

TV Feature: The 10 Best TV Shows of 2012

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 2, 2013 - 4:07pm

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CHICAGO – Zombies. Dragons. Gangsters. Meth dealers. David Lynch. It was a weird year for television. Was it a good year? Sorta. It was nowhere near the landmark year of 2011 but there was still a lot to like and it was easy to get to 30 shows worth mentioning. Most of the greats of 2011 were down a tick (or in the case of “American Horror Story,” WAY more than a tick) and there was a notable dearth of new shows worth talking about, especially on the networks, after the best freshman crop in years in 2011. Overall, it felt like a transitional year as networks still seem to be trying to figure out how to compete in an increasingly unstable landscape in which more viewers than advertisers covet are watching HBO Go than NBC. Let’s get right to it with notes on the top ten as to if they’re available on Blu-ray and DVD...

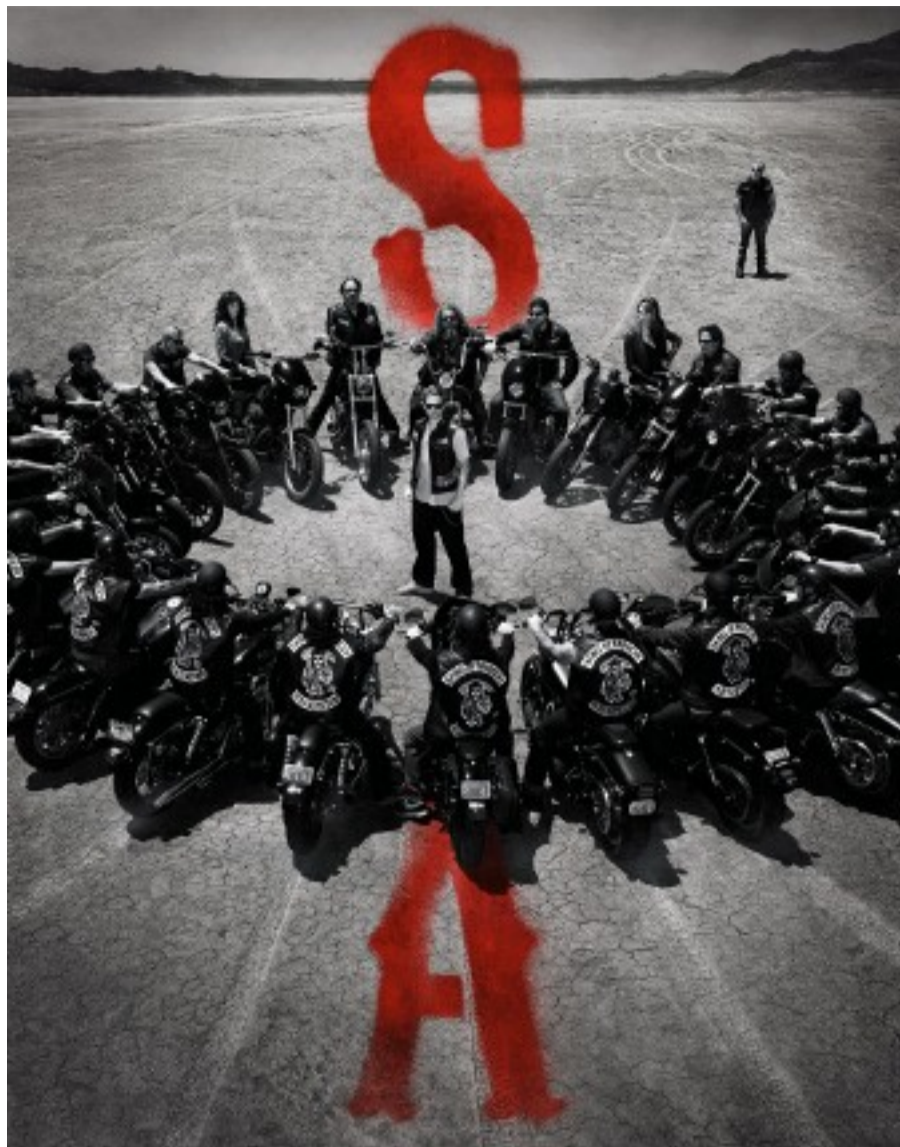
Runner-ups: “Archer” (FX), “Downton Abbey” (PBS), “Episodes” (Showtime), “Falling Skies” (TNT), “Last Resort” (ABC), “The Middle” (ABC), “Modern Family” (ABC), “The Newsroom” (HBO), “Raising Hope” (FOX), and “Survivor” (CBS).

20. “Go On” (NBC)
19. “Happy Endings” (ABC)
18. “New Girl” (FOX)
17. “Justified” (FX)
16. “Community” (NBC)
15. “Doctor Who” (BBC)
14. “30 Rock” (NBC)
13. “Southland” (TNT)
12. “Mad Men” (AMC)
11. “Veep/The Thick of It” (HBO/Hulu)

10. “Sons of Anarchy” (FX)

“There’s an old saying, ‘That what doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger.’ I don’t believe that. I think the things that try to kill you make you angry and sad. Strength comes from the good things - your family, your friends, the satisfaction of hard work. Those are the things that’ll keep you whole. Those are the things to hold on to when you’re broken.”

—Episode 5.1, “Sovereign,” 9.11.12



Sons of Anarchy

Photo credit: FX

“Sons of Anarchy” started its first season as an interesting take on “Hamlet” that somehow didn’t feel grounded enough or melodramatic enough to work as either realism or grand spectacle. It improved in its second season, largely due to great work by Katey Sagal, but took such a nose dive in its awful third season that I thought it was done. I thought wrong. Season four was entertaining but season five was absolutely riveting television, thanks in no small part to guest turns by Jimmy Smits and Harold Perrineau that seemed to invigorate the entire cast. Darker than ever, more intense than ever, and more tragic ever, “Sons of Anarchy” reached new heights and stars Charlie Hunnam and Ron Perlman had their best seasons to date. It still sometimes plays a bit too broadly to be believable — there are more shoot-outs in this area of California than most war-torn countries — but the pacing this year kept the suspension of disbelief in line. (Seasons 1-4 are on Blu-ray and DVD.)

9. “Parks and Recreation” (NBC)

“Wikipedia is mankind’s greatest invention. You can learn about anything. We all know Ray J. We all know he’s a singer. He’s Brandy’s brother. And he was in that classic sex tape with Kim Kardashian. But, did you also know he’s Snoop Dogg’s cousin AND he was in the 1996 Tim Burton movie Mars Attacks? Suddenly, you’re on the Mars Attacks page!”

—Episode 5.4, “Sex Education,” 10.18.12



Parks and Recreation

Photo credit: NBC

The writing was a bit rocky at the beginning of the fifth season of network TV’s best show, but the fact is that this is still the funniest show

on TV when it's clicking on all cylinders. And the final few months of 2012 were very good to the gang in Pawnee. The writers have reached that confident point where they have refined their characters so well that they don't have to hit punchlines directly, allowing the humor to come from people we feel like we know. And I always say that a sitcom is only as good as its weakest supporting player. It's the ultimate ensemble art form. And there's not a weak player on this team. (Seasons 1-4 are on DVD.)

8. "Homeland" (Showtime)

"This is Nicholas Brody and I'm a Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. People will say I was broken, I was brainwashed. People will say I was turned into a terrorist."

—Episode 2.3, "State of Independence," 10.14.12



Homeland

Photo credit: Showtime

How do you follow an act like the first season of "Homeland"? The dip in writing was undeniable this year as it felt like the staff behind one of TV's most-talked about shows were figuring things out as they went along. Subplots like the hit & run that gave Brody's daughter way too much screen time and then was quickly dropped when the writers couldn't really figure out how to tie it back in with the rest of the show hinted at a program for which the wheels could quickly come off (as they have for night-mate "Dexter," a show that has gone so far afield from its original concept that it barely resembles its creative peak). All season, the acting on "Homeland" was so stellar, especially in that amazing interrogation scene that probably won Claire Danes and Damian Lewis second Emmys, that the writing was easy enough to forgive. And then, despite leaving a few plot holes big enough to drive through, the final two episodes really, truly worked. Once again, I can't wait to see where they go next. (Season 1 is on Blu-ray and DVD and Season 2 is available on Showtime Anywhere for subscribers.)

7. "Sherlock" (PBS)

"Your mind, it's so placid, straight-forward, barely used. Mine's like an engine, racing out of control. A rocket, tearing itself to pieces, trapped on the launch pad."

—Episode 2.2, "The Hounds of Baskerville," 5.13.12



Sherlock

Photo credit: PBS

“Elementary” ain’t bad and the Robert Downey Jr. “Sherlock Holmes” movies are massive hits but the real Sherlock & Watson are Benedict Cumberbatch & Martin Freeman, stars of what were essentially three of the best TV movies of 2012 aired under the banner “Sherlock.” “A Scandal in Belgravia,” “The Hounds of Baskerville,” and “The Reichenbach Fall” would all merit consideration for year-end best of film lists if they had been released in theaters this year. They are perfectly executed, wonderfully performed, and highly entertaining mysteries that brilliantly offer a lesson in how to adapt well-known characters for modern times. The team on “Sherlock” use characters and ideas and even plots from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle but they make them their own. And they make them incredibly entertaining. (Seasons 1 & 2 are available on Blu-ray and DVD.)

6. “The Walking Dead” (AMC)

“I can’t profess to understand God’s plan, but when Christ promised a resurrection of the dead, I just thought he had something a little different in mind.”

—Episode 2.13, “Beside the Dying Fire,” 3.18.12



The Walking Dead

Photo credit: AMC

It went through a rocky period in the mid-section of season two after the departure of Frank Darabont and the notable difference in season length led to some pacing issues but, man, did it come around near the end of the sophomore outing and continues to just dominate creatively halfway through season three. The endless soap opera of Lori-Rick-Shane was replaced by a true sense of horror in that everyone became expendable and plotlines became completely unpredictable. From the minute that Shane opened those barn doors, this show hasn’t looked back, maintaining a degree of highly entertaining action that most movie can’t keep up for two hours much less a dozen episodes. (Seasons 1 & 2 are on Blu-ray and DVD. Season 3 returns in February.)

5. “Game of Thrones” (HBO)

“I asked him, ‘How can a man be brave if he’s afraid?’ That is the ONLY time a man can be brave, he told me.”

—Episode 2.8, “The Prince of Winterfell,” 5.20.12



Game of Thrones
Photo credit: HBO

Is there any show on TV more dramatically ambitious than “GoT”? It’s one of those shows that is really hard to believe is even on TV. It’s like “LOST” in that respect, in that not only should it not really work but it’s hard to believe it was ever greenlighted. “We’re gonna make an incredibly expensive show with dozens of major characters in fantasy settings and make it more about politics and leadership than dungeons & dragons. Sound good?!?” And yet it has become one of the smartest and most technically accomplished programs of the last decade. The second season was a little dense at times but it peaked to a point of dramatic perfection. I can’t wait for season three. (Season 1 is on Blu-ray & DVD and Season 2 is on HBO Go.)

4. “Girls” (HBO)

“I’m offended by all of the supposed tos. I don’t like women telling other women what to do or how to do it or when to do it.”
—Episode 1.2, “Vagina Panic,” 4.22.12



Girls
Photo credit: HBO

The best new show of 2012 by some stretch is Lena Dunham’s daring comedy about girls in their quarter-life crisis in New York City. Dunham is brilliant in how she allows her characters to be imperfect, annoying, and even spoiled. There’s a reason it’s called “Girls” and not “Women.” These characters are supposed to be immature and it’s the ways in which they are so that is so fascinating and truthful. Turn on the TV and flip to any channel and you’ll see a character, whether it’s a sitcom lead or a dramatic hero, that the writers really want you to like. Lena Dunham’s show (along with the comedy only a hair better than it just below) never feels like it’s pandering to that aesthetic. And lost in all of the controversy over the divisive nature of “Girls” was something very simple — it’s damn funny. Major laughs in every episode. And you can’t say that about many shows in 2012, a year in which most comedies were down creatively. Or maybe it just felt that way with “Girls” to compare them to. (Season 1 is on Blu-ray, DVD, & HBO Go.)

3. “Louie” (FX)

“You have to do research. You have to go on Amazon and read a really long review written by an insane person... who’s been dead for months

because he shot his wife and then himself after explaining to you that the remote is counterintuitive. It's got really small buttons on the remote he said before he murder-suicided his whole family."

—Episode 3.10, "Late Show (Part 1)," 8.30.12



Louie

Photo credit: FX

Few shows in history have been less reliant on genre than "Louie." The fact is that we're a two-party system on TV. You're either a comedy or a drama (with reality TV being the underappreciated independent party, I suppose). "Louie" is neither. And both. This year was more melancholy than the last and I was actually happy to hear that Louis C.K. was planning to take some time off to rekindle some creative fires. Not that this year was "bad" (I clearly don't think that based on its ranking here) but I was starting to worry about the guy. There were so many moments of absolute brilliance this year from the funniest scene at a strip club in years to the amazing trip to Miami to the arc in which the comedian hoped to be the next late night star (and that BETTER win David Lynch a guest star Emmy). Comedy, drama, whatever you want to call it — it's just great TV. (Seasons 1 & 2 are on Blu-ray and DVD.)

2. "Breaking Bad" (AMC)

"You are trouble. I'm sorry the kid here doesn't see it, but I sure as hell do. You are a time bomb. Tick tick ticking. And I have no intention for being around for the boom."

—Episode 5.2, "Madrigal," 7.22.12



Breaking Bad

Photo credit: AMC

The best show of the last decade took the ever-so-slightest dip from season four in part due to the decision to divide the final season into two eight-episode installments. I felt the rush this year, as if the saga of Walter White was racing to a finish when I wanted more time to appreciate the characters. Despite that, this is still such an amazingly complex program, the kind of drama that you don't just watch, you experience. You mull it over afterwards. What does it mean? Where is it going? We'll know next year when Vince Gilligan officially ends the saga of one of the most fascinating characters in television history. (Seasons 1-4 are on Blu-ray and DVD.)

1. “Boardwalk Empire” (HBO)

“We’ve been on the road for 18 hours. I need a bath, some chow and then you and me sit down and we talk about who dies.”
—Episode 3.11, “Two Imposters,” 11.25.12



Boardwalk Empire
Photo credit: HBO

I wasn’t fully sold on the first two seasons of HBO’s prohibition drama but the third time was most definitely the charm as every element that felt slightly out of place before was placed into this year’s well-oiled machine. The dramatic urgency that the program lacked was there in every episode and the melancholy of Buscemi’s performance as a man who seems to have lost his interest in being a gangster but cannot live any other life allowed the actor to do the best work of his career. Jack Huston and Bobby Cannavale should fight for Best Supporting Actor consideration next year. And the entire season had the quality of great fiction. It might not have been the best show of the year episode to episode, week to week, chapter to chapter. But when you close the book and consider the fictional accomplishment as a whole, it was absolutely flawless. (Seasons 1 & 2 are on Blu-ray and DVD.)



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