

Mike's Top Ten TV Shows of the 2008-2009 Season

by Mike Wagner

You've read the rest, now read the best! Boom! Did I just do that? (Jersey pop!) Oh my God, I laid *into* Brandon, Jameson, and Joe! Wooooo!

Wooooo!

Ok. You know the rules better than I do. Personally, I don't care for these rules and am generally curmudgeonly about them whilst Brandon and Jameson assiduously work to make rules so fixed and stilted that poop readers in Kenya (you know, where Barack Obama wasn't born) could play along in a comparable context. Of course, now Jameson and Brandon are strenuously objecting (the only way to object) because Kenya, to the extent that there's a lot of TV watching, probably has different shows than the programs we enjoy here in the U.S. So, now, we may need to make an international version of the rules – of course, if the British version of *The Office* is airing for the first time in Myanmar, does that count or is it not eligible...or is it only eligible for Myanmarians? If so, how will we police that? Jameson? Let me know.

Also, I would've listed *Michael and Michael Have Issues* as number 10, but there was some prolonged e-discussion about whether MMHI was too new that I just couldn't bring myself to read, so I'm not sure if it was eligible and the last god damn thing I want is to get an e-mail saying that my list is invalid b/c it included *Michael and Michael Have Issues*.

Before I present the definitive list of the Best Shows on Television, here is a list of shows I have not seen: *Lost*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Dexter*, *Weeds*, *Life*, *House*, *Party Down*, *Eastbound and Down*, *Pushing Daisies*, *Top Chef*, *The Shield*, *How I Met Your Mother*. Never seen an episode of any of them. I'm sure they are great. Well, I saw *House* twice. Eh, I can live without it.

10. *Scrubs* (ABC) I enjoyed the "final" season of *Scrubs* and am intrigued by the idea of some new folks coming in and keeping things going while some old favorites stay around and keep scrubbing it up. The last season kept the funtastical whimsy of the show while allowing some of the characters to grow up a bit. I like shows that allow their characters to change, with the exception of *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* where everyone remains essentially the same year to year. There are probably other exceptions to my rule, but I have a one year old and a job so I'm not going to spend anymore time thinking about this.

9. *Pardon the Interruption* (ESPN, ESPN2, & "The Ocho") I love watching Tony Kornheiser and Michael Wilbon talk about sports and *American Idol*. This show is such a great idea, they should apply it to other professions. *Pardon the Interruption*, *D.C* with Rahm Emanuel and Newt Gingrich,

Pardon the Interruption, *Chefs* with the Iron Chef and Rick Bayless and so forth. This show is always entertaining when the two main hosts are present. Please don't fuck with the format. No Pace Picante Sauce Hot Sauce Seat, please! Just "five good minutes."

8. *Charlie Rose* (PBS) The most interesting hour of conversation on television. Even if there were lots of other hours of conversation on TV, which there aren't, it would still be the best. Charlie has politicians, journalists, sports stars, musicians, actors, directors, artists, architects, business mavens, authors, and scientists on his show. He asks great questions, provides sometimes interesting sometimes horrible premised preambles to questions, gets out of the way when the person says something interesting and interrupts when things drag. His science series is outstanding as are his takes on contemporary events (when he scraps a show and does something about what happened today, as when Ted Kennedy passed). He's also done some of the best interviews that have been done with Michael Stipe, a plus in my book because R.E.M. is awesome and because Stipe's a tough interviewee to get to commit to having a conversation rather than the things he's thought to say about the album and will repeat everywhere as a kind of social experiment.

7. *The Late Show with David Letterman* (CBS) I like what Conan is doing on *The Tonight Show*, but Dave remains my TV friend. As Brandon noted, Dave's desk chat is the best part of the show, but his interviews are becoming more like good conversations – like how I imagine *The Tonight Show* was in the 70s with Johnny. That said, Craig Ferguson's show nearly made my list as well – he is reinventing late night. Anyway, it's also fantastic when his irascible irreverence comes out to play. And, Dave is more willing now to show us that he's smart. Not just smart with jokes and comedic style, but smart, s-m-r-t! (hat tip to Homer Simpson).

6. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (Comedy Central) The interviews are really getting good, especially when they are with political folks, though Stewart is getting better at making "Unknown Author of middling book" segments better as well. He's done hero's work on Jim Cramer, Glennnnnn Beck, and other bloviating blatherers who are ruining America. To me, the correspondents aren't quite as good as in the Colbert/Carell era, but then again, they came and did a story with a colleague and co-author of mine, so they aren't all bad. The show does have some of what Seth Meyers or Tina Fey call Clap-ter, but it's because the points Stewart now tries to make are both political and funny. Pointing out hypocrisy is funny, but it can also just be exhilarating without being funny. That's still good television.

5. *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central) Dr. Stephen T. Colbert, DFA is the most talented performer on television and anyone who says otherwise is dead to me. The absolute complexity of what he does at the level of execution he

regularly achieves is much more amazing than we give him credit for. He can think like someone else, say things that someone else would say – do these things on the fly, and have us all know that not only doesn't he think those things, not only are they really funny, but they are also sometimes things that he thinks are disgusting. *And*, he can say these things to people he respects while simultaneously tweaking them a bit too. Genius. He is a genius.

4. *Big Love* (HBO) Season 3 was edge of your seat exciting. I have to know what is going to happen next. I root for everyone and I find everyone contemptible. My wife and I would press the arrow button on the DVR multiple times an episode just to see how much time was left; we'd let out audible groans as the end came near. Fabulous performances by the four main characters – and just perfect casting everywhere else. Watch *Mean Girls* and *Big Love* and tell me you aren't blown away by Amanda Seyfried's talent.

3. *The Office* (NBC) Funny as ever in different ways. Kevin spilling his chili ("The only thing I do really well") was one of the best teasers ever in the history of television. The Jim and Pam saga is played so well – you think that a conventional sit com trap is coming and they just glide past it with effortless humor. I liked the "Michael Scott Paper Company" stuff and almost wish that Michael's threat to David Wallace of just "starting another one and another one...I've got a lot of names" was played out (even in just a quick flashback). I am also really enjoying the growth and fragile/faux? truces that occasionally seem present between Dwight and Jim as well as Dwight and Andy.

2. *30 Rock* (NBC) The other boys have said everything about this show so well, there's not much for me to add. Can't wait for this year.

1. *Mad Men* (AMC) Aside from seeing my daughter (and, OK, my wife), I look forward to nothing as much as I look forward to seeing *Mad Men* each week. I really liked *The Sopranos*, but I had a little bit (just a little bit) of trouble rooting for the characters. I can simultaneously detest Don Draper and say a little prayer for Dick Whitman, find Betty a child and a victim, think Pete is immature and honestly trying to do better, hope Peggy finds love but worry about her mental state and so on. Of course, the dress, style, period references and behaviors are all great. But what makes *Mad Men* so great is the unflinching way it presents an increasingly fuller picture of each character, each situation, and each overall story arc. Everything is related, but some things more than others. People make good and bad decisions – people even sometimes prefer making bad decisions to good ones (especially when making good ones). It is very true to life, but since it is presented as a period piece, it doesn't require uncomfortable self-reflection – it actually encourages, I think, a more productive form of self-discovery because you can remove yourself from the characters foibles, peccadilloes, struggles, and triumphs enough by writing it off as the 60s, but you still have to

grapple with the undertoad (see John Irving).
