New Broadcast TV Series: The Good, the Bad, and the Too Bad
By Steve Sternberg

Because of the pandemic, this is the first time in 30 years I haven’t seen any fall pilots and have only seen a few mid-season shows prior to their premieres. So I’m reviewing these new series after watching at least the first few episodes during their regular broadcast runs.

Also due to the pandemic, many returning scripted shows didn’t premiere until January or later. These include, ABC’s The Rookie, Black-ish, Mixed-ish, NBC’s Zoey’s Extraordinary Playlist, Chicago Fire, Chicago Med, Chicago P.D., Law & Order: SVU, New Amsterdam, Good Girls, FOX’s Prodigal Son, The Resident, 9-1-1, 9-1-1: Lone Star, CW’s Batwoman, All American, Riverdale, Nancy Drew, Legacies, Charmed, Black Lightning, The Flash. Still to come this spring include, NBC’s Manifest, FOX’s The Moodys, and CW’s Legends of Tomorrow, In the Dark, and Dynasty.

Here’s a look at the new broadcast series premiering so far this season:
Big Sky (ABC): David E. Kelley crime drama centering around a seemingly harmless long-haul trucker (the always good Brian Geraghty) and state trooper (John Carroll Lynch) in Montana, an unlikely pair who are involved in abducting women as part of a human trafficking ring (and killing anyone who gets in their way). When teenage sisters (Natalie Alyn Lynd, Jade Pettyjohn) and a trans sex worker (Jesse James Keitel) are taken, an ex-cop and private detective (Katheryn Winnick, Kylie Bunbury) race against the clock to find the girls – bumping heads with local police along the way.

Since I hadn’t seen any episodes prior to its premiere, I read some of the reviews before watching (which I seldom do). Based on these reviews, I expected a derivative, boring, cheesy mess. Instead, I found something better. While it certainly is derivative, with its Fargo-esque feel and some familiar sub-plots, there are some unexpected twists, and it is fun to watch. The kidnapped sisters are the weakest characters, and are really only there to drive the plot, but the rest of the cast is solid. Brooke Smith is excellent as the long-suffering wife of the state trooper, as is Valerie Mahaffey as the trucker’s overbearing mom (shades of Norman Bates). The first season has 16 episodes, 9 of which already aired. You can catch up on Hulu.

Clarice (CBS): This crime drama takes place about a year after the events in the 1991 Silence of the Lambs theatrical movie. FBI agent, Clarice Starling (Rebecca Breeds) is still not fully recovered psychologically from her encounter with Buffalo Bill and Hannibal Lecter. She is drawn back into the field to tackle new serial killers and sexual predators. Taking place in the early 1990s, Starling has to navigate a male-dominated workplace and colleagues who see her presence as little more than a public relations gimmick.
The first few episodes show potential to make this one of the best procedural dramas on television. But being a broadcast procedural, means a need to solve most cases in a single episode, which leads to a fair amount of repetition. Clarice scans the crime scene, spots something no one else has noticed, gives her theory of the case which conflicts with everyone else’s, she’s told to back off and go along with the official narrative, she goes rogue and solves the crime – thereby earning the grudging respect of her skeptical boss and colleagues, who initially think she’s only there because she got lucky and solved the infamous Buffalo Bill serial killer case (from the original movie).

The last few episodes have an ongoing case that is not fully resolved by the end of each telecast, which is atypical of most broadcast procedurals, and a promising sign going forward. Convoluted legal entanglements prevent the CBS series from mentioning Hannibal Lecter by name – reportedly any character that appeared in NBC’s Hannibal series is off-limits in this one. Although there was a reference to “the cannibal.” The cast includes, Michael Cudlitz, Kal Penn, and Jayne Atkinson, all of whom are excellent as usual.

**The Equalizer (CBS):** Re-imagining of the 1980s CBS series (not the Denzel Washington 2014 and 2018 movies), updated with a female lead (Queen Latifah). She’s a mysterious former top CIA operative who uses her extensive skills to help those in need who have nowhere else to turn. She is also a single mom with a 15-year-old daughter, which I suppose is designed to humanize her and have some potential storylines beyond just beating up the goons of the week.

Nothing new or original here, but that’s not what this is about anyway. If you want to see Queen Latifah outsmart and outfight bad guys every week, this is good, mindless, entertainment. She’s
charismatic and always appealing to watch. An hour after you see it, you’ll forget what it was about, which means it will probably repeat well among the typical CBS and eventual cable audience. Adam Goldberg and Liza Lapira are part of her team, helping her behind the scenes, and Chris Noth plays her former colleague and CIA mentor. It’s already been renewed for a second season.

Debris (NBC): When debris from the wreckage of an alien space craft start falling to earth, bad and mysterious things start happening to people who encounter any of the fragments. A secretive international agency is tasked with figuring out what is happening and why. British MI-6 and American CIA operatives (Riann Steele, Jonathan Tucker) are teamed up to track down hundreds of pieces of debris that fell throughout the Western hemisphere. They have very different styles, and their countries have their own agendas that they can’t share. But they have to find a way to trust one another. And, as is almost always the case with this type of show, shadowy forces want to obtain the debris for their own nefarious purposes.

The basic plot devices do have some familiarity to sci-fi fans (The X-Files and Manifest come to mind). Since I’ve only seen the first two episodes, it’s hard to provide any recommendations yet. But there’s enough chemistry between the leads, enough creepiness, and enough innovative elements, that I’m interested enough to see where this all leads.

Transplant (NBC): Canadian medical drama (where it became a hit) with Hamza Haq as a Syrian doctor who is transplanted with his young sister to Canada as a refugee from the Syrian Civil War. Because his foreign credentials aren’t fully recognized in his new country, he has to redo his medical training.
as a resident in the emergency department at a fictional Toronto hospital, while at the same time facing discrimination and initially skeptical new colleagues.

While following some standard medical series tropes – a doctor who’s different from everyone else, but who also has knowledge and skills that in many ways surpass them – it also has the interesting twist that he learned many of his unorthodox (and more analog) techniques in war-torn Syria while his colleagues rely much more on computer imaging before they decide on anything. He also brings a perspective you seldom if ever see on U.S. medical dramas – for example, he is completely taken aback that anyone would get sick because they refuse to be vaccinated when vaccines are in such short supply and desperately needed in his home country.

If you like medical dramas, this is a pretty good one. John Hannah, Laurence Leboeuf, Ayisha Issa, Torri Higginson, and Sirena Gulamgaus round out the main cast. It’s been renewed for a second season. You can watch season 1 on Peacock.

**Nurses (NBC):** Canadian series picked up by NBC primarily because of the shortage of programming due to the pandemic. It centers around five young nurses in a Toronto hospital. In these times, it’s good to see a series that focuses on these essential workers, but if we weren’t in these times, this one would likely not have made it onto NBC’s schedule.

Unrealistic is a word that can be applied to most medical dramas, but when you add bland, trite, and derivative, this is what you get. NBC had to pull one episode from digital and future airings after a backlash over a storyline the Simon Wiesenthal Center condemned as anti-Semitic. It stars Tierra
Skovbye, Natasha Calis, Jordan Johnson-Hinds, Sandy Sidhu, and Donald Maclean Jr. It’s been renewed for a second season in Canada, but I’d be surprised if it returns here.

Superman & Lois (CW): It’s not easy to develop a fresh take on such a long-running franchise and iconic character. It was done successfully with Smallville, and the CW is trying to pull it off again. They may have succeeded (I haven’t decided yet). Technically you could say this is a spin-off from Supergirl, since both characters (portrayed by Tyler Hoechlin and Elizabeth Tulloch) have appeared on that show, but it’s really a standalone series – none of CW’s Arrowverse heroes have yet been referenced.

The problem with screen versions of Superman has always been that he is so powerful, that unless you use Kryptonite or have villains from another planet who also have super powers, he’s going to easily win every fight, and the viewer never really feels he is threatened – which quickly gets boring. So far, Superman’s battles have been a peripheral part of the show, which is more in the CW mold of teen coming-of-age drama.

Parenthood conflicts with super-heroing, as Clark (Superman) Kent and Lois Lane are now married with twin teenage sons (Jordan Elsass, Alexander Garfin), who may or may not have powers of their own. In the pilot, they move from the big city of Metropolis to his small hometown (appropriately named Smallville), although like many small towns today, the once thriving farm and coal community is struggling, and many residents have moved out. The contrast between being a husband and dad to angsty teenagers and his responsibilities to protect the world (and Smallville) from evildoers makes for a potentially interesting series. Following its premiere episode, it was renewed for a second season. It was also reportedly CW’s most streamed premiere ever.
**Walker (CW):** This is not your father’s *Walker, Texas Ranger*, and it’s star, Jared Padalecki is nothing like Chuck Norris (who starred in the original). This is both part of the problem and part of the appeal. I’m sure CW felt Jared Padalecki’s fans from his 15 years on the hit series, *Supernatural*, would at least check out his new show.

*Walker* has not even a fraction of the action and beating up bad guys (no martial arts or roundhouse kicks here) as its predecessor, so fans of the original might be disappointed. Those under 45 probably don’t remember the 1990s series anyway, which is often the problem with rebooting old series. They could just as easily called the show *Ranger*.

Rather than a hard action series, this is more of a family drama about a guy who just happens to be a Texas Ranger. He’s teamed up with the first Latina ranger (Lindsey Morgan), who is one of the show’s few bright spots. In this version, Walker is a workaholic whose wife was murdered near the Mexican border. He is trying to raise his teenage daughter (Violet Brinson) and son (Kale Culley), who he has neglected since his wife’s death (he went on a 10-month undercover mission). Constant flashbacks to his life with his wife have become one of the more annoying aspects of the show – I guess they want to constantly remind the viewer how much his life has changed. Co-stars include, Keegan Allen as Walker’s brother and Molly Hagan and Mitch Pileggi as his parents. It’s been renewed for a second season.

**New Sitcoms:** The current batch of new comedies are perfect examples of something I’ve been saying for many years. Shows make stars, stars don’t make shows. The best thing I can say about most of the formulaic comedies premiering this season is that they’re innocuous. Nobody gets hurt and no one is likely to be offended.
Call Your Mother and tell her that even though she loves Kyra Sedgwick, she probably won’t love her new ABC sitcom. She plays an overbearing empty nest widow who moves cross-country from Iowa to Los Angeles, to be closer to her two twenty-something children (Joey Bragg, Rachel Sennott), who aren’t exactly thrilled at the prospect. Kyra Sedgwick hasn’t been able to find the right TV vehicle since her great eight-year run on The Closer, which ended in 2012. This bland comedy certainly isn’t it. And the laugh track doesn’t help, but rather highlights the lack of funny.

B Positive is one of those generic, interchangeable CBS Monday/Thursday sitcoms that can just as easily be renewed as canceled without too many people noticing. In this case, it’s been picked up for a full 18-episode season. It is from Chuck Lorre, which usually means it will get better as the series progresses. The rather strange premise for a sitcom has a divorced therapist (Thomas Middleditch) in renal failure who needs a kidney donor. He has a chance run-in with a former high-school classmate (Annaleigh Ashford), something of a partying space cadet, who volunteers to give him one of her kidneys – if only she can remain clean and sober for three months. The two stars do have chemistry, so we’ll have to see how far they can stretch this situation. The cast, which includes Sara Rue and Linda Lavin, is also good.

Call Me Kat stars Mayim Bialik, who is determined to show her mom (Swoosie Kurtz), and society in general, that it’s possible to be 39 and single and still be happy. So she spends the money her parents set aside for her wedding to open a cat café in Louisville, Kentucky. The cast is better than the material. Given
that Mayim Bialik and her *Big Bang Theory* co-star, Jim Parsons, are executive producers, I’m surprised this didn’t wind up on CBS (instead of FOX), where its built in audience might have enabled it to attract more viewers – particularly with the broadcast networks’ stubborn refusal to cross-promote one another’s series.

I really wanted to like NBC’s **Mr. Mayor**. I like Ted Danson in virtually everything he does. I like him here as well. I even like most of the ensemble supporting cast (which includes Holly Hunter). Ted Danson as a newly elected Mayor and his mostly incompetent but well-meaning staff seems like it might have potential. But the writing is so mediocre that after the first few episodes, I let the remainder of the season pile up on my DVR queue (and I’m not sure if I’ll eventually watch or delete them).

**Kenan** stars Kenan Thompson as a recently widowed father of two young girls (Dani Lane, Dannah Lane), who hosts a morning show in Atlanta, Georgia. His father-in-law (Don Johnson) and brother (Chris Redd) live with them and have their own opinions on how he should move on with his life. Kimrie Lewis plays executive producer of his show and one of his closest friends. Kenan Thompson’s talent and charisma rise way above the material, and makes this NBC sitcom better than it should be – which means it’s not bad, not good.
Young Rock is the real comedy surprise of the season. I expected it to be cheesy and dumb but I was pleasantly surprised. It’s actually funny and sweet, and a treat for anyone who grew up in the 1970s and 80s watching WWF (now WWE) Wrestling on TV.

The format has Dwayne (“The Rock”) Johnson running for president in 2032, and being interviewed on camera (by Randall Park), where he talks about the various events in his life that led him to this point. Flashbacks show his youth with his relentlessly upbeat professional wrestler father, Rocky Johnson (Joseph Lee Anderson), and provides a behind-the-scenes look at highs and lows the wrestling business, featuring such icons as Andre the Giant, King Kong Bundy, The Iron Sheik, Junk Yard Dog, and The Wild Samoans – opponents in the ring, but friends in real life. Except for Andre, the actors who play these wrestlers are spot on in their portrayals.

Johnson relates stories about his life from his rebellious teenage years in a Pennsylvania high-school and his college football years in the University of Miami, and I assume through his time as a professional wrestler (which we haven’t seen yet). His younger selves are portrayed by three different actors, Adrian Groulx (10 years old), Bradley Constant (15 years old), and Uli Latukefu (18-20).

Here are some of the original scripted broadcast series debuting this spring:

United States of AI (CBS) April 1: Chuck Lorre comedy about the friendship between Riley (Parker Young), a Marine veteran trying to readjust to civilian life in Ohio, and Awalmir (Adhir Kalyan), aka Al, his Afghan interpreter, who has just arrived to start a new life in America. Kelli Goss
and Dean Norris also star. Seems pleasant enough to be interchangeable with whichever CBS sitcom it replaces without losing too many viewers.

**Law & Order: Organized Crime (NBC)** April 1: Christopher Meloni makes his long-awaited return to the Dick Wolf franchise, reprising his role as detective Elliot Stabler. The former member of the Special Victim’s Unit, and ex-partner of Captain Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay), returns to an NYPD that has changed dramatically in the decade since he left. He leads a new organized crime task force. Dylan McDermott, Tamara Taylor, Danielle Mone Truitt, and Ainsley Seiger co-star. It will premiere as part of a two-hour crossover with *Law & Order: SVU*. This is as close to a guaranteed success as you can get on broadcast TV these days.

**Kung Fu (CW)** April 7: Modern-day adaptation of the 1970s series, set in present-day rather than the old west. A Chinese-American woman (Olivia Liang) drops out of college to make a life-changing journey to an isolated monastery in China. When she returns to her home in San Francisco, she finds her town plagued by crime and corruption. She uses her martial arts skills and Shaolin values to protect her community, all the while dealing with her estranged family and searching for the assassin who killed her Shaolin mentor, and is now targeting her. The cast includes, Jon Prasida, Shannon Dang, Tan Kheng Hua, Eddie Lu, Tzi Ma, and Gavin Stenhouse. I just saw the pilot, and as is the case with so many other reboots, it’s nothing like the original. But it does have potential.
Home Economics (ABC) April 7: Comedy examining the relationship among three adult siblings at different points in the economic spectrum – one is a one percenter, one is middle class, and one is barely holding on. It stars Topher Grace, Caitlin McGee, Karla Souza, Sashee Zamata, and Jimmy Tatro. This one has potential if it can avoid being too cloying.

Rebel (ABC) April 8: Katey Sagal is Annie “Rebel” Wilson, a blue-collar legal advocate without a law degree. Inspired by the life of Erin Brokovich. She’s messy, brilliant, and fearless when fighting for causes she believes in. The cast includes, John Corbett, James Leisure, Tamala Jones, Ariela Barer, and Andy Garcia. Katey Sagal is good in just about everything she does, and the Thursday 10-11pm slot should help.

The Republic of Sarah (CW) June 14: The New Hampshire town of Greylock is threatened when a valuable mineral used in tech is discovered under the town, and a state-backed mining company plans to extract the mineral, which would result in wiping the town off the map. Rebellious high-school teacher, Sarah Cooper (Stella Baker) vows to stop them. Her plan calls for Greylock declaring independence. After a federal judge agrees that Greylock is not – and never was – part of the United States, it becomes a new nation. Now Sarah and her allies face the daunting task of building a country from scratch. I initially had no idea if this will catch on. Then I saw the pilot, and still have no idea if this will catch on. The cast includes, Luke Mitchell, Izabella Alvarez, Ian Duff, Hope Lauren, and Nia Holloway.