

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

by Jameson Simmons

The rules regarding this list have been posted and re-posted enough that you're already familiar with them if you care about that stuff. (If you really care about that stuff, chances are you're one of the guys who've been re-posting those rules!) In short: if you were watching TV this past year, these were the best shows you saw.

Maybe you don't like these shows (that's fine; that's your own stupid fault) or maybe you like other shows. One shortcoming of a list like this is great shows I don't watch. I hear a lot of talk about *Rescue Me*, *The Shield*, *The Closer*, and *Damages*, and I'll assume those are all actual shows. It just happens I don't watch them – I hate joining shows after they've started and a man only has so much time to catch up using the giddy but laborious "Netflix marathon" method. I'm sure they're great, but I don't see how I can possibly kick one of my top ten TV shows off the list to make room for a show I've heard is really excellent. I've heard that *Inglourious Basterds* is really excellent, but I've also heard it was written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. Sometimes what you hear is dead wrong.

Here's the list, presented in "countdown" order because that seems to be the way we're doing it. (I'll spoil the big surprise: *30 Rock* is #1. It always will be, until they cancel it or lobotomize me.)

#### 10. *The Mentalist*, CBS

A fake psychic helps detectives solve crimes. For someone who loves *Psych* as much as I do (see #6), this should be a no-brainer. And it is, though the shows could scarcely be more different – in tone, in style, and in their treatment of the phony clairvoyance. In this case, Patrick Jane (played by Simon Baker, the star of a number of long-running hit shows I'd barely even heard of) is a former TV psychic, who used "cold reading" and the power of suggestion to make audiences believe he had extrasensory powers that didn't exist. Then, after making a few glib televised remarks about the wrong serial killer, he came home to find his wife and daughter murdered. So, he quit the TV game and now he's lending his perceptive skills to the detectives at the CBI (which stands for California Bureau of Investigation, no matter how much it sounds like a kids' breakfast cereal). He's there to help, but he's also there for the access to his serial killer's case file, in case he gets the chance to spend some off-duty time tracking the man who shattered his family.

The supporting cast is excellent (even the stone-faced Robin Tunney will grow on you; as Jane's boss her main job is to act frustrated whenever he goes off-book and does something absurd to achieve brilliant results), but the key to the show is Baker, who plays Jane as compassionate but aloof. He's the smartest guy in every room, so a lot of his time is spent just

amusing himself. As much as he yens to see bad guys face justice, no case the CBI works is as meaningful to him as his own pet project, so he takes a detached view of suspects, witnesses, and police procedure. He's sort of like Jack Bauer, except instead of ripping out your fingernails he'll hypnotize you or trap you with a little sleight of hand. As procedural shows go, it seems like something that will still feel fresh in a few years and will keep things interesting along the way. It was the most successful new show last season – not that it had much competition – so let's hope it will actually be around a few more years.

#### 9. *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, CBS

The last few years, I've been a pretty vocal critic of sitcoms that have a studio audience and a laugh track. It's not a flawed format, necessarily – it's just that it seems to give bad sitcom writers license to do extremely tired and predictable material. The last show to truly excel at it was *Everybody Loves Raymond*, so it should come as little surprise that *Christine*, which inherited a lot of *Raymond*'s writers, should do it fairly well also. And I suppose there's a part of me that enjoys seeing Julia Louis-Dreyfus anchoring a solid comedy, with an Emmy to show for it. You often hear about the "Friends curse" or the "Seinfeld curse" – and it's true that it's hard to engage an audience with a new character after inhabiting a well-known favorite on a long-running series – but most of the challenge is overcoming the chorus of dimwitted entertainment writers chanting about the curse in the first place!

Supported ably by Hamish Linklater, Wanda Sykes, and the irresistible Clark Gregg, Louis-Dreyfus has crafted Christine into a thoroughly funny character: opinionated, ignorant, vain, selfish, needy... but lovable as hell. The show is at its best when it's discovering the humor at the center of normal, relatable situations, which is most of the time. (This particular season happened to begin and end with weddings – an unusually trite choice – but the second wedding was Christine's ex-husband [Gregg] marrying his much younger girlfriend, "New Christine," which made for some excellent laughs.) There are shows on this list that appeal more directly to my style or sense of humor – even shows **not** on this list, like the wonderful *How I Met Your Mother* – but, in terms of out-loud laughs this season, *Christine* topped them all.

#### 8. *Life*, NBC

I guess I'm supposed to hate the 2007 WGA strike – I mean, even WGA friends of mine thought it was a stupid waste of time – but I kind of liked it at the time, because people were standing up against absolutely unreasonable greed, and something felt good about that. But I still hate it for one thing: it ruined the chances for *Life* to find an audience, when it could have been a brilliant, long-running series, and one of the best new shows of the decade. The strike cut *Life*'s first season in half, which made it difficult to bring viewers back after a nine-month hiatus. (Only *Heroes* has survived that

fate – and barely.) When it returned, Robin Weigert was gone and Donal Logue was in her place. Unless we're talking tug-of-war anchor, that's *never* a good trade. Gone as well was the fetching Brooke Langton, taking with her a viable and enticing romantic subplot that could've boiled just below the surface for years. And the producers, forced to write a finale halfway through their first season – with the possibility it just might be a *series* finale at that – had to tack on a hasty resolution to the season-long arc behind Charlie's wrongful imprisonment, which left them scrambling in season two to open that story back up to new mystery.

So, boo, striking writers – because this was a truly beautiful show. Damian Lewis was pitch-perfect as Charlie Crews, whose incarceration left him a changed man in many unexpected ways, and whose settlement-derived promotion to detective rubbed a lot of real detectives the wrong way. The chemistry was magical between Lewis and Sarah Shahi, as his spicy partner Dani Reese, who often barely tolerated him. (Not that it is difficult to create magical chemistry with Shahi in the room.) It was a procedural show without all the tired clichés that make many procedural shows dull and predictable. Each week's case was something unique, unlike anything you've seen before, and the intrigue as Charlie delved into his own case was complex and fascinating – pulling in suspects from all over the world of the show. You never quite knew what to believe. Then things got really interesting when the conspiracy took Reese away from Crews, and I don't even know how it turned out because I *still* have the last episode on TiVo, so desperate am I to prolong the show's life just a little longer. As numbskulled cancellations go, this one is up there with *Veronica Mars* – I mean *Futurama* and *Arrested Development* hurt a lot, but at least they had a chance to realize a good bit of their potential. *Life* had a lot more to show us.

### 7. *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central

The *Report* is up two spots from last year! Sure, there are easy explanations for that – *CSI* lost Bill Petersen and *Mad Men* very nearly lost me – but it's also because Stephen Colbert just keeps getting better and better. His character has become so richly textured over time, you forget he was originally created to make fun of Bill O'Reilly. In his interviews (especially the brilliant "Better Know A District" series of Congressional profiles), he pulls off the Borat schtick without the mean-spirited "gotcha" aspect or the exploitative undertones, and somehow it still comes out even funnier. He and his Colbert Nation of devoted viewers have brought Wikipedia to its knees, run rings around NASA, and managed to get all sorts of things named after him, from a species of spider to an ice cream flavor to a mid-range youth hockey mascot (Steagle Colbeagle the Eagle – go fightin' Saginaw Spirit!). Get your news from Jon Stewart (along with a disarmingly frequent occurrence of "taint" jokes); get your laughs from Stephen Colbert.

### 6. *Psych*, USA

This show simply should not be as satisfying as it is. The oh-so-quippy antics of fake psychic Shawn Spencer (James Roday) should become grating. The ever-convenient solutions to each week's mystery should set my eyes rolling. I should get tired of having to look at Corbin Bernsen every week. But it just. Doesn't. Happen. Somehow, *Psych* just keeps on walking that razor's edge between silly and stupid, with slick pacing and no '80s movie reference left unturned. Last season they also brought in Alan Ruck, Steven Weber, Christopher McDonald, Jane Lynch, Gary Cole as a tough-edged hostage negotiator, and Rachael Leigh Cook as Shawn's high school love interest, who has stuck around as his girlfriend (and has evidently not aged a single perky nanosecond since *She's All That*). This show isn't screwing around, people. And I haven't even mentioned my giant man-crush on Dulé Hill, whom I'd thought was dead to me forever after he broke my heart beating James Woods on *Celebrity Poker Showdown*. But I've gushed about him every other time this show made the list (like *30 Rock* and *The Colbert Report*, it's made this list every year it's been around) – so go read those and leave me with a little dignity.

### 5. *The Office*, NBC

Hard to find much new to say about *The Office*, except that about half the stuff I'd have sworn took place a year ago actually happened this past season – I think that means they're packing a lot in. As has been mentioned, Amy Ryan was unbelievably spectacular as Holly, Michael's short-term girlfriend – who just happened to be the replacement for Toby, his longtime nemesis. The awkward chemistry between Carell and Ryan was almost too uncomfortable to watch, but heartwarming at the same time because Michael Scott had finally found someone who could appreciate him on his level. (Having gone through the same thing myself this year, I can say it's pretty remarkable.) Brandon turns up his nose at the brief interlude where Michael leaves Dunder Mifflin and, in a moment of *Jerry Maguire*-inspired lunacy, Pam goes with him. But I liked it, because I love the episodes where Michael turns out to be actually somewhat decent at what he does – in his own way. When Dwight steals Michael's client roster, the list does him precious little good, because all of the information on it is encoded in Michael's bizarre system, causing Dwight to look like an idiot. Even the edge-of-your-seat buyout negotiations between Dunder Mifflin and the Michael Scott Paper Company (the latter teetering on the edge of insolvency) were great, because Michael managed to stop just short of ruining everything with his ignorance and overexcitement. That's the essence of Michael Scott to me, so how could the show go wrong exploring that?

### 4. *House*, Fox

According to Joe, people are apparently cooling on *House*? Who are these people, and where do they park their cars, because I've got a carton of eggs with their name on them! I can't for the life of me remember why, but for some reason I

watched the season finale of *House* the year before last, after barely having noticed the show's existence for the previous four years. I was hooked instantly, and found out only later that the show had undergone a drastic retooling that year, so I actually wasn't as far behind as I thought I was. With no time for a Netflix marathon, I've filled in the backstory gaps with a few Wikipedia pages, and in no time I was feeling pretty settled in. A lot of the character arcs this season seemed to focus on soap opera plots: death, suicide, terminal disease, workplace romance – but somehow on *House* it doesn't wear thin the way it does on *ER* or *Grey's Anatomy*. (It's still hard to believe Lisa Edelstein as a love interest, considering I would love to see her ground into hamburger meat and fed to starving children, but that's no fault of the show's. She just grates on me.) Obviously the linchpin is Hugh Laurie, who is just excellent as the sarcastic, misanthropic title character, with a penchant for tampering in his employees' personal lives. Last season he gained a new friend in private detective Lucas Douglas, whom he hired to spy on all his team members because he's obsessed with knowing everything. (And who's played by Michael Weston which threw me for a loop because I watch *Burn Notice* and its main character is named Michael Westen – then Weston showed up for a guest spot on *Burn Notice* later that year and I threw up on my TiVo.)

I still can't imagine people are cooling on this show. With all the twists and turns of the past season, it sure feels vibrant and exciting to me. I've heard a little about the start of season six and I can't wait.

### 3. *Party Down*, Starz

Among this show's creators are Rob Thomas (*Veronica Mars*, *Cupid* – let's focus on the good version, the Jeremy Piven one) and Paul Rudd (my personal Tiger Beat heartthrob), and among its stars are Ken Marino and Jane Lynch. This was so enticing I nearly signed my life over to DirecTV to get Starz, a channel no sane person actually needs. (Dennis Hopper in the TV version of 2005 Oscar thief *Crash*? No and no!) Fortunately, a few months later, DirecTV offered my mom three free months of Starz, so we caught up on 90% of the *Party Down* season in repeats. It has a lot of things going for it: very funny writing; a stellar cast deployed magnificently; a format which allows for a whole new world each week, as it follows a catering company to new jobs every episode. But really what won me over was Jane Lynch. I've loved her since she captured all our hearts in Christopher Guest's *Best in Show*, and lately she's only been getting better – still, on *Party Down* she revealed a whole new set of skills. Everyone on the catering staff is a Hollywood wannabe, with the exception of Ken Marino's character, Ron, whose dream is to open a SoupR' Crackers franchise, and Lynch's character, Constance, who's a Hollywood has-been. Not a bitter, disgruntled has-been though – she just loves reminiscing about all her crazy dalliances and coke parties. She's impulsive, wacky, and sometimes delusional, but the best part is her bizarre and misguided mothering instinct toward

aspiring actor Kyle (Ryan Hansen, turning in way better work than he did on *Veronica Mars*). It takes a character like Constance to open up a new side of Lynch, and kills me she won't be back for season two, because she's stuck playing another version of a character she's done to death already – the crazy cheerleading coach on Fox's *Glee* (yet another reason to be disappointed with that show). Lynch actually had to depart *Party Down* before the end of the season, and the producers brought in Jennifer Coolidge to play yet another incarnation of the only character she ever does. But it was riotously funny, which just proves how masterful the writing on *Party Down* is.

### 2. *Dexter*, Showtime

Probably the best dramatic series television has ever created, *Dexter* manages to tackle so many different issues and still somehow keep you rooting for a guy who is vicious and prolific serial killer. Joe made a point last year about the show offering a vicarious thrill, and in fact this past season involved a character who became a fan of Dexter's for this very reason – at one time or another, all of us have been so angry we've wanted to kill someone and watch them beg for mercy. (Try getting customer service from my bank!) Most of us think of murder only as an abstraction ("Oh, I could just *kill* that guy!"); faced with the actual act, we'd be incapable of executing someone. But with the gleam in Dexter's eye, we can share in that feeling of justice being done, safe in the knowledge that we didn't have to get our hands dirty (or leave incriminating fingerprints anywhere).

That thrill isn't all *Dexter* offers, of course – that would be pretty sick. His situation also offers a way to examine familiar issues with insanely exaggerated stakes. When Dexter has a fallout with an acquaintance, it's not like you or me, where we "unfriend" them on Facebook and call it a day – it can literally be a life-and-death situation. When a secret comes out at home, it doesn't mean a night on the couch – it could destroy his entire family. So, every twist and turn brings with it a critical decision for Dexter's survival. As much as we love him – and I do – watching him squirm is somehow the best part of the show. (It drove me crazy at the start of season two, but I've learned that it's usually a long, slow setup for a very satisfying conclusion, so now I just strap in for the ride.) He's the kind of serial killer who gets away with it, so obviously he's ridiculously intelligent, and it's great to watch him get himself out of each new scrape.

Over the course of the series, *Dexter* insists through narration that he's not really human – that he's incapable of feeling human emotion. But slowly, last season in particular, he's been realizing there's humanity in him after all. During the season, he plans his wedding to his adorable girlfriend Rita, whom he's come to realize he cares for very deeply. At first, he was acting like a boyfriend to keep up appearances, but now the connection is deeper than that. It's like a part of him was still stuck in selfish childhood, and we've watched that part grow up. There's also his sister Debra, who is probably

the best part of the show. Dexter was adopted, and Debra's biological dad spent more time with Dexter than with her, so she's always felt a distance in their relationship, which isn't helped by Dexter's secretiveness. But he's fiercely protective of her, and each is the only person the other can truly depend on, so it's a fascinating relationship made even more poignant by the fact that Dexter can't reveal to her who he really is.

There's a lot more I wish I could get into, but I'm still writing about *Dexter* as spoiler-free as I can, because I know you will want to catch up on it one day and the best part of *Dexter* is its surprises. (No, not like *Lost* – actual, motivated surprises that make sense in the story and not as part of a TV gimmick.)

### 1. *30 Rock*, NBC

A third year of resounding praise from the TV Top Ten list and what looks to be a third consecutive Best Comedy Series Emmy (how can it lose, considering it's nominated multiple times in nearly every comedy category?). *30 Rock* is doing everything right – for proof, consider that the Steve Martin episode (in which Steve Martin is *brilliant*, by the way) is probably the third- or fourth-funniest episode of the season. As has been stated earlier by my compatriots, the "Generalissimo" episode is among the most wondrous of mankind's creations – in fact the entire Dr. Andrew Baird story arc was magnificent, with Jon Hamm revealing a gift for comic performance not seen in such a handsome and acclaimed dramatic actor since... well, Alec Baldwin. If anything, I could live with a little less Jenna Maroney – when she wasn't channeling Jackie Jormp-Jomp or Jaime Jimplan, her stories tended to drag a bit this year. But the start of the season had me worried that the show would get lost under its pile of superstar guest appearances, and the episodes proved that not only were my anxieties unfounded, but I was a filthy, treasonous coward for ever having doubts. So, bravo *30 Rock*, for taking a show that seemed perfect in its first two seasons and making it even better – it's a shame there's not a higher slot than #1, or I'd put you there.

(Honorable mention to two shows that really can't merit a spot on anyone's Top Ten TV list, but, in terms of how deliriously happy I am watching them, would come in around #3 if they could: ABC's *Wipeout* and *The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* on the Cartoon Network. Watch those shows!)

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