

Brandon's Top Ten TV Shows of the 2010-11 Season

by Brandon Kruse

Before we launch this weeklong blast of five different looks at the best TV from the past year, let's review the details – here are the ground rules for this particular event:

These are shows that have been airing new episodes in the last year (September 2010 through August 2011), 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 proof of that last part, I give you this – *30 Rock*, which just two seasons ago was my #1 show, did not make my list this time around, partly due to strong competition, but mostly due to what I thought was an off year. I must not have been the only one who felt that way, because by February, March, and April, the show's ratings fell to all-time lows, worse even than during their struggles in Season 1. (And sure, some of that may be the decline of TV ratings in general, but come on – *30 Rock* had 6.7 million viewers for episode 4 last season, and 3.95 million by episode 22. That can't be a coincidence.) I want so badly for it to be great again, instead of merely above average. And soon, because if Alec Baldwin is serious about this next season being his last, that's gotta be it. I simply cannot envision a way the show lives on successfully without him.

As always, as an added bonus, I am giving you, the beloved reader, my selection for each show's best episode. Or at least I'm trying to. In some cases, it wasn't easy to remember. I really should start writing these things down as they happen. (But I know I won't.)

I suppose that's the just the reality of these lists – we want them to be perfect, but they can't be. Some things get forgotten. Some shows don't get watched. These lists are written in pencil, not in ink. *Friday Night Lights* and *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad* aren't on my list because I haven't gotten around to watching them (I'm working on FNL, but my wife and I are still in Season 1), but I can see a future where, having viewed them, I look back and mentally revise these rankings.

Oh well. Just another sign of how good we have it, to be living in an age where there's so much great television that you can't possibly keep up with it all in real time. I wouldn't have it any other way.

10. *The Walking Dead*

I had never read (nor even heard of) the comic book series before the TV show launched last October, and I'm not a zombie fanatic; I tuned in simply because of the combination

of AMC's track record of greatness, a mild affinity for post-apocalyptic storytelling, and the involvement of Frank Darabont (who has held near-Lifetime Pass status ever since *The Shawshank Redemption*). I'm glad I did. It was only six episodes, and there were a few missteps, but on the whole, it was gripping and unsettling enough that, during the period when the show was on, whenever I had to take my dog out to pee for the last time before bed, I would look nervously over my shoulder, as if zombies might come lurching out of the shadows. (I think I may have also, at one point, after a particularly intense episode, asked my wife to let the dog out. I'm not proud.) I don't know if you'll consider that an endorsement, or a reason to stop reading this article.

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: "Wildfire" was my favorite, both for the agonizing situations several of the characters were put into, and for the dash of mythology that was added to the series. It made me really excited for the story directions the show might take in its second season.

9. *Eagleheart*

I've been a fan of Chris Elliott since his days on *Late Night with David Letterman*, so I enjoyed the brief run of *Get a Life* (which I really wish they would release on DVD), the lunacy of *Cabin Boy*, and was thrilled to see him get higher-profile work in *There's Something About Mary* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. But *Eagleheart* may be my favorite thing he's ever done. Apparently the *Walker, Texas Ranger* parody wasn't even originally his project, but once he was on board, they tailored it to his comedic style, and the results were mostly hilarious (there were a few episodes that disappointed a little, but even those had at least one or two good laughs). And co-stars Brett Gelman and Michael Gladis (doing an Orson Welles impersonation that is never explained) were both terrific. Best of all, the episodes are only like 11 minutes long. Who doesn't have room in their life for 11 minutes of funny?

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: "Susie's Song" was one of the most densely-packed 11 minutes of comedy all year. Deputy Susie comes down with a case of regicidophilia or, as "Doc Shades" calls it, "Lou Gehrig's other disease." I know that makes no sense to you. But honestly, it won't make THAT much more sense after you've watched, and by then, you'll have seen my favorite statue ever. Win win!

8. *Sports Show with Norm Macdonald*

We finally, after 14 years, right the wrong that Don Ohlmeyer committed against comedy and get Norm Macdonald back behind a desk doing beautifully snarky jokes about current events, and Comedy Central fucking cancels it after nine episodes. (Cue Sad Bill Cosby footage here, please.) It's incredibly disheartening, this Norm business. The man has a gift, does this one thing arguably better than anyone you wanna name, and yet he remains unappreciated in his time. He is the van Gogh of fake news

comedy.

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: Okay, this is one where it's simply too hard for me to remember a specific show, but I can tell you that every episode had multiple big laughs, and that "Garbage Time," the 60-to-90-second segment at the very end of each show where Norm would rattle off a bunch of jokes in quick succession while a timer counted down, was always a joy to watch. Come back soon, Norm.

7. *Bob's Burgers*

I have to thank fellow PoopReading contributor Jameson Simmons for turning me on to the show, which quickly won me over with its quirky comedic tone and stellar voice cast (which includes many wonderful guest voices). You know how on most shows the kids are often the weakest part? The kids on this show are the best part, and may well be the funniest kid characters on any show I've ever seen. *Bob's Burgers* only ran for a short 13-episode season, so if you track it down via Hulu or the official website or something and like it (and I'm telling you I think you'll like it!), catching up should be a pretty easy task.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: Because I jumped in late, it was the third episode I saw (while in actuality, it was the eighth episode of the season), but "Art Crawl" was just a thing of beauty, and an absolute showcase for the character of Louise and the awesome voice work of Kristen Schaal. Plus Sarah Silverman, Megan Mullally, and anuses!

6. *Rubicon*

As we already saw with *Sports Show*, I just can't seem to get through one of these yearly Best TV columns without having a show(s) I loved that got cancelled. It's incredibly frustrating. I get that not everyone wants to watch an AMC drama about national security intelligence analysts in a New York City think tank, especially when its biggest name actor is Miranda Richardson in a supporting role, but it was a really smart, well-crafted show that delved deep into the characters while also sustaining an addictive conspiracy mythology. And it featured top-notch performances from Arliss Howard and Michael Cristofer (who, after this and writing the play "The Shadow Box", probably deserves a Lifetime Pass from me). If you liked the movie *Three Days of the Condor*, you would have loved *Rubicon*.

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: If I'm Cristofer's agent, I just send the tape of "The Outsider" episode to the Emmy voters and tell him to start writing his acceptance speech. Dammit, why did this show have to get cancelled?! I was getting all geared up about being able to sort things out over the course of several seasons, and instead, I don't even get any sort of closure because AMC killed it before the writers could do anything about it! I don't even want my 13 hours back – I just want more *Rubicon*! Gah!!

5. *Modern Family*

I thought the second season was just a slight step back in quality, but only because the first season was so unimpeachably fantastic. I do worry a little about the fact that the core of the show is these fairly stereotypical characters, but the writing and acting are so good that it escalates everything above that. I'm not sure that ages well over time, as the story ideas start to get used up and they hit the 100 episode mark. But right now, this is simply an All-Star collection of creative talent bringing their A-game nearly every week.

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: "Our Children, Ourselves" is a great example of what *Modern Family* does so well. In lesser hands, the storylines of Gloria pretending Jay is senile, and Cameron and Mitchell misinterpreting a run-in with Mitchell's ex-girlfriend could be the stuff of a bad episode of "Three's Company," but here, it's executed to TV perfection.

4. *Community*

This was a breakout season for *Community* after a rookie year that, in my opinion, suffered from a few bouts of inconsistency from episode to episode. Not this time around. In its second season, *Community* found its footing and its voice, and became a weekly funhouse of experimental TV. To the point that I'm amazed no one at NBC has shut it down. (I'm looking at you, Ohlmeyer, even though you don't work there anymore – and while we're on the subject again, do you know what Donny Shithead is doing these days? He's a Professor of Television Communications at Pepperdine. I feel bad for those kids. That's a lot of money to waste.) So please throw your support behind *Community*, if only so we one day get a Magnitude spin-off. ("Pop! Pop!")

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: "Advanced Dungeons and Dragons" was good enough to get fellow PoopReading contributor Joe Mulder to declare *Community* as his new Best Show on TV, and it really was their finest half-hour (though "A Fistful of Paintballs", the Spaghetti Western parody half of their two-part season finale and paintball callback, was awfully damn good). And worth watching if for no other reason than the wordless sexual encounter involving an elf named Hector the Well-Endowed.

3. *Louie*

Here's part of what I wrote about *Louie* last year...

...a lot of the unevenness and awkward landings were due to the fact that Louis C.K. was trying something new and experimental, so even when the execution wasn't perfect, you had to credit him for the ambition to try it in the first place. Now that he has a season under his belt, I'm excited to see where he goes from here. Here's my prediction: Season 2 of *Louie* is going to blow us all away.

And if Season 2 didn't blow us all away (and I saw enough "Best Show on TV" articles to think maybe it did), it came awfully close. It became one of the most fascinating and unpredictable shows on television, and one that doesn't always need to be funny to satisfy. In fact, some of the show's most compelling moments were dramatic rather than comedic. The fact that C.K. does all this on a budget that is a tiny fraction of what most other TV shows spend is just further proof that the majority of showrunners out there are doing it wrong.

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: The summit with Dane Cook in "Oh Louie/Tickets" was mesmerizing, perfectly addressing their complicated history while being fair to both sides (I don't like Cook, and it would have been easy to just shit all over him, but this was so much better), but my vote would to go "Subway/Pamela," which featured Louie confessing his love to his friend Pamela with a impassioned speech that put just about every romantic comedy ever made to shame.

2. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

A major comeback season. And it's not that Season 7 was bad, I think it just suffered from high expectations because of the *Seinfeld* reunion, and that fitting that storyline into the show's format proved harder to pull off than anyone expected. Season 8 got everything back on track, and the energy of the show seemed more loose, giddy, and freewheeling than ever, as if Larry David was really having fun with it again. And I'll tell you what – I think getting rid of Cheryl helped. I liked Cheryl Hines well enough, but I always thought she was the weakest link on the show, and I think dropping her character after the divorce opened up a new avenue of story ideas. Plus, it allowed them to further cement the live-in relationship between Larry and Leon, and trading Cheryl for Leon is one of the best trades in the history of trades.

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: The "Palestinian Chicken" episode was one of the funniest episodes of any TV show in the last year, and one of the best episodes *Curb* has ever done. I'm not sure what more I can say than that.

1. *Parks and Recreation*

I'm still pissed that NBC's decision to air *Outsourced* in the fall and push *Parks* back to January cost us six or seven episodes at a time when the show was running on all cylinders (though it did at least result in the Season 3 premiere happening on my birthday). But perhaps all that lead time in production was what made the season so unbelievably good, like "first three seasons of *30 Rock* good" or "Seasons 4-8 of *The Simpsons* good".

Creator and showrunner Michael Schur has talked a lot over the past year about the influence that *Cheers* has had on the show, and you can see it in the affection that the characters have for one another, and in the heart and humanity the

writers infuse into the show. There aren't many sitcoms that could pull off the honest emotion that *P&R* infused into Andy and April's wedding without it turning maudlin, or killing the comedy in the rest of the episode. I love comedy more than drama (as my Top 5 makes pretty clear), but if you give me a comedy with heart and execute it with skill and precision, well, I'm yours.

BEST 2010-11 EPISODE: "Flu Season" was the high point of Season 3, quite simply the best episode of any show I saw last year. Every character got a moment to shine. There's just something about a flu epidemic that seems to bring out the best in a sitcom with a large cast, because one of my favorite *Simpsons* episodes ever ("Marge in Chains") was also built around such an outbreak. Plus, we got to see Rob Lowe imploring himself to "Stop. Pooping." Top that, *Outsourced!* (Shaking a fist at NBC and stupid Ohlmeyer. He probably had something to do with that decision as well.)
