

Joe's Top Ten TV Shows of the 2009-2010 Season

by Joe Mulder

10. "Chuck" "Chuck" could easily be fluff. Entertaining, worthwhile fluff, but fluff nonetheless. The show's concept – world's tallest and most handsome underachieving computer nerd unwittingly uploads top secret government information into his brain via a mysterious e-mail and then uses said information to help a hot chick and a badass guy stop international super-criminals and fight terrorism – could certainly lead to nothing but over-the-top plotlines peppered with aren't-we-clever dialogue, and while there's nothing much wrong with any of that, it might start to feel a bit empty after a while. "Chuck," however, continues to treat its characters' emotions and relationships completely seriously, even amidst all the silliness.

Chuck and his older sister Ellie, by way of just one example, are very close, as neither of their parents are around (or *are they?*... it's a spy show, after all). Chuck has to keep his increasingly elaborate covert missions from Ellie, and Ellie naturally wonders what Chuck is up to these days, and why he can't be counted on to show up when and where he says he will. And of course Chuck's adventures often butt up against his personal life, so he often has to save the world, keep Ellie out of danger *and* make sure she doesn't find out about his secret occupation, all at the same time.

While the storylines on "Chuck" may be fantastical, though, the underlying emotions hit closer to home. Most of us are unlikely to have diffused a bomb with 00:01 left on the blinking red LED timer, or to have gone toe-to-toe with "Stone Cold" Steve Austin in the cargo hold of a commercial airliner (and more's the pity, really), but far more of us have probably experienced something like the uncertainty of whether to share a painful secret with a family member, or the frustration of sensing troubling changes in the behavior and temperament of a loved one, only to have offers of counsel and assistance rebuffed when we try to get involved.

"Chuck," in short, places its characters in fun, silly plotlines and then takes their reactions seriously. The show really cares about them, and they really care about each other.

And so, in turn, do we.

9. "30 Rock" "30 Rock" definitely had its moments this season. I don't want to make it sound like it didn't.

I loved Michael Sheen as Liz Lemon's not-soul-mate, Wesley Snipes (which, as he himself points out, sounds *much* more like the name of a pasty British man than that of an ass-kicking African-American action star). We see enough of "guy who's sexy, and way more so because he's British" in American TV and film; I suspect that "guy who's annoying, and way more so because he's British" is sorely under-represented.

I loved Cheyenne Jackson as new "TGS" cast member Danny; for my money, he gave what had to be one of this year's top ten portrayals of a straight Canadian by a gay American on prime time network TV.

As a father of two small children, I *loved* Tracy Jordan explaining his suspicious biweekly credit card charges at a ritzy Manhattan hotel: "Do you know why I get a hotel room? To poop in peace! No kids banging on the door, no phones ringing. It's *my* time!"

There is some cause for concern, though. This season also featured Alec Baldwin's Jack Donaghy talking to a peacock that seemed to house the reincarnated soul of his corporate mentor Don Geiss; it's not easy to come back from something like that. But if any show can, I'm sure it's "30 Rock."

I don't want to say too much more, though, because I wouldn't want Tina Fey to rip me a new one during an awards show acceptance speech. Although with the way "30 Rock" is going, there might not be any more acceptance speeches in that show's future.

[Burn!]

[Seriously, though, don't tell Tina Fey I said that. I'm a big fan and I wouldn't want her to turn on me]

8. "Louie" "Louie" might not be for everybody. It's for fans of comedian Louis C.K., that's for damn sure. Louie C.K. seems to have as much control over "Louie" as anybody has ever had over one scripted television show; he writes, directs, stars in and edits each episode, and if you think that sounds like it would produce a show about a guy whose head is so far up his own ass he could lick his rib cage, then you're absolutely right.

The show hinges, then, on whether one finds Louis C.K. (playing a barely fictionalized version of himself) interesting or watchable. Many do. I sure as hell do. He plays a sort of Everyman, and I suppose the viewer has to find something in him to identify with if the viewer is going to enjoy the show. It's hard for me to say for sure, though, because other than the divorced part, the has a couple dollars in the bank part, the sailing past middle age part, and the living in New York part, Louis C.K. is pretty much playing me. And that's why the show works, I'd imagine; it's probably pretty easy for just about anyone to watch "Louie" and think, "Hey, other than [four or five specific things], he's pretty much me!"

One more thing that distinguishes "Louie" from other shows on TV (besides being better than all but seven of them) is that it skirts the occasionally annoying conventions of the format by generally ignoring them. Some episodes contain two or even three quick vignettes (the television equivalent of a short blog post, one might say), some episodes contain one storyline that runs throughout. It's almost as if "Louie" is

Louis C.K.'s own version of something like "Hogan Knows Best" or "Denise Richards: It's Complicated," only not a reality show. The segments are actually more "essays" than storylines; one might even say that the closest thing in the broader popular culture to a season of "Louie" is not any other TV show or movie, but rather a David Sedaris book. If that makes any sense.

"Louie" is a bit hard to explain (and a bit hard to get used to at first, but it doesn't take long), but it's refreshingly different, the first instance I can recall of one person using the scripted television format to give us his take on all aspects of his own life.

It's a half-hour of navel gazing, to be sure, and yes, other people's navel gazing is exceedingly dull. So it tennis, though, but an all-time great like Rafael Nadal can still thrill you. And Louie C.K., if I may be the first person in history to say so, is the Rafael Nadal of navel gazing.

In that it's usually boring, but he makes it awesome.

Like I said, it's a hard show to explain.

7. "Glee" "Glee" started out so strong that I was completely convinced it would end up being the greatest TV show of all time.

That most certainly didn't happen, but "Glee" still has Broadway-level talents doing musical numbers every week, so even if it gets bad creatively I'm still not going to stop watching it.

What keeps "Glee" from true greatness is the ease with which the characters embrace and/or reject certain ideas, or certain people, on a week-to-week basis with no regard for anything but the given episode's theme. Motivations and character traits sometimes seem to change on a whim, in service to little more than the message *du jour*. It's like the opposite of what I wrote about "Chuck" a few paragraphs back; if the people responsible for "Glee" don't seem to care all that much for their characters, then it's hard for us to care that much about them.

So why did I put it all the way up at Number 7 on this list? Because! Singing and dancing! Who doesn't love singing and dancing?

Nobody I ever want to meet, that's who.

6. "Community" "Community" lands itself in the top ten mostly on the strength of a great stretch run (not that the first half of the season was anything to sneeze at) highlighted by "Modern Warfare," which was probably best single episode of any comedy series all year. I think I've watched it five times by now, which pretty much makes it this season's "Generalissimo". It seems a shame that the episode couldn't have scored an Emmy nomination for writing; that was

undoubtedly the biggest non-"Friday Night Lights"-related Emmy snub of the season (every Emmy category in which "Friday Night Lights" did not receive all of the nominations could in fact be considered an egregious snub. Not to tip my hand as far as the Number 1 spot on this list goes, or anything...).

Despite the fact that I happen to adore my relatives I've always been attracted to stories about outcasts who come together to form their own makeshift "families;" that's probably why I've always been so devoted to much of Joss Whedon's work (found families are something of a constant theme of his). And "Community" is, in spirit if not always in tone, just such a story. Joel McHale plays Jeff Winger, a slick, charismatic lawyer whose law degree turned out not to be quite so genuine. Driven back to the world of community college, he almost immediately pretends to run a study group for his Spanish class as an excuse to hang out with cute blonde Britta (Gillian Jacobs). When an amusingly odd and racially diverse cross section of students catch wind of the meeting, though, Jeff's pretend study group becomes an actual one and *voila*, there's your TV show. The group is the core of "Community," and it is expertly conceived and cast; every member of the family offers something, and gets from the group what he or she needs in return. And what an ensemble it is; I'd go on and on about them all, but I could never describe them better – or more hilariously – than Chevy Chase's Pierce does, and in the season finale no less: "You, me, and Jeff, and Rain Man, and big boobs, and medium boobs, and black boobs... we're a family."

And they are, God bless them.

Plus, the "Modern Warfare" episode is the absolute balls.

5. "Modern Family" We may be entering the best Top 5 Shows of a TV Season ever, just so you guys know that. Thank God I don't watch "Mad Men" or "True Blood" or "Eastbound and Down," or I don't know how on earth I could have kept this list to ten entries.

"Modern Family" recently dethroned "30 Rock" as the Outstanding Comedy Series Emmy winner, and deservedly so. It boasted as good a debut season as any show since, well, probably "30 Rock," introducing a quirky cast of characters but almost obstinately refusing to exploit those quirks for cheap humor.

One of the show's three core families, for instance, is made up of gay couple Mitchell and Cameron and their adopted daughter Lilly. It would be easy for the show to trot out stories Mitchell's dad Jay (Ed O'Neill, in a second and far more defensible turn as sitcom paterfamilias) being the gruff man's man who learns valuable lessons from his saintly gay progeny, but "Modern Family" doesn't play it that safe. Mitchell is his father's son, and as such can be a bit of a pill sometimes. It's not his "fault" he's gay, obviously, but neither is it Jay's fault that Mitchell isn't the son he imagined he'd

have. At one point Mitchell laments to Cameron that his father wasn't always so great with the male bonding when Mitchell was a kid, mentioning that, among other things, they "never went to sports games together." Cameron, who played college football, replies, "maybe because you called them 'sports games.'"

"Modern Family" also features the old "doofy husband" sitcom trope, in the person of Ty Burrell's Phil Dunphy. But here, too, the show surprises and delights as it consistently allows Phil to be right, to be good at things, and to be depicted as a wonderful dad and husband. It's all too easy to joke about how wives are steadfast and resourceful while husbands are clueless dopes (see: any movie, TV show or commercial made in the last 40 years), but once again "Modern Family" won't take the coward's way out. Phil's wife Claire (Julie Bowen, finally landing on a show that'll stick around a while, and good God she deserves it) can't figure out how to run all of the gadgets in the family's home entertainment center (TV, BluRay, DVR, etc.) through the new universal remote. The minute it starts to seem like it might turn into an "oh, those meathead guys and their silly toys" routine, though, Phil vows to show her how easy it really is by teaching their dumbest child to use the system. And he does!

Those are but a few examples of what makes "Modern Family" so special. If pressed I'm sure I could think of a couple more, but let's move on to Show #4.

4. "Party Down" In my current station in life, for reasons that shouldn't be difficult to discern, I find myself particularly drawn to stories about people who are dealing with the realization that they will not become what they wanted to. I expect this theme to crop up even more in the coming years as my generation is dragged, foundering and childless, toward middle age. When you're promised "everything," after all, it's difficult to see how blessed you are to have "plenty."

(And maybe that's why "Party Down" reminded me so much of the original BBC version "The Office;" I never could quite put my finger on why those shows seemed so similar, but I bet that's it)

On "Party Down" – the second and final season of which aired on the Starz network and on Netflix earlier this year, which is why it's not your fault that you haven't heard of it – the great Adam Scott plays Henry, a former actor of fleeting success (he was the "Are We Having Fun Yet?" guy from those beer commercials everybody sort of remembers) who finally seems to have accepted the fact that he needs to get a real job. Season 1 has him coming to work for Party Down catering, and Season 2 continues the adventures of the catering crew. Each episode takes place at a different gig, allowing the series naturally and organically to introduce new settings and characters each episode. And since Henry is working a food-service job in Los Angeles, most of his

costumers and coworkers have something to do with show business, which he just kicked. It's almost like a recovering alcoholic working in a bar, which now that I think of it was the premise of another classic show – "Cheers" – to which "Party Down" also compares favorably.

And if you knew how much I adore "Cheers," you'd know I don't say that lightly.

Conventional wisdom – to the extent that conventional wisdom exists with a show that nobody really watched – seems to hold that Season 2 of "Party Down" wasn't quite as good as Season 1. I think conventional wisdom is a bit hard on Season 2, but I can see conventional wisdom's point.

Either way, do yourself a favor: get a hold of the "Party Down" DVDs and check them out. You won't be sorry. In fact, you'll be kind of pissed at the popular culture at large for not making more people aware that this show existed. I mean, it's *so* good. It's "Arrested Development" good; that level of good where you just sit there, frustrated, and think to yourself, "Who could possibly not love this? Seriously! I want to meet the son of a bitch who doesn't love this!"

3. "Breaking Bad" I'm almost tempted to revisit previous years' Top Ten TV Shows lists, just to see how they might have looked if I'd been watching "Breaking Bad" and "Friday Night Lights" all along. They'd look a little different, I know that much.

"Breaking Bad," for those who don't know, is the story of Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a high school science teacher who is diagnosed with terminal cancer. He decides, in essence, "Fuck it," and begins to cook crystal meth in the hope that he might make enough money to leave his family financially stable when he's gone.

Unsurprisingly, things get complicated. I don't want to spoil anything if you haven't seen it. You'll watch it someday. And here's why:

Near the end of Season 3, "Breaking Bad" shows us a peripheral character, at home alone in his modest apartment. He listens to some obscure Italian big band music as he waters his houseplants, and he sings along, perfectly matching the rapid staccato lyrics as he does. This isn't some TV character we were introduced to a few weeks ago and haven't seen much since; this is a man, a man who has spent a great deal of time learning, engaging, following his passions and cultivating his interests. He is also – apart from the fact that he has decided to use his science education to help drug dealers cook meth – a harmless man, a blameless man.

We don't know what, if anything, is going to happen to him – but in those few seconds, as he sings along to his music and waters his plants, we're reminded once again that good people, bad people, strong people, weak people, innocent

people, evil people... they're all people. People in full. Nobody is just The Bad Guy or The Wife or The Cop or The Sidekick or The Drug Kingpin. It's not that simple. I'm sure it's not that simple in real life, and it sure as hell isn't that simple on "Breaking Bad."

2. "Dexter" Even if you don't watch "Dexter," I suppose you've heard about the ending to Season 4. If you haven't, I'm about to spoil it. Be warned. Also, the entire season is good – good enough to be Number 2 on a Top Ten list during the new Golden Age of TV, after all – but I'm just going to talk about the finale, because it was unlike anything I've ever seen, and it was the biggest storytelling gut punch I've ever received.

Dexter Morgan, the serial killer who only kills murderers, finally captures and dispatches Trinity (John Lithgow), so named because he constantly recreates his own childhood trauma by committing three similar murders, over and over. Throughout the finale episode we appear to be laying the groundwork for Season 5; as Dexter watches Trinity's confused, horrified family being escorted from their home by police he imagines his own wife, his stepchildren, and his infant son being led away after his own true nature is exposed.

Will he – can he? – be able to stop killing? If he does, will he continue to avoid getting caught? He'd seen Trinity as something of a mentor; an example of how to lead a perfect double life well into middle age. But Trinity turned out to be a disappointment, just as much of a psychopath at home as he was when he was out killing. How can Dexter avoid the same fate? Can he keep his family blissfully unaware of his true self while continuing to satisfy his "dark passenger," his innate desire to kill?

These ideas seem to be leaving us with a lot to think about in the months before Season 5 starts up. As we watch Dexter return home from dumping Trinity's body, ready to pack for his romantic getaway to the Keys, we think about how compelling it's going to be to see Dexter try, perhaps once and for all, to defeat his own urges for the good of his family...

And then he discovers his wife's naked corpse in a bathtub full of blood.

One of Trinity's signature murders.

Dexter could have killed Trinity weeks ago.

He didn't. He waited.

Season 5, it turns out, won't be about what we thought. Not at all.

1. "Friday Night Lights" There's not much to say in the way of recapping the fourth season of "Friday Night Lights."

Some new characters were introduced (many of the show's original characters having graduated high school by now), some crises arose, some football was played.

By now, you know what the show is about. If you're not watching it, I'm sure you have your reasons.

They aren't good enough.

If you only watch one TV show, it should be "Friday Night Lights."

Regardless of whether you think you'd like a show about high school football, you should watch "Friday Night Lights."

"Friday Night Lights" is the best television show ever, and it's difficult to imagine that anyone who has ever been a fan of any quality television show wouldn't at least agree that it belongs in the discussion.

I don't know what else to tell you. I don't know why, if you really like TV, you would intentionally deprive yourself of what pretty much everyone who has seen it agrees is one of the best shows ever made.

(Of course, this comes from the guy who doesn't watch "Mad Men." But still.)
