep through the howling of dozens of stray cats outside his window; I just don't always understand why not. (Me, I hope the producers of the show will one day take Charlie and Frank's characters and living situation and make that its own show, because it would be fantastic.)

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: I said this back when it first aired last September, but if you watch "The Gang Solves the Gas Crisis" (complete with the recurring Charlie Day catchphrase "Wild card!") and still don't like the show, you can probably

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safely give up on it. I'm gonna say I'm about 95% sure it's the best episode they've ever done.

2. *Lost*

I said it last year, and I'll say it again: deciding on an end date for the show was the best decision they've ever made. And ABC is lucky they made this show; it's the only thing that keeps me from burning them down.

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: "The Variable." It was written as a companion piece to my favorite episode from last season, "The Constant," so it's only natural that I'd pick it. Like that episode, it expertly mixed the brain appeal of the show's core mythology with heart-tugging exploration of the emotional core of a character's storyline – in this case, Daniel Faraday, superbly portrayed by Jeremy Davies.

1. *30 Rock*

Here's what I wrote about *30 Rock* last year, still applicable today:

After two seasons, I'm going to make it official: *30 Rock* is the new *Simpsons*. Here's why... 1) It has achieved that rare mix of goofy humor and cutting satire that *The Simpsons* perfected during its glory years; 2) it has developed a cast of recurring supporting characters that now runs at least twenty deep; 3) it has mastered the art of guest casting, using the "good period" *Simpsons* model of having the majority of guest stars play a fictional character within the show's world, not the "bad period" *Simpsons* model of having the majority of guest stars play themselves; and 4) it has that same densely layered mix of verbal and visual gags, along with pop culture parodies, catchphrases and callbacks, the type of jokes that reward multiple viewings. If you were a *Simpsons* fan (I say "were" meaning prior to about Season 12 or so), there is no reason you should not be a *30 Rock* fan.

A year later, the question is no longer whether *30 Rock* is the heir to the legacy of *The Simpsons*; it's whether *30 Rock* is now funnier than *The Simpsons* was at its peak. Me, I don't know yet. But I do know that broaching the subject does not feel like blasphemy, and that in itself is a bit of an answer.

BEST 2008-09 EPISODE: Not only was "The Generalissimo" the best episode of *30 Rock* last year, it was the best episode of any 2008-09 show, period. And as Joe said yesterday, it's almost certainly one of the best episodes of any TV show ever. Those 22 Emmy nominations, the most in a single year for a comedy series? Not enough, my friend. Not enough.