

## TV Feature: The 10 Best Television Shows of 2011

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 6, 2012 - 2:34pm

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CHICAGO – Here's the best news for TV fans — there's reason again to be excited about our favorite distraction. After a few years of lackluster freshman classes, the just-ended year was simply an amazing one — eight out of my top twenty shows of 2011, a whopping forty percent, are new offerings. It's the best freshman class since the legendary one of 2004 ("Lost," "Deadwood," "Battlestar Galactica," "Entourage," "Veronica Mars") and my list doesn't even include pop culture hits like "Once Upon a Time" or "Revenge" or new shows that could easily move up into the elite next year with a bit of tinkering like "Enlightened" or "Shameless." Even the under-achievers of the class of 2011 have potential.



Boardwalk Empire  
Photo credit: HBO

As we watched new stars burn bright, old ones began to fade out, some more drastically than others. When I think of the final season of "Entourage," my skin crawls (especially when compared to how good it used to be). It was arguably the worst show of the year, new or old, certainly the worst one that garnered any attention at all (but I'd probably give the golden turd trophy to "I Hate My Teenage Daughter" with runner-up citations for "How to Be a Gentleman" and "Free Agents.") "The Office" started a decline before Steve Carell left and jumped into freefall afterwards. Seriously, it's reaching terminal velocity of crap, arguably the worst show on NBC Thursday nights (yes, including "Whitney"). It wouldn't even be in the runner-ups to the runner-ups this year, after regularly finishing in the top ten in years past. "Damages" also took a steep fall in its move to DirectTV, although I could easily see it returning in its final season. And "True Blood" took another sizable dip. Still sporadically entertaining, but not what it used to be and not top-20 worthy.

Enough negativity. More than any other year, I had painful difficulty whittling down the best of what TV had to offer down to ten choices. There are strong shows like "Nurse Jackie," "South Park," "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia," "Treme," and "Parenthood" that I wish could have

at least been given a spot in the top 20 but they fell just short. And I can't think of any other year in which award-worthy programs like "Boardwalk Empire," "Southland," and "Modern Family" couldn't squeeze their way into my top ten but I just can't make it happen. All TWENTY of these shows (and a few more) deserve spots in your Season Pass Manager. It's an amazing time to be a TV fan. Arguably there's never been one better.

As for what might be considered missing, I clearly find a lot of time for TV but have never made room for enough episodes of "Fringe," "The Good Wife," or "Sons of Anarchy" to aptly judge their place on the year — I mention them because I've liked what I've seen but not seen enough of any of them to feel like I could accurately place them on this year. Every critic has gaps in their viewing schedule. I'm only admitting mine so you know they aren't missing because I didn't deem them worthy. I also labeled mini-series ineligible. With that in mind, I loved "Mildred Pierce" and "Downton Abbey." If both were eligible, they would be top 5. Rent them both.

Finally, I want to extend a truly heartfelt thanks to the people who tune in on Saturday mornings to hear me with Bill Moller on WGN-AM Radio 720. For the last month, we've been listening to your choices for the best of the year and it honestly did change the list below. I went back and re-visited most of the suggestions and listened again to your arguments, which can be found [here](#), [19] resulting in further appreciation of "Boss" and "American Horror Story," among others. Thanks so much for being a part of a great year in television coverage on HollywoodChicago.com and I hope you come back for 2012. And tell your friends.

#### Runner-ups:

- 20. "Falling Skies" (TNT)
- 19. "The Walking Dead" (AMC)
- 18. "Raising Hope" (FOX)
- 17. "Boss" (Starz)
- 16. "The Killing" (AMC)
- 15. "Dexter" (Showtime)
- 14. "New Girl" (FOX)
- 13. "Southland" (TNT)
- 12. "Boardwalk Empire" (HBO)
- 11. "Modern Family" (ABC)

#### THE TOP TEN SHOWS OF 2011

##### 10. "Happy Endings" (ABC)

*"He's a hipster, Penny. All those things you like, he likes them ironically."*

—Episode 1.7, "Dave of the Dead," 5/4/11



Happy Endings

Photo credit: ABC

As television comedy has become more loosely defined with shows with such diverse intentions as "The Big C," "Whitney," "Hung," and "Two and a Half Men" somehow all falling into the same category, there's something comforting about a program that falls into a well-worn groove in a comforting way. Viewers and critics like to complain about how shows feel generic or copied from previous hits, but there's something to be said for well-done formula. "Happy Endings" is incredibly well-done formula. It's the best of the "Friends" copies since the NBC hit and is a program that, most importantly, just keeps getting better. The first half-season that debuted earlier this year featured an ensemble still a little uncomfortable with their characters and the rhythm of the show. With rare exception, every episode since that premiere has felt more confident and more accomplished. In particular, the cast, especially Adam Pally and Casey Wilson, keep adding depth to their characters while perfecting their comic timing. There was a bit of a desperation to make you laugh, a need to hook the viewers, when the show started, and as that disappears and these characters become more likable and interesting, the show just keeps getting funnier. It's a guaranteed laugh every week.



## 9. “Curb Your Enthusiasm” (HBO)

*“That’s a remarkably idiotic thing that you just said but you know, the fact that you’re wearing glasses, I perceive it as a little less idiotic than I normally would.”*

—Episode 8.9, “Mister Softee,” 9/4/11



Curb Your Enthusiasm

Photo credit: HBO

The oldest show in my top ten by a whopping FOUR seasons. It makes me wonder if the new TV marketplace is creatively putting its veteran programs out to pasture more quickly than in days past. And perhaps the reason that Larry David’s brilliant program has defied the typical law of diminishing returns that seems to be hitting veterans earlier than it used to is because he doesn’t play by typical rules. He comes back and does a new season when the spirit moves him to do so, when he’s creatively inspired. The seventh season of “Curb” is one of the best comedy seasons of the last several years, as David brilliantly intertwined a “Seinfeld” reunion into his hit show. This past eighth season may not have been as creatively impressive but it was often just as funny. Any comedy that can weave Bill Buckner and Michael J. Fox into risky, dangerously un-P.C. plotlines deserves your attention. And moving a now-single Larry to New York City was a stroke of genius (I almost wish it had happened earlier and gone on longer). Where better for the most bitter, cynical, self-serving protagonist on TV to feed his character weaknesses? There’s no saying how much longer “Curb” is going to be on the air but it shows no sign of getting stale. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if its the elder statesman of my top ten for years to come.

## 8. “Justified” (FX)

*“At this intersection here I’m gonna go right, I want you two to go left. I go right, you go left. If you go right, I’m gonna want some answers.”*

—Episode 2.10, “Debts and Accounts,” 4/13/11



Justified

Photo credit: FX

The second season of great programs are often their best — the writers work out the kinks from the freshman year and refine their process for the second one. (“The Sopranos” and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” are two prime examples of programs that had simply amazing sophomore

years for that very reason.) The team behind “Justified” came into year two riding a wave of good press and delivered easily one of the best shows of 2011. In fact, I can’t believe I can’t get it higher than #8, which just serves as a testament to the strength of programming on the list above this entry. In recent years, the second season of this brilliant series would be top five or even top three. It’s that good. It helps to have guest stars like Emmy winner Margo Martindale and Jeremy Davies to push your regular cast to even higher levels. I loved Martindale’s arc this year, but the programs belongs to Timothy Olyphant and Walton Goggins, two men who have carved out a pair of the most fascinating men on television right now in just two seasons. More than any show in the first quarter of 2012, I can’t wait to see where “Justified” goes next.

## 7. “American Horror Story” (FX)

*“I questioned my sanity when I first found out. But this house, this house will make you a believer.”*

—Episode 1.6, “Piggy Piggy,” 11/9/11



American Horror Story

Photo credit: FX

The most gleefully unpredictable show on TV this year. Ryan Murphy and his team purposefully played with archetypes of the form — jump cuts, big score moments, things written on mirrors, twins, all of the traditional haunted house themes of the last fifty years — but every single episode would contain shocks that viewers had to admit came completely out of left field. (I particularly loved the nurse who passed out when she looked at an ultrasound from hell.) The creative thing was how much the writers embraced the B-movie nature of their scares — making you jump and then laugh at the audacity of the ridiculousness of the plot. The genius of “American” is how it took increasingly over-the-top risks by working with familiar elements and themes but filtering them through something that felt new. Almost like Quentin Tarantino’s films, the show felt derivative and completely original at the same time. It was nearly brilliant and the pace was the most remarkable on TV. At one point, it felt like there were a dozen ghost arcs spinning simultaneously (the Halloween two-parter with Denis O’Hare, Zachary Quinto, and Kate Mara chewing scenery like they were starving to death was insanely brilliant and when they had the nerve to incorporate The Black Dahlia and even Roanoke into the mix I had to marvel at the sheer audacity of it all...truly American). Was there any filler? Even casual conversations felt like they could erupt in an S&M blood orgy. That’s original programming. We could use more shows this daring. And given the success of this one, there’s reason to hope we’ll get them.

## 6. “Game of Thrones” (HBO)

*“Your mother’s dead, before long I’ll be dead, and you, and your brother, and your sister and all of her children. All of us dead, all of us rotting in the ground. It’s the family name that lives on. That’s all that lives on. Not your personal glory, not your honor, but family. Do you understand?”*

—Episode 1.7, “You Win or You Die,” 5/29/11





Game of Thrones  
Photo credit: HBO

What daring storytelling. Never falling victim to the common over-exposition that usually comes along with fantasy fiction, the producers of HBO's "Game of Thrones" dared to be dense; dared to be complex; dared to be hard-to-follow. This program didn't just require attention, it requires work. And yet the show had a cumulative power not unlike the great fiction on which it was based. While it felt like perhaps you were lost in the quantity of characters and their relation, the program was building and building, getting under your skin until, suddenly, you knew who everyone was, how they were related, and what they were trying to do. And let's talk a second about production value — this is arguably the most impressive television filmmaking in the history of the form. The art direction, the costume design, the score, even the mesmerizing opening credits — "Game of Thrones" looked amazing. Maybe that's why it was hard to follow at first — it was too jaw-dropping just to watch.

#### 5. "Community" (NBC)

*"If you're lying to me, if my father isn't coming, if a car pulls up and anyone other than my father steps out, say an actor or you in a wig, if you pull any Ferris Bueller, Parent Trap, Three's Company, FX, FX2: the Deadly Art of Illusion bulls\*\*t I will beat you. And there will be nothing madcap or wacky about it."*

—Episode 2.16, "Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking," 2/17/11



Community  
Photo credit: NBC

If this NBC gem doesn't return from its forced hiatus to make room for Chelsea Handler, it will be the greatest TV tragedy since the cancellation of "Arrested Development." All signs point to one of the smartest shows on TV returning to it and having at least one more half-season to try and get viewers to tune in. There's always a few shows on TV that simply aren't watched by a large portion of the viewing audience, but those who do tune in love them. What's even more interesting is how often these same shows become legendary after they're off the air. The number of people who claim to love "AD" and "Firefly" now would have made either of them a smash hit were they on the air. Where were you back then fanboys? In some wonderful alternate universe, "Community" is the hit it has long deserved to be. Joel McHale is a household name and an Emmy winner. Danny Pudi and Alison Brie have run out of awards space on their shelves. And the show has been renewed for two more years. I sometimes wish I lived in that alternate universe. Especially if there's no "Whitney" there.

#### 4. "Homeland" (Showtime)



*“Why kill a man when you can kill an idea?”*

—Episode 1.12, “Marine One,” 12/18/11



Homeland

Photo credit: Showtime

The best new show of the year, barely eking out said victory over “Game of Thrones” & “American Horror Story” is this complex, rewarding gem, the most nail-biting drama since “24.” Not only is this an incredibly satisfying series on a pure thriller level but the show is greatly elevated by four of the best performances on television from Claire Danes, Damian Lewis, Mandy Patinkin, and Morena Baccarin. There’s something particularly rewarding about a program that takes a structure as familiar as “Homeland” — it’s basically a spy thriller — and delivers in an unexpected, unique way. Was there anything this year more riveting than the final episode of this incredible series (except maybe the final hour of my #1)? THAT is how you do a season finale — providing a perfect mix of character development and action while tying up enough loose ends and starting a few new ones for next year. Remember back in “Justified,” I wrote about how often shows improve in their second season? “Homeland” could be scary-good next year.

### 3. “Parks and Recreation” (NBC)

*“I guess I kind of hate most things. But I never really seem to hate you. So I want to spend the rest of my life with you, is that cool?”*

—Episode 3.9, “Fancy Party,” 4/14/11



Parks and Recreation

Photo credit: NBC

It’s hard to pick just a few highlights. April and Andy’s wedding. Every appearance of Tammy 1 & Tammy 2. The supernova of Entertainment 720. The Halloween party. The cook-off. “Parks and Recreation” is the smartest, funniest, most well-acted show on network television and some weeks it’s not even close. What truly elevated this season was an emotional depth of character that hadn’t been there in seasons past. Sure, there had been glimpses of it, but the hipster irony that sometimes held back the program gave way to an amazingly romantic arc



between Amy Poehler and Adam Scott, and both actors did the best work of their career this year. Leslie Knope and Ben Wyatt are my favorite couple on TV BY FAR. And, as I always say, a program is only as good as its worst supporting character. Pick one here. Hell, Jerry is funnier than anything on most of the competition. This is the best comedy ensemble on TV, period. And what's perhaps most remarkable is the variety — you look back at “Cheers” or “Friends,” and everyone kind of sounds the same. They all have the same style. Aziz Ansari, Nick Offerman, and Chris Pratt have COMPLETELY different comic rhythms and talents and the writers keep figuring them out with each season. They took a leap forward this year and delivered the best show on network TV.

## 2. “Louie” (FX)

*“Americans only buy things that come from suffering. They just enjoy it more when they know someone’s getting hurt.”*

—Episode 2.10, “Halloween/Ellie,” 8/18/11



Louie

Photo credit: FX

There was no program more daring on television this year than Louis C.K.’s brilliant and riveting rewriting of the rules of TV comedy. Every once in awhile a series comes along that redefines its genre. “Seinfeld” did it. “The X-Files” did it. “24” certainly did it. “Louie” is doing it by daring to make TV comedy that doesn’t wear its desperation on its sleeve like so many laugh-track-driven yukfests. Instead it’s merely the work of a genius saying to his viewers, “Here’s something I find interesting, I bet you will too.” Whether it’s the reaction of his children as he sings along to the entirety of “Who Are You,” his using a real-life controversy with Dane Cook as fuel for an episode, a moving encounter with a suicidal colleague, a hysterical piece on masturbation, or the most interesting episode of television this year as Louis tracked his USO tour to Afghanistan, “Louie” was brilliant in the most inspired way a show can be — completely unpredictably.

## 1. “Breaking Bad” (AMC)

*“I am not in danger, Skyler. I AM the danger.”*

—Episode 4.6, “Cornered,” 8/21/11



Breaking Bad

Photo credit: AMC

There has been so much positive press aimed at one of the biggest shows in the history of cable television this year that what could I possibly add to it? Not only am I here to tell you that Cranston is going to make it four-in-a-row (and go for the complete sweep...a Best Actor trophy for each season of the show...with the final season next year) and Paul is likely to make it two but that this was the best season of the show to date. I'm stunned at the dexterity of the writing on "Breaking Bad" with a staff that has achieved that perfect balance of character and plot that allows them to consistently surprise. There is no formula. What I mean by this is that most shows have what feel like episodic requirements — they must move the plot in a certain direction a certain number of degrees every episode. Not "Breaking Bad." It can go anywhere at any time and yet it never feels uncontrolled. You can sense the sure hand of the best writing staff on TV guiding one of the best single actor performances in history. You know the way people talk about "The Sopranos" and "The Wire" now that they're off the air? They will gush in much the same way about "Breaking Bad." It's a classic airing in our time. In a very, VERY good year, it was the best show on television.



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