

TV Review: 'The Big Bang Theory' Opens New Season With a Whimper

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CHICAGO – If “The Big Bang Theory” is truly among the better sitcoms in prime-time, that’s saying a great deal about the current state of television comedy. I was genuinely interested in checking out this show after hearing the rapturous response from viewers and critics, and especially after seeing co-star Jim Parsons snag the Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series away from Alec Baldwin.

So I was rather shocked when I sat down to view the fourth season premiere of “The Big Bang Theory,” and found myself sitting in appalled silence for the entirety of the show’s 21 minutes. It reminded me of the phony sitcom on “Extras,” where the struggling actor played by Ricky Gervais is forced to stay imprisoned in an endless nightmare of shrill stereotypes, obnoxious catchphrases and canned laughter. In all fairness, “Theory” is reportedly shot in front of a live studio audience, but their laughter sounds suspiciously like the work of a skilled sound mixer.



Television Rating: **1.5/5.0**

Perhaps I’ve simply outgrown laugh track comedies, where disembodied chuckleheads instruct you where to laugh. I didn’t find any of the lines funny in the premiere primarily because I didn’t buy any of the characters. The show has been heralded for mastering the art of geek culture, but this particular episode makes “Revenge of the Nerds” look like “A Brief History of Time.” With the possible exception of Leonard (Johnny Galecki), none of these characters appear to be anything more than one-note caricatures. The show centers on four intellectual goofballs employed at Cal Tech, and the hot girl next door who inexplicably befriends them, probably because she got the Apatowian memo that dorky guys are, like, totally in. The girl, Penny, is played by Kaley Cuoco, who inspires great empathy as she suffers through endless awkward encounters with this league of morons. The third season followed Leonard and Penny as they developed a romantic chemistry that actually felt somewhat human. Unfortunately, tonight’s episode shoves Leonard to the wayside in favor of its overly broad ensemble, much to its detriment.



CBS's The Big Bang Theory stars Kunal Nayyar as Raj, Jim Parsons as Sheldon, Johnny Galecki as Leonard and Simon Helberg as Howard.

Photo credit: Sonja Flemming/CBS

In the opening moments of “The Robotic Manipulation,” the impenetrably aloof Sheldon (Parsons) breaks the surprising news that he intends on taking out a girl, Amy (Mayim Bialik), that he met on a dating site. This inspires his incredulous buddies to label the new couple, “Shamy,” a line that actually generates applause from the enthusiastic crowd. While Sheldon reluctantly pursues love, Howard (Simon Helberg, so uproarious in “A Serious Man”) has become obsessed with a robot whose hand movements inspire him to find more intimate jobs for it to handle. This godawful subplot leads to the umpteenth rip-off of the zipper scene in “There’s Something About Mary,” though it’s not quite as

cringe-inducing as Sheldon's alleged date with Amy, who turns out to be a tired variation on Frasier's girlfriend from "Cheers." Needless to say, Bialik is no Bebe Neuwirth, and the script forces her to make random, blunt, socially clueless observations a la Harvey Pekar, such as, "I have dry scalp." Poor Penny is dragged along to facilitate conversation between the two troglodytes, who take delight in humiliating her.



Kaley Cuoco, Jim Parsons

Photo credit: Sonja Flemming/CBS

Parsons gets the majority of screen time here, and I think that's a mistake. His character may be amusing if used sparingly, though the writers seem determined to make him their Latka Gravas, and a little bit of his shtick goes a long way. It isn't even an original shtick. It's a blatant channeling of Crispin Glover in "Back to the Future," from his bizarre body language down to his labored line delivery, occasionally punctuated by a heightened intake of breath. There is not a single line his character says that doesn't sound self-consciously hip and painfully overwritten. Though Parsons certainly has a flair for comic timing, he's stuck with a character so smug and alien that he's thoroughly insufferable.

Either this premiere is one of the worst of the new fall season, or "The Big Bang Theory" is one of the most overrated shows on television. There's nothing here that seems even remotely original. Howard even has one of those cliched mothers who's always screaming embarrassing put-downs at him from another room. The gag worked great in Scorsese's "King of Comedy," but it's gotten increasingly stale ever since. And I almost forgot to mention the character known as Raj (Kunal Nayyar), who is yet another condescending Indian stereotype on American TV. Listen to how the audience laughs after practically every line he delivers, much like how the laugh track guffawed over every oh-so-precocious remark uttered by little Bobby on "The Brady Bunch." The audience laughs as if Raj's Indian accent is funny in and of itself, especially when it's made to say ludicrous things like, "How does Aquaman poop?"

'The Big Bang Theory,' which airs on CBS, stars Jim Parsons, Johnny Galecki, Kaley Cuoco, Simon Helberg and Kunal Nayyar. The show was created by Mark Cendrowski and Peter Chakos. The fourth season premieres on Thursday, September 23, 2010 at 7PM CST.



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