

## Joe's Top Ten TV Shows of the 2010-2011 Season

by Joe Mulder

Here's how good TV is now: "Community" at one point this season was The Best Show on TV, a serious, real and not-made-up title that doesn't change hands often, or without considerable fanfare. It ranks #3 on my list of the Top Ten TV Shows of the year.

There's some good TV on right now, is what I'm saying.

10. "Raising Hope" (FOX) Like it's progenitor, the underrated "My Name Is Earl," "Raising Hope" is a Greg Garcia-created comedy about lower-middle class people who have absolutely nothing to do with show business. Also like "My Name Is Earl," it's pretty damn good.

The show centers around Jimmy Chance, an amiable if slightly dim early-20s man who lives with his young parents (they had Jimmy while they were in high school) and his senile great grandmother. In a scenario that's not nearly as gruesome as it sounds, Jimmy meets and almost immediately impregnates a wanted serial killer and, when she's executed a little less than a year later, he winds up in charge of their baby (whose name the family changes to the titular Hope from "Princess Beyonce").

From that truly bizarre setup comes a wonderful, heartfelt and often hilarious comedy about traditional family. Not "traditional" in the nuclear family sense, either; but in the far, far older tradition of great grandparents, grandparents, parents and children all living lives intertwined with each other the way human beings have almost always done, and still probably do almost everywhere today expect for in certain parts of the affluent West. "Raising Hope" seems to argue – not forcefully, or perhaps even consciously, but merely by example – that people might be more content if they were closer with their families. Many of the show's episodes, in fact, center around the Chance family becoming involved *other* people's romantic or familial arguments, and trying to help solve them. Sometimes not all that helpfully, but their hearts are in the right places.

It's also refreshing how the relatively bare bones, paycheck-to-paycheck existence of the show's main characters is often mined for comedy but never mocked outright. I mean, Jimmy's dad makes his living doing lawn care and his mom is a maid, for crying out loud; those are occupations that would be one-note punch lines in the background of most any other show, but on "Raising Hope" the people who do those jobs are main characters. I can handle a little cynicism if it's done well, but it's nice to watch a show once in a while that's completely devoid of it.

Also, it doesn't hurt that this is the one "adult" show that my five-year-old daughter and I really enjoy watching together. A family show in every sense.

9. "Tosh.0" (Comedy Central) I don't tend to even think of anything other than hour long dramas or half hour comedies when I do my Ten Best TV lists, but "Tosh.0" had such a great year that I couldn't help myself. And I wish there was anything more to it besides "it's really really super funny," but there isn't. The humor certainly isn't groundbreaking, not in a time when plenty of comedians are using the "racist/sexist/homophobic joke, ha ha ha, I can say that because we all know I'm not really racist/sexist/homophobic" template that seems to be Daniel Tosh's bread and butter. But I think of myself as pretty difficult to offend and I find the show extremely funny, so, there's not much I can do but put in my Top Ten.

And I'm sure that my love of the show has much to do with the fact that I couldn't be any more squarely in the "Tosh.0" demo, but there's not a lot that can be done about that. I can't exactly *not* be a 33-year-old white American guy in 2011.

And let me tell you something about 33-year-old white American guys in 2011: we freaking *love* "Tosh.0."

8. "Curb Your Enthusiasm" (HBO) This season of "C Your E," as not nearly enough people call it, seems to have been thought of as a return to form by most fans. I don't entirely agree, if only because I so enjoyed the previous "Seinfeld" reunion season. In any case, if it was a "comeback" year for the show then I'm a little surprised we're not hearing more about how this was the first season on which creator Larry David shared a "Story By" credit on each episode with former "Seinfeld" writers Alec Berg, David Mandel and Jeff Schaffer.

It's a tall order to come up with seven seasons' worth of TV episode ideas all by yourself, as Larry David apparently did until now, so if "Curb Your Enthusiasm" was reinvigorated this year then the added storytelling brainpower probably had a lot to do with it.

7. "Men of a Certain Age" (TNT) I'll miss this show. It was always good and was really starting to become great toward the end of its second season, after which it was cancelled by those bastards over at TNT who were apparently only concerned with "ratings" and "profitability" and "whether anybody was actually watching the show at all."

It's a shame. You'll either catch up with it on DVD at some point or you won't (let's face it: you probably won't) so I won't spend a lot of time going over the details of the show, but it was really starting to get beautiful little details juuuust right. In one of the final episodes, for instance, Joe (Ray Romano) makes a remark to his teenage daughter about how all she's having for breakfast is a little single-serving cup of yogurt. "That's what girls eat, dad," she tells him on her way out the door.

Meanwhile, Scott Bakula's Terry has just turned 50 and, jilted by an age-appropriate lover, he's drowning his sorrows

in the first early-20-something he could find. He has misgivings about their relationship almost immediately (there's an excellently revealing bit when he's out with her and her friends and, during bar trivia, he's the only one who knows who George McGovern was) but he keeps going along with it, mostly because that's easier than admitting to himself that he's getting not just older but *old*.

Finally, while he's at his young girlfriend's apartment meeting her parents and hearing her mom talk about how they've got to get her onto her own health insurance now that she's been out of college long enough, Terry excuses himself and goes into the kitchen. He opens up his girlfriend's fridge... and it's filled with little single-serving cups of yogurt. That doesn't even really mean anything to Bakula, but as viewers it now means a great deal to *us*.

"Men of a Certain Age" was just nailing that kind of stuff at the end; it's too bad not enough people tuned in to enjoy it.

6. "House" (FOX) "House" was only marginally better this year than it's been in the past, but it's always so damn good that it needed to be on my list. I don't really have anything constructive to add. Some people think it's not as good as it used to be; I think it's as good or better. There you have it.

5. "Parks and Recreation" (NBC) It's not the nature of human beings to regart their own lives as small and insignificant, whether those human beings live in Manhattan or Beverly Hills or Tokyo or Renville, Minnesota or a yurt on the steppes of Mongolia; I think the default setting of the human psyche is to think of your world as *the* world. That's not necessarily a good or a bad thing in and of itself; that's just how it is. And sure, every place has people who dream of leaving for another sort of life. I'm sure Pawnee, Indiana has those people too. "Parks and Recreation," though, seems to be mostly about characters who are more than happy to live and build their lives, their worlds, in the town of Pawnee.

As such, it's vital that we care about these people if we're to care about what happens on "Parks and Recreation," because the only stakes involved are their own emotions, their own fortunes. If Jack Bauer screws up on "24," the city of Valencia gets obliterated by a nuclear weapon; if Leslie Knope screws up on "Parks and Recreation," Leslie Knope is sad. We like Leslie Knope and don't want to see her sad, so her fictional character being fake sad is as devastating to us viewers as the city of Valencia being fake blown up. That's a real credit to Michael Schur, Amy Poehler, Mike Scully and the rest of the creative team behind the show, which succeeds as well as it does because our affection for the characters has been lovingly shaped and cultivated as carefully as a bonsai tree.

I expect "Parks and Recreation" only to get better, and I'd be surprised if it was ranked as low as No. 5 on my list in the next few years.

4. "Louie" (FX) Much has been made about how Louis C.K. got something of a sweetheart deal from FX: in return for barely enough money to produce episodes of "Louie," he gets full creative control and virtually no network meddling. FX drops off bags of money (one hopes it's just hundred-dollar bills banded together and stuffed into sacks with dollar signs on them), and a few weeks later he drops off a finished TV show.

This is not a model that would be easy to replicate, incidentally, if other cable networks are thinking of trying it (and it would be pretty much unthinkable for a broadcast network to attempt); Louis C.K. is widely regarded as the best standup comic in the world right now *and* he's been training himself as a filmmaker for over a decade (I recall being in college and seeing him on "Conan" showing a clip of a movie he made called *Tomorrow Night*, which the internet tells us dates back to 1998). "Louie" is sort of the perfect creative storm of talent, timing and training, and the results are like very little else we've ever seen on TV.

Each episode is sort of a short film, sometimes two. Rarely are there "plots," as such; we simply see incidents in Louie's life (he plays a very thinly fictionalized version of himself) that cause us not only to laugh but, very often, to ponder the nature of early 21st-century American existence. "Louie" is deeply thought out and deeply felt in addition to being deeply funny. It's experimental art, really, and it's an unpredictable pleasure.

So how can it only be No. 4 on my list? Well...

3. "Community" (NBC) ...Because "Community" also stretches and prods the very boundaries of what's possible to accomplish during a half hour television comedy, but they do it on network TV in prime time. So even though it's nearly impossible to say whether "Louie" is better than "Community," or vice versa, I'm putting "Community" at No. 3 due to a slight advantage in degree of difficulty.

Really, though, it's a minor miracle that the show is allowed to get away with what it's getting away with. No show has ever bent convention and genre as readily or as gleefully; it's as if anybody who ever had any idea – no matter how crazy – about what to do with a half hour of TV comedy will eventually have that idea come to fruition thanks to "Community." Some of the best examples:

An entire episode dedicated to the cast sitting around a table playing a game of "Dungeons & Dragons" in which someone's real life was essentially at stake

A clip show featuring clips from episodes that never actually existed

A fairly serious, unvarnished coming-of-age story set during one character's 21st birthday

A Claymation episode

Someone named "Professor Professorson"

A story involving a secret Zen trampoline

A re-creation/parody of/tribute to *My Dinner With Andre* that completely satisfied a) big fans of *My Dinner With Andre*, b) people who've heard of *My Dinner With Andre* but haven't seen it, and c) people who've never heard of *My Dinner With Andre*

A two-part sequel to a previous season's episode about a campus-wide paintball war that switches from being a Western to a *Star Wars* parody halfway through

"Community" isn't perfect, but when it's at its best – which is almost always – it's wildly unpredictable and incomprehensibly clever. Anybody who follows the show's creator Dan Harmon on Twitter or who has ever read or heard an interview with him knows full well how passionate he is about the show's quality, even to the detriment of his own emotional health. "Community" might be the only baby Dan Harmon will ever have, but it's a unique and beautiful offspring that I wouldn't want to live without.

2. "Breaking Bad" (AMC) It seemed like it might be hard for "Breaking Bad" to live up to the the promise of its Season 3 cliffhanger and still somehow reset the series so that everybody (well, almost everybody) would be able to get on with their lives afterwards, but they managed to do it.

Then, in Season 4, the show took its time isolating and marginalizing Bryan Cranston's high school science teacher cancer diagnosee-turned-meth cooker from his family and his colleagues just as those same colleagues found themselves embroiled in a turf war with a ruthless Mexican cartel. What that meant for Walter's colleagues, and for the cartel, we just last Sunday found out in quite possibly the most badass fashion imaginable.

What it means for Walter and his family we can only guess. "Breaking Bad" has an end date – they'll make just 16 more episodes after Season 4 is done – so we're almost to the point in the series where pretty much anything could happen at pretty much any time. It feels as though it's all been building to something, and if I were you I'd get watching if I wasn't already. Because history suggests that when "Breaking Bad" builds to something, it's most definitely worth it to stick around and see what that is.

1. "Friday Night Lights" (DirecTV/NBC) I've written a lot about "Friday Night Lights." So have other people. By those who love it, it's considered one of the best TV shows in recent memory, or possibly of the decade, or even of all time. I regard it as the best television that's ever been produced (although it's still weird to say that and not be talking about mid-90s "Simpsons"). It was art, it was literature, and we

somehow miraculously got five seasons of it even though hardly anybody ever watched.

There's not much left to say that I haven't already said, other than to say that Season 5, the show's last (and the show's most acclaimed, now that writer Jason Katims and star Kyle Chandler finally won the long-overdue Emmys that everyone else associated with the show deserved as well), was a worthy addition to the canon. More than that, even; Season 5 built on the legacy of the first four, enhancing "Friday Night Lights" status as, in my considered opinion, the best TV show ever made.

---