TV Feature: The 10 Most Promising New Shows of Fall 2011

Submitted by BrianTT [1] on September 12, 2011 - 10:51am

- 2 Broke Girls [2]
- A Gifted Man [3]
- ABC [4]
- Brian Tallerico [5]
- CBS [6]
- Charlie's Angels [7]
- FOX [8]
- Hart of Dixie [9]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [10]
- List [11]
- NBC [12]
- New Girl [13]
- Pan Am [14]
- Person of Interest [15]
- Prime Suspect [16]
- Ringer [17]
- Television [18]
- The CW [19]
- Up All Night [20]
- Whitney [21]
- Zooey Deschanel [22]

CHICAGO – Do you want the good news or the bad news, TV fans? The good news is that the upcoming crop of new Fall programs from the five major networks (totaling 27 new shows) is not as bad as last year's incredibly-horrible debut slate. The bad news is that it's still pretty bad. There is no "Lost," no "Glee," no "Modern Family," no instant stand-outs of any kind. There are a few comedies and dramas that could develop their way on to the list of the best shows on TV, but none would make it based solely on their pilot. Even the best need some work.

So how do we judge them? How do we rank them? Honestly, the reason this Fall TV Preview is later in the season than any I've done in the decade I've been covering television is simple — it's one of the hardest seasons to rank. We've all seen comedy pilots for series that went nowhere shortly thereafter and were dimply treading water until they were canceled. We've all seen dramas that started slow and took time to find their footing. So how do we judge this crop of pilots, most of which are pretty damn mediocre? (The good news is that things will look up at mid-season with a much-more-daring crop of programs including "Awake," "Alcatraz," "The River," "Smash," and more.)

We can only go based on the key question that faces every first episode — Will you watch episode two? That's really all that matters. These are the ten shows for which we're most interested in episode two. (And come back for full-length reviews of all of these programs plus the ones for which we don't see quite as much promise — Sorry Chicagoans, "The Playboy Club" doesn't do your city justice.)



Ringer
Photo credit: The CW

10. "Hart of Dixie"/"Ringer"
Network: The CW
Premieres: September 26th at 8pm CST/September 13th at 8pm CST
Starring: Rachel Bilson, Scott Porter, Cress Williams, Wilson Bethel, Nancy Travis, and Jaime King/Sarah Michelle Gellar, Ioan Gruffudd, Kris

Polaha, Tara Summers, Nester Carbonell, and Mike Colter
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because Rachel Bilson and Sarah Michelle Gellar could turn this network around. The CW is in dire straits. “Smallville” is gone. Their staple hit in “America’s Next Top Model” is sinking fast, as are “Gossip Girl” and “90210.” They could use a water-fountain hit (other than “The Vampire Diaries), the kind of show that gets people talking, and who better to bring that to this network than a veteran like Bilson or Gellar? These two talented young ladies proved they could carry not just hits but pop culture phenomena in “The O.C.” and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” Now, of course, neither of these programs appear to be in the league of those shows based on their premieres, but they both have reason for hope. “Dixie” has a “Sweet Home Alabama” affability about it that fits Bilson’s girl-next-door personality perfectly while “Ringer” plays to Gellar’s unique skill set with elements of “Cruel Intentions” mixed with Brian De Palma oddity. For these shows to work, “Dixie” will need to get less cliched and “Ringer” needs to be more stylish (we’ll get into more detail in the individual reviews), but there’s reason to believe that at least one of these star vehicles could drive this network back in the right direction. If not, they may just want to close up shop.



Whitney
Photo credit: NBC

9. “Whitney”
Network: NBC
Premieres: September 22nd at 8:30pm CST
Starring: Whitney Cummings, Chris D’Elia, Zoe Lister-Jones, Rhea Seehorn, Maulik Pancholy, and Dan O’Brien
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because she’s pretty damn funny. Sometimes a personality doesn’t just tiptoe into the TV landscape, she busts down the door, screams a few profanities, does a little dance, and makes sure you don’t forget her name. Stand-up comedian Whitney Cummings is involved in three shows this season — starring in her own NBC series, co-creating the CBS comedy “2 Broke Girls,” and a mid-season program for her friend and collaborator Chelsea Handler. In front of the camera, Cummings proves to be a deft comedian (not all stand-ups are), carrying the show over most of its screenwriting bumps. “Most.” This program definitely still needs some work on the writing level and has a supporting cast that is going to take some time to click. Honestly, the only reason it works is because of its titular star. She won’t be able to carry a program on her own every week, but if the other elements improve around her then her dance card could stay full beyond her rocking debut year.



Person of Interest
Photo credit: CBS

8. “Person of Interest”
Network: CBS
Premieres: September 22nd at 8pm CST
Starring: Jim Caviezel, Michael Emerson, Taraji P. Henson, and Kevin Chapman
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because Ben Linus is back. God, I miss “Lost.” It feels like when all the Losties went into the neverending light, they took most of the creative network TV writing with them. Most of the dramas this season are high-concept-low-execution as if the hook is everything and it doesn’t matter that there’s nothing on it. The hook of “Person of Interest” may be the most interesting of the season and it’s not just because J.J. Abrams and Michael Emerson have reunited. The concept is devilishly clever — Emerson plays a man with advanced knowledge of a crime. He is not unlike The Adjustment Bureau in his ability to predict the future. But he can’t intercede. Enter Jim Caviezel’s mysterious hero, who Emerson hires to push people away from impending tragedy. Blending sci-fi elements that should attract fans of “Lost” with a plot that allows for a weekly procedural dynamic was a stroke of genius. The pilot is a bit disappointing (more on that in the individual review, hence the relatively low position on this list) but the potential for this series is high. “Lost” high? A bitter TV critic can still dream.



Charlie’s Angels
Photo credit: ABC

7. “Charlie’s Angels”
Network: ABC
Premieres: September 22nd at 7pm CST
Starring: Annie Ilonzeh, Minka Kelly, Rachael Taylor, and Ramon Rodriguez
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because it’s got just the right blend of cheese and sleaze. We know, we know — Another reboot? When are they gonna learn? Didn’t anyone notice that “Bionic Woman” and “Knight Rider” didn’t exactly work? Hell, “Wonder Woman” didn’t even make it to the air. There’s a part of me that expects that “Charlie’s Angels” will continue that pattern and hopefully put to rest this bizarre trend of failed reboots. And yet, here it is, on the list of most promising shows. Why? Because it’s one of the very few programs this season that knows not to take itself too seriously. It’s a cheesy retread and the best parts of it knows that it’s silly. You would not believe the number of programs this season with essentially goofy premises — perfect memory! fairy tale characters! time travel! — that take themselves as seriously as “Boardwalk Empire.” “Charlie’s Angels” has some flaws (which we’ll get into in our review) but when it comes to potential, it’s here — an entertaining, beautiful cast in gorgeous locations with theatrical-caliber action and silly mysteries — network TV could use some more escapism.



A Gifted Man
Photo credit: CBS

6. “A Gifted Man”
Network: CBS
Premieres: September 23rd at 7pm CST
Starring: Patrick Wilson, Jennifer Ehle, Margo Martindale, Pablo Schreiber, and Julie Benz
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because Jonathan Demme directed the pilot. Yes, THAT Jonathan Demme. The Oscar-winner. “Silence of the Lambs,” “Something Wild,” “Rachel Getting Married,” “Stop Making Sense.” THAT guy.It has been tweaked enough that his name may not be on the final version according to a few websites but the core of what works about this show comes from the way that one of the best living directors brings relatable humanity to a ridiculous premise. CBS is going back to the inspirational well on Friday nights with a show not that dissimilar from other eye-network programs built around moral lessons like “Touched by an Angel” or “Joan of Arcadia.” So, why does the program about a shallow doctor haunted by his morally righteous ex make the list? The pedigree of the people involved and the gentle touch they bring to what could have been a manipulative mess. Wilson is a strong lead and supporters that include Emmy nominee Martindale and the great Ehle (now kicking ass in “Contagion”) shine. This is a show that you’ll watch and tell yourself that you’re above the emotional ploys and silly concept but you’ll still fall victim to them and want to watch next week. I’m as cynical as they come and I’m more curious about the second episode of “A Gifted Man” than most of the new programming this year. It could dive bomb into “Ghost Whisperer” silliness but hopefully Demme left some notes for future directors.

Check out page two for the top five…



Up All Night
Photo credit: NBC

5. “Up All Night”
Network: NBC
Premieres: September 14th at 9pm CST (airs regularly at 7pm CST)
Starring: Christina Applegate, Will Arnett, and Maya Rudolph
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because this is the most talented comedy ensemble of the new season. They may not have found the right vehicles lately with failures like “Running Wilde” and “Samantha Who?” but that doesn’t change the fact that Will Arnett and Christina Applegate have incredible comic timing. They can carry a show like this, especially with Arnett FINALLY toning down his ironic schtick and playing it straight. He’s been doing the larger-than-life routine for so long now that he’s nearly unrecognizable here as an average guy. Arnett’s family chemistry with fellow-new-parent Applegate works perfectly and that’s why the show could be a hit. I say “could” because they’re already tinkering with it in less-than-satisfying ways. Originally, Applegate’s new mom worked for Maya Rudolph’s attorney but after the success of “Bridesmaids,” her character was turned up to eleven both in screen time and attitude. Reshooting and turning Rudolph into an Oprah-esque talk show host might have seemed like a good idea on paper but the retooled pilot makes her come off as more annoying than the writers might understand. Tone it down. Find the realism in the situation, not the ridiculousness. This was higher up this list before version #2 of the pilot. If they keep screwing with what works, it could fall quickly off any list of promising programming (and a deadly timeslot doesn’t help…if NBC doesn’t move it, this and the awful “Free Agents” could be the first new shows cut.)



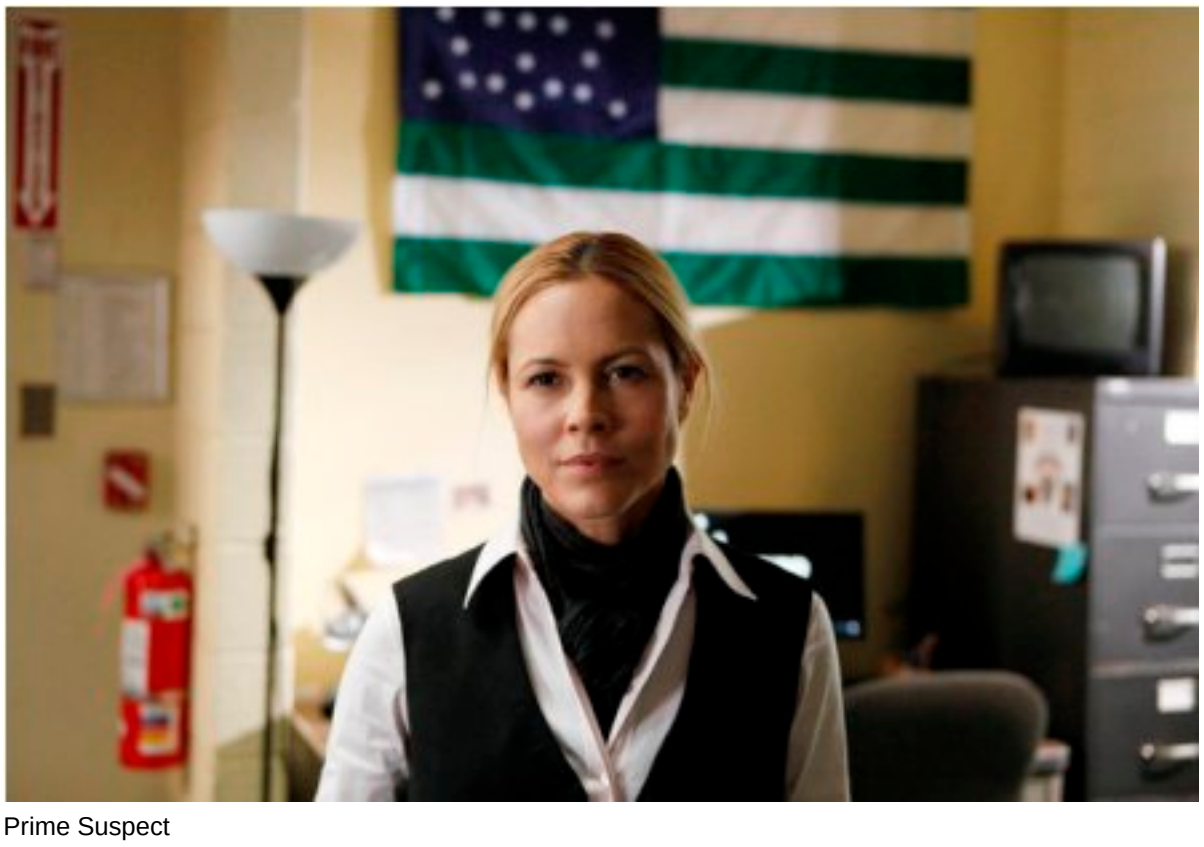
Pan Am
Photo credit: ABC

4. “Pan Am”
Network: ABC
Premieres: September 25th at 9pm CST
Starring: Christina Ricci, Margot Robbie, Michael Mosley, Karine Vanasse, Mike Vogel, and Kelli Garner
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because it has the potential to be the true escapist getaway of the new year. Is it weird that the mediocrity of “The Playboy Club” makes “Pan Am” better? The fact is that audiences are going to compare the shows — two mystery-driven period pieces trying to find that “Mad Men” lightning on network TV — and “Pan Am” undeniably comes out on top. With a likable cast and an intriguing premise (spy stewardesses?), this show strikes the right balance of drama and escapism, not unlike the first season of “Desperate Housewives” in the way that program knew it was soapy escapism. I hope it becomes even sillier than its sometimes self-serious premiere but what strikes me the most about this show is the tonal consistency of its pilot — it lulls you in and, before you know it, it’s over and you’re wondering what happens next. It is unlikely to ever top a list of best shows on TV or win awards, but it has the potential to be the kind of consistently entertaining escapism too often missing from network television.



2 Broke Girls
Photo credit: CBS

3. “2 Broke Girls”
Network: CBS
Premieres: September 19th at 8:30pm CST
Starring: Kat Dennings, Beth Behrs, Garrett Morris, Matthew Moy, and Jonathan Kite
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because it’s a proven formula for a reason. There are a surprising number of old-fashioned, single-camera, laugh-track comedies this season, as if programmers feel that viewers wanted to go back to something more nostalgic and more familiar. Tim Allen’s new sitcom might as well be called “Home Improvement 2”. There’s a “Charlie’s Angels.” And then there’s “2 Broke Girls,” which is essentially a retread of sitcom hits like “Laverne & Shirley” or “Alice” — working class programs with strong female leads. But there’s something comforting about seeing a formula reconfigured as successfully as it is in one of the most likely ratings hits of the new season (having “Two and a Half Men” as a lead-in is about as cushy a timeslot as a showrunner can ask for in 2011). We’ve seen it all before — rich girl & poor girl forced into a friendship/working relationship. She’s blonde, she’s brunette. She’s naive, she’s cynical. She’s a princess, she’s a street girl. But the writing and, more importantly, the likable performances from Dennings and Behrs, allow the formula to taste fresh. This is a funny show with two leads who I expect to become huge TV stars because of it. Will it win Emmys and critical praise? It’s doubtful, but I expect it to have loyal fans for years. And there haven’t been many new shows in 2010 or 2011 for which that could be written.



Prime Suspect
Photo credit: NBC

2. “Prime Suspect”
Network: NBC
Premieres: September 22nd at 9pm CST
Starring: Maria Bello, Aidan Quinn, Brian F. O’Byrne, Tim Griffin, Kirk Acevedo, and Peter Gerety
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because Maria Bello is instantly one of the best actresses on TV. First and foremost, stop comparing it to the Helen Mirren version. I wish this strong mystery series had taken a different name than one of the best series in the history of television because it doesn’t come CLOSE to that standard. But if you ignore that and judge the show on its own terms, it’s definitely got more potential than any drama this season. Bello is a spectacular actress and she’s amply supported by great actors like Quinn, O’Byrne (“FlashForward”), and Acevedo (“Oz”). It’s hard to tell from the premiere if this will be a mystery-of-the-week series not unlike “Law & Order” or if it will be more dramatically consistent from episode to episode. I expect a mix of the two as Bello’s detective faces work problems (mostly the male chauvinism of the station) while trying catch the bad guy. There are wrinkles to be ironed here for sure but the award-worth cast added to the potential of a dark, adult-driven mystery series that doesn’t focus on DNA or storytelling tricks earns it the highest dramatic spot of the new season.



New Girl
Photo credit: FOX

1. “New Girl”
Network: FOX
Premieres: September 20th at 8pm CST
Starring: Zooey Deschanel, Jake Johnson, Max Greenfield, Hannah Simone, and Lamorne Morris
Why You Should Set Your DVR: Because it’s funny. Maybe you’ll notice a pattern here — promise in a pilot often comes from casting. We don’t know for sure where the writing is going to go but we know if a respected actor or actress is talented enough to either carry weak writing or really elevate strong writing. Maria Bello, Kat Dennings, Christina Ricci, Patrick Wilson, Christina Applegate — these are all people who have been good before and there’s reason to believe they’ll be good week-to-week on network TV. At least a few of them. At the top of that list is a

program built around the charming personality of the great Zooey Deschanel. Do you find her quirky behavior sometimes too cute? Well, then this may not be the show for you, but this critic finds it the perfect bridge between “Glee” and “Raising Hope,” a show that takes the “Friends” formula and tweaks it enough to make it fresh. Deschanel plays an awkward soul forced to move in with three male roommates and, well, wacky hijinks ensue. Comedy is about the writing and it could fall flat here but there’s something immensely likable about the program. It’s funny, it’s enjoyable, and it has you looking forward to your next visit with its characters. What more do you want from a pilot? Oh, you say you want a strong second episode too? Check back with us on that one.


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