

Chuck one-ups most of new Fall TV season

NBC's new action-comedy tops our list of new TV shows, but not everything new is wonderful: *Grey's Anatomy* ain't what it used to be



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Now that we've had a chance to sit back and expand out waist sizes via heaping thanksgiving dinners, we've had plenty of time to take in all that fall television has to offer. Beware, television producers: hell hath no fury like *Gateway* writers scorned.

Elizabeth Vail

BEST: *CHUCK*

Those entrusted with "saving the world" have gone by many names. Bond. Buffy. Hiro. Jesus. And now, one may add Chuck to the list. In NBC's latest offering from Chris Fedak and Josh Schwartz, Chuck (Zachary Levi), the head of the computer department at a Best Buy-esque superstore, receives an email on his birthday from an old roommate from college. Turns out, his buddy's a spy-gone-rogue who's stolen every secret the NSA and CIA ever hoarded, encoded in thousands of subliminal images. Opening the email, Chuck unwittingly downloads America's most sensitive secrets into his brain.

Transformed into the man who knew way, way too much, Chuck finds himself teamed up with the CIA and NSA's top spooks, femme fatale Sarah (Yvonne Strzechowski) and blunt instrument Casey (*Firefly*'s Adam Baldwin), whose job is to make sure the conspiracies inside Chuck's head stay there. A winning combination of *Alias*-type martial arts, explosions, and car chases, with the nerd-in-need humour of *Office Space*, Chuck proves to be a spicy action thriller with a sweet comedic centre.

WORST: *GREY'S ANATOMY*

The worst show this Fall isn't some gimmicky new program from some brain-dead commercial think-tank, but an established series that has taken a sharp and sudden turn for the worse. It's easy—just take two counts of sodden break-up angst, one shark-jumping drunken encounter, a dash of convoluted family ties, and one crazy-ass blonde homewrecker, and you've successfully turned *Grey's Anatomy* from a witty, sexy medical romp into a depressing deadweight on Thursday nights.

Anatomy's varied cast of characters have all been reduced to their own individual clutter of clichés. In the season premiere alone, Meredith freaks out about her relationship with Derek and still ends up screwing him, Derek practices his kicked-puppy look, Kerev smirks like an asshole, George whines like an infant, Cristina's repressed herself into the 18th century, and Izzie abandons all rationality yet again, this time by performing surgery on a live deer to impress her wary interns.

There's a way to portray the implausible and make it campy fun, but *Grey's Anatomy* has gone farther into the plain, dull, and impossible. If real American doctors are like this, it's no wonder so many forgo health insurance.

Sean Steels

BEST: *THE OFFICE*

Initially dubbed a cheap imitation of its BBC counterpart, the American version of *The Office*, now starting its fourth season on NBC, has risen to earn more than a dozen awards and even more nominations. Its subtle, mockumentary style of comedy requires attention to detail and patience—some of the funniest moments won't make much sense unless you've been watching from Day One—but it's the show's meticulous production and attention to detail that make it different from anything else on the tube.

Michael Scott (Steve Carell) brings a sense of excruciating awkwardness to the show. His well-intentioned but usually inappropriate jokes and comments drive each situation to the point where all you can do is cringe and wait for the reliably hilarious aftermath of his bungled attempts to bring his "family" of employees closer together. In this season's first episode, he's already managed to run down an employee with his Chrysler Sebring.

WORST: *THE HILLS*

The Hills is back for its third season, and with its third outing, MTV's hit faux-reality show takes cable to a whole new low. These inarticulate, spoiled, pampered rich kids are given 20 minutes' time to

star Campbell doesn't hurt much either. He lends a sarcastic and humorous tone that adds to the already well-written dialogue and expert direction.

WORST: *FLASH GORDON*

Flash Gordon is a sci-fi classic: the tales of a hero thrown into the fray against the evil Ming the Merciless. Sounds fairly difficult to screw up, right? Wrong.

The Sci-Fi channel, the very same people who managed to revive *Battlestar Galactica*, have redone this show—already revived multiple times beforehand—with all the excitement of an extended yawn.

The writing is very weak and feels forced; the action sequences are overly campy; and the alien world and citizens of Mongo are all terrible. Mongo itself looks like a city here on Earth tinted pink, and its inhabitants are 100-per-cent human. Hell, even the '80s movie version did a better job than this.

The only saving grace for this show is the acting: the onscreen chemistry between Flash (Eric Johnson) and Dale (Gina Holden) is particularly evident, and well done. The two would shine even more had the writing and direction not been so awful. *Flash Gordon* is a complete and utter bust.

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SEAN STEELS

gush volumes of insubstantial nothingness to brainwash the continent's adolescents. The thought that these irresponsible, near-sighted socialites could ever be mistaken as role models by any MTV-worshipping teen is a terrifying prospect.

The Hills takes mindless fashion obsession to a level cable has never seen before. The only reality presented here is a bunch of Hollywood C-listers bumbling their way through grainy shots, with rubbing each other's naughty bits being their most common form of character motivation.

Kyle Yasinski

BEST: *BURN NOTICE*

Burn Notice tells the tale of Michael Weston (Jeffery Donovan), an espionage agent working for the United States government who, unfortunately, receives a burn notice—he may have been identified by an enemy agent, and, as such, becomes untouchable by all his former compatriots. With the help of his former partner Fiona (Gabrielle Anwar) and Sam (Bruce Campbell), an old colleague, he opens a detective agency of sorts to find out who burned him.

The acting is awesome, with the two leads working together and playing off of each other very well. Of course, having a geek-culture icon like *Evil Dead*

Kristina De Guzman

BEST: *CHUCK*

When I tuned into NBC's *Chuck*, I didn't know what it was about or that Josh Schwartz was the executive producer of the show. Later, I discovered that he was the same guy behind *The OC*, which I named Best Show of 2006. Maybe I'm more of a Josh Schwartz fan than I realized because *Chuck* has all the makings of a great drama: witty dialogue, a talented cast, a good *mélange* of "out-of-this-world" drama, and more realistic situations that many viewers can relate to.

The show's basic premise is that the protagonist, Chuck (Zachary Levi), becomes a computer himself when he opens a strange email from a former classmate and has secret government files transferred into his brain. The fast-paced action à la *Mission Impossible* or *The Matrix*, juxtaposed with the daily dilemmas of a computer geek working at a place that looks so much like Best Buy, is a strange thing to witness, but somehow, it totally works.

WORST: *IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY IN PHILADELPHIA*

There must be a pretty good reason why most sitcoms are only half an hour long instead of an hour like their dramatic counterparts. It's possibly because

many of them are like FX's *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*: they're just plain awful to watch.

Philadelphia seems to take in all the qualities that make for a horrible comedy: characters who act like idiots, sleep-inducing plots, and actors who try to be funny but overact to the point that they're not.

One episode presents three different stories dealing with political or social issues. Two of the stories revolve around environmentalism and abortion, and, frankly, are simply a waste of time; the most interesting of the three involves finding a baby in a dumpster and trying to turn it into a child star. However, the talent agent refuses the baby, saying that the agency is now trying to target a Latino audience and sadly, Dumpster Baby, well, just doesn't look Latino. The talent agent says she won't accept the baby "unless you can change the colour of this baby's skin," so the lackluster caretakers take the baby to a tanning salon.

There's something wrong when the highlight of the show isn't Danny Devito, but the orange receptionist who reacts with disgust to what Dumpster Baby's temporary parents are trying to do. As long as the receptionist isn't a regular, *Philadelphia* has no hope.

David Johnston

BEST: *PUSHING DAISIES*

It's a little risky to stake a claim that the fall's best bet is a show that hasn't premiered yet, but the ninety seconds I've seen of executive producer Bryan Fuller's new fantasy drama are better than entire hours of some of the drivel currently clogging the airwaves.

The premise is simple: it's the story of a piemaker with the power to bring dead people back to life ... for a little while. However, logic and realism aren't even close to what the show is trying to deliver. Rather, it's a modern-day fairy tale that gives most viewers a breath of fresh air. The cinematography is rich, colourful and compelling, making the brightness of *Pushing Daisies* a welcome change from the cold blue steel prevalent in the bevy of legal/forensic/medical shows or serial 24-esque dramas that have become so popular in recent years.

Call it magic, escapism, whimsy, or anything you like; the fact is, everything Fuller touches springs to life, from *Wonderfalls* to *Dead Like Me* to *Heroes*, so this flowering show has earned a slot on my Fall roster.

WORST: *KID NATION*

The concept was sound enough: 40 kids dropped off in a turn-of-the-century Old West town for 40 days, left alone with no adult supervision. Their mission: form a society. And if they'd been left alone and watched through Big Brother-style cameras, it could've been interesting. Would they bond as a group? Would they divide on class or race lines? Would they go *Lord of the Flies* on each other?

We'll never find out, unfortunately, as the idea gets lost in the execution. Forty very loud kids left alone, with no adults, except for the 75 cameramen, sound guys, lighting directors, medics, psychologists, therapists, boom handlers, production assistants, and smarmy hosts hovering off-camera. And it isn't so much "form your own society" as "do the things we tell you to do while screaming."

Congratulations, CBS. If you set the reality TV bar any lower, we'll be able to pave a freeway over it.

