

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

by Jameson Simmons

I have a son on the way, and I'm convinced – and I'm reasonably certain my wife-to-be will back me up on this – that pushing him out will involve less stress and physical pain than it does for me to create this list every year. Each year, I cuss and spit and squirm, enraged at the impossibility of picking ten shows from a "season" of TV when there's no longer any such thing as a cohesive "TV season". And I refuse to start this list on the first day of the fall season and maintain it all year – that just feels like a level of homework I was really happy to be done with after the eleventh grade.

So, with apologies to any eligible shows I forgot to mention, or any ineligible shows that made the list due to confusion about schedules, here it is – my last Top Ten TV list to exclude *Yo Gabba Gabba* (whatever the hell that is):

10. *Justified*, FX

Why You're Not Watching It: It's strange, this question is a lot easier to answer for my top five shows than these early ones. I'm going to guess an exhaustion with law enforcement shows? Or maybe an unfamiliarity with the FX schedule, since there aren't that many shows on it? Whatever the reason is, it's wrong.

Why You Should Be: If the character of U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens (Timothy Olyphant) weren't enough – and it absolutely should be – then the crackling dialogue and intricate plotting ought to do it. It's hard to think of a TV drama these days that isn't toying with the idea of moral relativism on some level, but I think *Justified* is doing it best. Good guys are naughty – by choice, or by last resort – and bad guys are often more honorable than the heroes who chase them. Givens and his childhood-pal-turned-nemesis Boyd Crowder (Walton Goggins) are the best examples of this, but it runs throughout the show, and the ambiguity causes the stories to resonate long after the episodes are over. Goggins is particularly fascinating to watch, with his intensity and fundamentalist clarity sparking unpredictable results each week. Also: Natalie Zea, who has been the reason to watch many of the shows she's been on.

9. *House*, Fox

Why You're Not Watching It: Well, if it's Lisa Edelstein, I would absolutely forgive you. If I loved this show even a tiny bit less, she'd be the reason I quit watching it. I might quit watching it five times an hour. (But, if she's your reason, I've got great news for you about next season!)

Why You Should Be: Hugh Laurie. And also Robert Sean Leonard, who's got the loyalty of a labrador (and nearly twice the eyebrow expressiveness!), but consistently challenges House, too. And Olivia Wilde has really evolved

from a hatchet-faced window dressing to a strong character actor this season. But primarily Hugh Laurie and the ingenious stuff they write for him to say. He's America's favorite sociopathic misanthrope atheist, and he thinks he's smarter than everyone (which is often true) – was there ever any chance I wouldn't love this character?

8. *30 Rock*, NBC

Why You're Not Watching It: The live episode was so completely terrible that it caused you to melt down your television in disgust, which is why you're not watching *any* of these shows.

Why You Should Be: That's a valid reason, to be sure, but the pre-taped version of the show is still hilarious and unpredictable, and adroitly skips between commentary on contemporary mores, exploration of generational angst, and lament over the struggles of the creative artist. Despite a rocky patch where they wrote around Tracy Morgan for few episodes due to surgery, it was a great season – with the demise of Liz's relationship with Carol (Matt Damon) and the start of Jack's family with Avery (Elizabeth Banks), and the dawning realization that Jenna's relationship with Jenna-impersonator Paul L'Astnamé is the most stable of them all. (And, I'm sorry, I realize that *30 Rock*'s humor is increasingly rooted in its cleverness instead of its hilariousness, but I still find it awesome that that's Paul's last name – how did I only discover this now?) A reasonable argument could still be made that *30 Rock* is the funniest show on TV, and if it weren't for the sheer excellence of the half dozen comedies above it on my list, I'd be making that argument in this space.

7. *Parks and Recreation*, NBC

Why You're Not Watching It: Well, there are plenty of wrong reasons (there aren't enough actors you know on it; it's about city government; every bit of Amy Poehler's previous comedy work made you want to throw up), and a couple of forgivable ones (the first season turned you off; the show has not yet boiled Tom Haverford in oil, shot his face off, and chopped him into little pieces). But the only reason I can fathom that you're not watching *Parks and Recreation* is that you haven't tried an episode. If you do, you'll come back.

Why You Should Be: Look, I'm perfectly willing to admit that American sitcoms have forked into two styles: there are single-camera comedies with jokes that might be described as "cerebral" or "subtle" or even "too hip for the room" and there's *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory*, to which none of those terms would ever be applied. In terms of ratings, America has made its choice abundantly clear. And I suppose it makes sense: the first type of show feels like it's written primarily for the writers' satisfaction, and the second type is clearly drafted only for the audience, even if the writers have to drown their sorrows in scotch just to get through each script. (Drown their sorrows *all the way to the*

bank, I might add!) But my point is this: the writers' shows are a lot more accessible than they seem at first glance. *Parks and Recreation* has a lot more in common with *Cheers* than it does with *30 Rock*. Turns out there's a way to do writers' jokes with heart, and that feat – combined with a near-perfect ensemble cast (seriously, someone needs to detonate a nuclear device in Aziz Ansari's right eye socket) – makes for a thoroughly enjoyable show in which all the best material is based on the characters you've come to know and love (sometimes in spite of yourself).

6. *Modern Family*, ABC

Why You're Not Watching It: If there are people who aren't watching this show, I'm literally not aware of them. I mean, clearly someone must not be – I don't mean to do a Pauline Kael "Nixon couldn't possibly win" type of deal – but even the dumb fucks I'm connected to on Facebook are talking about this show. So you could put a gun to my head and tell me to give you a person's name who's not watching *Modern Family* and I'd be unable to.

Why You Should Be: In this case, the Facebook dummies are right! Somehow this show has managed to capture the family-centered heart of *Everybody Loves Raymond* and translate it to the single-camera format without any of its warmth being sapped by the rapid-fire delivery or nimble editing. I'm still kind of in awe of how they took bafflingly familiar stock characters (swishy gay guy, befuddled husband, old rich guy with trophy wife) and made them into specific, rounded people so quickly. I would put any episode of this show up against any comedy movie from last year.

5. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, HBO

Why You're Not Watching It: You find Larry David's personality cringe-inducingly grating.

Why You Should Be: Well, that's the whole fun of it, really! He and J.B. Smoove (and a rich and growing ensemble) have created exquisitely bizarre and wonderful characters, and each week mine laughs from the scrapes they land in – which are somehow simultaneously unique to their crazy lives yet also universally relatable in an instantaneous way. It's really a master class in social anxiety, and no matter who I'm watching it with, I can't get through an episode without at least once pausing the action and getting into a conversation about how agonizingly wrong people are almost all the time.

4. *Louie*, FX

Why You're Not Watching It: Louis C.K.'s sense of humor isn't necessarily for everyone. Since FX has no other comedies to speak of, you may not have known it was on (though you'd have to have avoided the Internet for the past two years).

Why You Should Be: As profane and perverse as Louis

C.K. can be, his observances are – at their core – universal truths. Even if his stand-up rubs you the wrong way (and, if so, I pity you), the rest of his show is remarkable. His deal with FX, which protects him from any meddling or notes from the network, is at times a double-edged sword. Broadcasting one man's unadulterated artistic impulses directly to the screen, you're likely to have a few missteps. But overall, it's a thrilling and revelatory ride. It's just lucky that C.K. turns out to be such an interesting guy.

3. *Bob's Burgers*, Fox

Why You're Not Watching It: Fox's animated shows have been in the doldrums lately, meaning if you even have the TV on on a Sunday, you're probably watching sports or *The Amazing Race*.

Why You Should Be: According to Fox, it was "last season's highest-rated new scripted series premiere on any network"! Obviously, the ratings system is a sham, and its results can be contorted to support just about any cockeyed claim, but someone must have been tuning in to this brilliant and wacky family comedy, because it's been renewed for next January. No animated character with Jon Benjamin's voice has ever failed to delight, and the same can frankly be said of Kristen Schaal, whose manic, bloodthirsty Louise (Bob's pre-teen daughter) steals every scene she's in (and stole my heart – right after I'd finally got it back from Schaal's portrayal of Mel in *Flight of the Conchords*!). Although Louise has an older sister and a mom, Schaal is the only female voice on the show – which is awesome, because it adds just a little more desperation to Louise's constant ploys for attention, and because John Roberts does such an amazing job voicing her mother, Linda. (No, not this John Roberts; it's this one.)

2. *Dexter*, Showtime

Why You're Not Watching It: Who has Showtime? Who wants to watch a show about a crazy serial killer guy?

Why You Should Be: It's still the pinnacle of TV excellence, and everything I said about it the last two years remains true. Really engrossing, cathartic, exciting, well-made television. Just thinking about it, I'm regretting the fact that I still haven't seen the last half of last season since my free Showtime ran out and stealing the show online became too much hassle. To iTunes I go!

1. *Community*, NBC

Why You're Not Watching It: If you're put off by single-camera writers'-jokes shows that are too hip for the room, you might be resistant to this show, which bathes itself in that material weekly, and features two lead characters who are in a constant battle to be the hippest one in the room.

Why You Should Be: Yes, this is a writers' show, and if

POOP READING

you're tired of how the clever/funny balance has tipped on *30 Rock*, you'd be forgiven for thinking this isn't your type of show. It's tremendously self-aware, with Abed making not-so-subtle references to the fact that they're in a TV show, and episodes like a fake clip show or send-ups of everything from *Apollo 13* to *The Office*. But there's a way to do clever material in a way that it doesn't compete with your show's funniness: make it goddamn perfect. Make the cleverness so good that it's beyond ha-ha funny or clever funny, it's just... well, for lack of a better term, scrumtrelescent. Where there are levels upon levels of clever funny and ha-ha funny. Where the cleverness rewards multiple viewings, and even going back to earlier episodes, because there are hidden gags and concepts woven through entire seasons. *Arrested Development* succeeded brilliantly at this. It's too soon to be sure, but *Community* may even be doing it better – because on top of all this, it's also experimenting with its own format in many different ways, most notably the Dungeons & Dragons episode. Even if NBC had aired only the D&D episode and then canceled the show, *Community* would still be last season's best show on TV.

In closing, I'm confident from all available evidence that *Friday Night Lights* had a fantastic final season, but I didn't end up watching past episode two or three. I've decided that from now on when that kind of thing happens, maybe there's a reason for it (even if that reason isn't always Zach Gilford). So, when it happens, I'm not going to stockpile episodes on TiVo as if I'll ever return to it nor make myself feel like a bad person for missing it the way I do to you people who don't watch *Psych*. Tally-ho, *Friday Night Lights* – you should've made this list.

(Also *Sports Show with Norm Macdonald* and *Eagleheart* – which, in terms of belly laughs they delivered this year, should come in right around fourth. Brandon reminded me of them after I'd already written this list, but since nobody's going to read it anyway I'm not going to spend a lot of time revising it just to restate what he's already said excellently.)
