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New Fall TV Shows – the Good, the Bad, & the Too Bad

By Steve Sternberg

In today's video world, the very idea of a fall TV season seems antiquated. For years, cable networks have debuted original scripted series throughout the year, most often in spring or summer when the broadcast networks typically air repeats or reality shows. OTT streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, drop new series whenever they are ready to go. But the broadcast networks still have the most and the highest rated original scripted series (*The Walking Dead* notwithstanding), so as long as they continue to premiere so many programs over a two-week period in September, the new "fall season" will be relevant.

I've been analyzing television programming for roughly 30 years, and have seen many good pilots flop, but also more than a few lackluster pilots build into hits. Increasingly, however, the latter is harder to come by. Long gone are the days when a *Miami Vice* can start out slowly and become a word-of-mouth success over the summer. Or a *Seinfeld* can take three years to find an audience and grow into an iconic hit. Or an *Everybody Loves Raymond* can start out on Friday with low ratings, move to Monday and become one of the highest rated comedies on television. The TV landscape is simply too competitive. These and many other long-running hits would have been canceled today after just a few episodes. **Let's hope the networks have the fortitude to give shows they believe in but are not instant hits a chance to build.** We will always have *Empire, This is Us, Young Sheldon,* and *The Good Doctor* – shows that immediately strike a chord with viewers. But we can also use another *Cheers*, which debuted as the lowest rated show of the week, but ended its 11-year run among the top 10.

While it is clear that broadcast networks ratings overall continue to decline, and there are more competitors than ever nipping at their heels, there are a number of positive signs going forward. Chief

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among them are that 58 of the top 60 rated series are still on broadcast TV, and that **six of the top eight rated original scripted series debuted within the past two seasons.** Will any from the current batch join them in the top 10 next season? Read on...

Evaluating the New Pilots

In the April edition of *The Sternberg Report*, titled *A Young Media Person's Guide to Evaluating Pilots*, I laid out several criteria for determining the success potential of a new series. I just want to reiterate a few of them here, and provide some examples based on this year's new shows.

• A comedy should be funny because of the characters, not the plot. In other words, does something specific happen in the pilot to make it funny? Is there some kind of fish out of water storyline? Does someone switch jobs, suddenly become poor or rich, move from a small town to the big city or vice-versa? You get the idea. Often times these plot driven comedy pilots can be hilarious, but essentially become different shows by the second episode. Last season, I cited ABC's The Mayor as fitting this category. The pilot was excellent, but by episode 2 it was a different show (and didn't last long). The new pilots that fall into this category include, CBS's The Neighborhood and Happy Together, and FOX's Rel (which is not to say they won't succeed). You'll see what I mean in the section evaluating each pilot.

On the other hand, I can't remember details about some of the funniest comedy pilots of all time, including *The Cosby Show, Golden Girls, Roseanne, Home Improvement, 30 Rock, Modern Family,* and *The Big Bang Theory.* That's because they were funny not because of anything that happened in the pilot, but rather because the characters were funny, had strong chemistry, and people wanted to see them interact week after week irrespective of storylines or plot devices. New comedy pilots that fit this mold include ABC's *Single Parents* and *The Kids Are Alright*, and NBC's *I Feel Bad* (which is not to say they will all succeed).

• What will a new drama's third episode look like? Is it a good one-time movie or will it work as a weekly series? Some of the things you look at to predict comedy success also apply to dramas. Are there specific events or guest stars in the pilot that drive the story but won't exist by the second episode? Medical, police, or legal dramas can seem compelling based solely on the case covered in the pilot. We need to consider the strengths and charisma of the lead characters, and ongoing themes of the series beyond the pilot's script.

Before this season began, I pegged ABC *The Good Doctor* as one of best medical drama pilots I had ever seen. I also cited ABC's mid-season series, *For the People* as one of the best legal drama pilots I had seen in years. The former is one of the highest rated dramas on TV, and the latter has moderate ratings, but has been renewed for another season.

For procedural dramas, does the cast gel and are there enough humorous elements that people will want to tune in to slight variations of the same situation week after week. This can be telling when you compare series in the same genre – the differences between the excellent *Criminal Minds* and the canceled *Criminal Minds Beyond Borders*, or the original *CSI* and the short-lived *CSI Cyber* are dramatic (and highlight the importance of good casting). All of the *NCIS*'s, on the other hand, managed to find the right formula – drama, humor, and compatible cast – and all are hits.

Here is my take on all the fall pilots which, at this writing, were made available for screening.

These are not my predictions of hits and misses, but rather which new pilots I liked and which ones have potential. You might be able to figure out by my comments the ones I think will actually succeed.

By way of definition: those I label as "The Good," have excellent casts, are executed well, and have the best chance to succeed; the "Almost Good" are not quite at the level of The Good, but have potential, and if promoted properly could work; the "Run of the Mill" pilots are either of the cookie cutter variety, miss the mark, or are simply nothing special.

Net	Day/Time	Program	Comment
			The Good
ABC	Tue. 8:30-9	The Kids Are Alright (Family Comedy)	Two of my favorite TV actors, Michael Cudlitz and Mary McCormick head a traditional Irish-Catholic family with eight kids. They live in a working-class neighborhood outside Los Angeles, and are trying to navigate big and small changes and the generation gap during the turbulent 1970s. There are several comparisons to events today, including the conservative pro-Nixon dad calling Watergate "phony news." The pilot was funny, and this would have been a good fit as originally scheduled, following <i>Roseanne</i> on Tuesday night. it could still succeed following the new show focusing on Roseanne's family. From ABC Studios, Meadow Lark Lane Productions, and Industrial Brothers.
ABC	Wed. 9:30-10	Single Parents (Family Comedy)	A diverse group of single parents lean on one another as they try to raise their precocious 7-year-olds and still maintain some kind of personal lives. It was a pleasure to watch a pilot I expected to be so bad that turned out to be so funny. Good ensemble cast (including the always great Brad Garret). Should fit in well on Wednesday following <i>Modern Family</i> . The only question is whether it can be maintained on a weekly basis without getting stale. From 20th Century Fox Television, ABC Studios, Meadow Lark Lane Productions, and Elizabeth Meriwether Pictures.
ABC	Wed. 10-11	A Million Little Things (Drama)	A group of friends from Boston, who met and bonded several years ago when they got stuck in an elevator together, try to come to terms with why one of them, who seemingly had it all, committed suicide. ABC is hoping this will be the new <i>This is Us</i> . It has that potential. The best new series pilot I've seen this year . From Kapital Entertainment, ABC Studios, and Next Thing You Know Productions.

Net	Day/Time	Program	Comment
			The Good
CBS	Mon. 8-8:30	The Neighborhood (Family Comedy)	White family from the Midwest moves into a black neighborhood in Los Angeles. Cedric the Entertainer is one of the neighbors who doesn't think they belong there. The pilot was funny, but that was based on a white family being introduced into the black community. It remains to be seen whether this can be maintained on a weekly basis. It has potential if executed properly. From CBS Television Studios.
CBS	Thu. 9:30-10	Murphy Brown (Workplace Comedy)	Candice Bergen and series creator, Diane English, as well as most of the original cast (plus Tyne Daly), reunite for the revival of this once groundbreaking, Emmy-winning comedy. No pilot is available (they wanted to be as timely as possible), so I'm taking a leap of faith. But how can a Murphy Brown take on "fake news," social media, and the Trump administration not be funny? From Warner Bros. Television.
NBC	Thu. 9:30-10	I Feel Bad (Family Comedy)	From Executive Producer Amy Poehler. Sarayu Blue is Emet, the not-so-perfect mom, boss, wife, friend, and daughter. She feels bad when people think she's turning into her mother, or when she has a sexy dream about someone other than her husband, or when she pretends not to know her kids when they misbehave in public, or when she uses her staff to help solve personal problems, or any number of things going on in her hectic life. The pilot was good. As is the case with most comedies, how the supporting cast gels will tell the story. A new NBC comedy can't ask for a better spot than following Will & Grace on Thursday night (unless, of course, it airs opposite Murphy Brown). From Universal Television, Paper Kite Productions, CannyLads Productions, and 3 Arts Entertainment.

Net	Day/Time	Program	Comment
			The Good
FOX	Sun. 9:30-10	Rel (Family Comedy)	Lil Rel is a prideful, self-made success who lives by the code, "always believe in yourself and great things will come." This attitude is put to the test when he discovers his wife is having an affair with his barber. He tries to rebuild his life as a long-distance single father on the South Side of Chicago, looking for love, respect, and a new barber. Also stars Sinbad as his father. The pilot was quite good, and there's no reason to think it can't be maintained on a weekly basis. From 20th Century Fox Television.
			The Almost Good
ABC	Tue. 10-11	The Rookie (Police Drama)	Nathan Fillion stars as a middle-aged, small-town guy, who, after a life-altering incident, pursues his dream and becomes the oldest rookie on the LAPD. The pilot was interesting and it has a good ensemble cast, although it seems like we've seen this before. Might have trouble up against CBS's NCIS New Orleans, which appeals to a similar audience. From ABC Studios and The Mark Gordon Company.
CBS	Sun. 8-9	God Friended Me (General Drama)	Brandon Michael Hall is a self-proclaimed pod-casting atheist. So imagine his bewilderment and skepticism when he is friended by God on Facebook, and then poked to help strangers. An interesting take on faith and social media, which may or may not find an audience. From Warner Bros. Television.

Net	Day/Time	Program	Comment
			The Almost Good
CW	Wed. 9-10	All American (General Drama)	When a star high-school football player from South L.A. is recruited to play for Beverly Hills High, two very different worlds collide. Inspired by the life of NFL football player, Spencer Paysinger.
			We've seen all this before , which doesn't necessarily mean it can't work here. Not particularly compatible to its <i>Riverdale</i> lead-in, however.
			From Berlanti Productions, CBS Television Studios, and Warner Bros. Television.
NBC	Mon. 10-11	Manifest (Mystery Drama)	When a routine but turbulent flight lands, the crew and passengers discover that while only a few hours passed for them, five years have passed for the outside world. Their friends, families, and colleagues thought they were lost, have mourned them, and moved on with their lives.
			Seems like a combination of <i>Lost, Resurrection</i> , and <i>The Leftovers</i> . If executed well, it could work. It might have tough sledding opposite ABC's <i>The Good Doctor</i> and CBS's <i>Bull</i> , two of the most popular dramas on television.
			From Warner Bros. Television and Compari Entertainment.
			The Run-of-the-Mill
CBS	Mon. 8:30-9	Happy Together (Family Comedy)	Daman Wayans Jr. stars as a pop star's accountant. The Beiber-ish star is drawn to their normal suburban life, and he moves in with them to escape the paparazzi following his latest scandal. There was nothing funny in the pilot, and this is another in a long string of interchangeable Monday 8:30pm CBS sitcoms.
			From CBS Television Studios.

Net	Day/Time	Program	Comment
			The Run of the Mill
CBS	Mon. 9-10	Magnum P.I. (Detective Drama)	A reboot of the 1980's CBS hit, about an ex-military P.I., who tackles cases no one else will take, with sun-drenched Hawaii as the backdrop. It's not just that they took the comma out of the title, or that they replaced the lead (Tom Selleck), a white guy with an iconic mustache, with a Hispanic guy (Jay Hernandez) with a goatee, or that his colleague, Higgins, a middle-aged white guy who provided much of the original series' humor, was replaced by a woman with no humor at all. It's that there is no chemistry among the cast, and the comedic elements that made the original series so fresh at the time is virtually non-existent (at least in the pilot). Those who remember the original will be disappointed, while those who don't will wonder what the fuss was about. From CBS Television Studios in association with Universal Television.
CBS	Tue. 9-10	FBI (FBI Drama)	Dick Wolf and the team behind the <i>Law & Order</i> franchise try their hands at this procedural drama about the inner workings of the New York Office of the FBI. Decent cast led by Missy Peregyn and Jeremy Sisto are trapped in a series that is as generic as they come . But that occasionally works for CBS procedurals. From Universal Television in association with CBS Television Studios.
NBC	Tue. 10-11	New Amsterdam (Medical Drama)	New medical director (Ryan Eggold) sets out to fight the bureaucracy of a large public hospital. He wants his superiors and colleagues to institute a system that values providing exceptional care over pure profit. Good luck with that. This has been done before and better. Following <i>The Voice</i> and <i>This is Us</i> will probably get it decent viewer sampling. Then it will live or die (probably the latter) on its own merits. From Universal Television, Pico Creek Productions, and Mount Moriah.

Net	Day/Time	Program	Comment
			The Run of the Mill
CW	Sun. 9-10	Charmed (Supernatural Drama)	Whether or not rebooting <i>Charmed</i> , which originally debuted in 1998 and ran for eight seasons, was a good idea remains to be seen. To refresh your memory, after their mother is murdered by demons, three sisters discover that they are powerful witches, and are tasked with fighting evil. The new cast members (Sarah Jeffery, Madeleine Mantock, Melonie Diaz) have neither the charisma nor chemistry of the original trio (Shannen Doughrty, Holly Marie Combs, and Alyssa Milano). I would have preferred seeing a continuation of the original (with an original cast member or two), rather than simply a remake with a lesser cast. It will follow <i>Supergirl</i> , as CW expands to Sunday night, so it will probably be given every chance to succeed. From CBS Television Studios.
FOX	Fri. 8:30-9	The Cool Kids (Retirement Community Comedy)	Three 70-something guys (Martin Mull, David Alan Grier, Leslie Jordan) are top dogs at their retirement community until a female rebel (Vicki Lawrence) invades their space. Excellent cast to draw 60+ year-old viewers. This would be a good fit on CBS Monday night, not on a FOX network that still wants to claim a younger audience. Given that it's going on Friday following Last Man Standing tells me they're not expecting much. So neither am I. From 20th Century Fox Television and FX Productions.
		The Unknown	s (pilots not available at this writing)
CW	Thu. 9-10	Legacies (Supernatural Drama)	No pilot yet available, but here's part of the official description of the series: Continuing the tradition of <i>The Vampire Diaries</i> and <i>The Originals</i> , this is the story of the next generation of supernatural beings at The Salvatore School for the Young and Gifted. Should be compatible with its <i>Supernatural</i> lead-in. From Warner Bros. Television.