



**Fall TV clicks... and sometimes it doesn't**

**New season brings several truly entertaining series - just nothing all that original**

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Whether you'll find any new favorite shows this fall depends entirely on your perspective. Let me ask ya this: how do you feel about novelty? 'Cuz sorry to say, the broadcast network aren't offering a lot of it this fall.

If you're already satisfied with your TV viewing options, you'll view this as a good thing. If you spend more time flipping channels than sitting on the edge of your couch, you'll remain comfortable and bored.

From where we're sitting - a place of such scrutiny it feels like the front row of a movie theater - the prospects aren't necessarily bad.

Of the 36 new shows, a handful are truly entertaining. The season's new series just don't break any new ground the way our precious "24" did a couple years ago.

In fact, almost all of the newbies fall within two tried-and-true genres.

The CRIME DRAMAS are led by cops, agents, lawyers, a man who thinks he's a talking monkey, and a med student who can talk to dead people. The RELATIONSHIP COMEDIES focus on dysfunctional middle-class collectives with twists and, of course, desperate singles.

Naturally, there are exceptions.

Action-packed "Las Vegas" defies placement in either category - though an ex-CIA casino exec does offer a snide "Welcome to the family" warning after discovering his star employee in bed with his daughter.

"Joan of Arcadia" criss-crosses them by being a drama about relationships (specifically the one between Joan and a certain higher being).

"Miss Match" takes a little from column A and a little from column B and winds up with a lawyer as the lead character of a lighthearted dating show.

That leaves Steve Harvey's variety show as the only square peg that can't be whittled to fit into the two round holes. Still, it's not all that innovative.

So whattaya say? Let's switch seats, move back a few rows, and take an wide-angle look at our upcoming prime-time attractions.

## **SUNDAYS**

### **"Cold Case," A- - 7 p.m. on CBS (debuts Sept. 28)**

Just because a case is cold doesn't mean it's unsolvable. And just because a new program is similar to other shows producer Jerry Bruckheimer has on the air these days doesn't mean it's redundant. Katherine Morris ("Minority Report") plays Lilly Rush, a Philly-based homicide detective who wipes the dust off long-forgotten files and takes a fresh stab at solving the murder within. The first episode makes use of some fun filmic devices, such as juxtaposing flashbacks with present day, to tell the story.

### **"10-8," B - 7p.m. on ABC (debuts Sept. 28)**

We meet Rico (Danny Nucci) in a series of chases through his hoodlum childhood to present day, where he winds up as an L.A. sheriff. Flashback to his first year on the force, a place viewers may soon recognize as the place "Oz" alums go when their characters die. Ernie Hudson (once the warden of Emerald City) and Scott William Winters (once Cyril, a mentally challenged inmate) are both training officers. "They say you're either born to be good or you're born to be bad and never the twain shall meet," Rico tells us. With its sharp dialog, mild action and interesting opportunities for character development, this one was probably born to be good. But up against such popular shows as "The Simpsons"

and "American Dreams" as well as "Cold Case," "10-8" might have a tough time hanging.

**"The Lyon's Den," B - 9 p.m. on NBC (debuts Sept. 28)**

Jack Turner is no Sam Seaborn. For "West Wing" fanatics, enough said. For everyone else, Rob Lowe's new character puts him back in Washington, D.C., as a lawyer with a heart of gold. He's a good guy with the odds stacked against him. Not the least of his problems is a senator father doubling as the man behind the curtain. When Turner's mentor, a managing partner at a major firm, dies, the pro bono clinic-running crusader is bullied into stepping into those high-profile shoes. Until Turner quietly admits to a frustrated police detective that he suspects homicide, not suicide, the build-up is slow. And until this wannabe ensemble cast hardens, Lowe's got a lot riding on him.

**"Arrested Development," B+ - 8:30 p.m. on FOX (debuts Nov. 2)**

When Dad (Jeffrey Tambor) goes to jail for playing with the corporate finances, the family is forced to learn how to live well below the means to which they've become accustomed. Sister Lindsay (Portia de Rossi) and her family move in with the sanest sibling, Michael (Jason Bateman), and his son, who dwell in the attic of a model home. It's just as we learned from "The Royal Tenenbaums" - the family that sticks together sinks together. The show's style is a little too weird to determine yet how this will pan out. But the cast is promising.

**"The Ortegas" F - 7:30 p.m. on FOX (debuts Nov. 2)**

Luis Ortega (played by Al Madrigal) is like an Hispanic Wayne from "Wayne's World." Not the movie, the SNL segment. Instead of a basement, Al's fictional dad, Cheech Marin, builds a TV studio in his back yard. In character throughout, Mr. Ortega, his mother and his wife all co-host from the couch while Luis interviews such real celebrities as Denise Richards and Howie Mandel. If Madrigal had used his real family and gone unscripted with the same set-up, it might actually have been funny.

**"Tarzan," D - 8 p.m. on WB (debuts Oct. 5)**

Jane Porter (Sarah Wayne Callies) is a gorgeous New York detective. The X-Files' Richard Clayton (Mitch Pileggi), CEO of Greystoke Enterprises, is a man unable to contain or control his incredible family secret. And "Tarzan" is a new "Beauty and the Beast"-like drama series starring hot male model Travis Fimmel

- as said secret, of course. We know jungle dwellers taught our taut new six-packin' monkey man to swing from vines (or fire escapes, as the case may be). And it's a safe guess that he gets his pouty lipstick application strategies from former employer Calvin Klein. But as (cough) entertaining as this may be, questions do remain - not the least of which is this: Where does a kid raised by apes learn martial arts?

## **MONDAYS**

### **"Las Vegas," A - 8 p.m. on NBC (debuts Monday, 9 p.m.)**

If you blink, you'll miss something. Like the city it's named for, everything about "Las Vegas" is fast - the writing, the acting, the filming. It's racy, it's risky, and it's great. James Caan is the big name, but first-person narrator Josh Duhamel really leads the cast, rounded out by three lovely ladies: Vanessa Marcil, Molly Sims and Nikki Cox. Caan plays "Big Ed," the no-nonsense main man for a casino surveillance and security team. Duhamel is the protg who didn't notice until it was too late that the woman he's sleeping with is the boss's daughter. In all likelihood this'll be your cross-channel lead- in to "CSI," if that's your thing.

### **"Eve," C+ - 7:30 p.m. on UPN (debuted Monday)**

A \$5,000 dress with fashion designer Shelly (hip-hop goddess Eve) inside gets caught on the zipper of a man on the prowl, J.T. Hunter (Eve's "Barbershop" co-star Jason George). Their first date goes almost as well when Shelly chokes on a shrimp stolen from J.T.'s plate and J.T. gets choked up watching "Casablanca." Cute outfits and semi-witty one-liners ensue.

### **"Two and a Half Men," B- - 8:30 p.m. on CBS (debuts Monday)**

"Alan, I think I'm gay." "OK. We'll make a list. On one side we'll put gay stuff . . ."

When ultra-rigid Alan Harper (Jon Cryer) is dumped by his newly declared lesbian wife, he and his son, Jake, invade jingle-writing brother Charlie's (Charlie Sheen) beachfront bachelor pad. Sheen warms up to the whole kid thing and chills on the cool lifestyle a little too fast. He gets some chuckles, but if anyone's going to keep this show going it'll be Cryer, whose freak-out scenes make him as funny as ever.

### **"Skin," B+- 8p.m. on FOX (debuts Oct. 20)**

Porno on prime time? Well, the topic anyway. Larry Goldman (Ron Silver) is an adult entertainment king. Thomas Roam (Kevin Anderson) is the L.A. district attorney. When Roam targets Goldman as his campaign conquest, the budding romance between their kids turns into full-on "Romeo and Juliet." There's even a balcony shot. The tale of young love amongst smut (political and sexual) is compelling and exciting.

## **TUESDAYS**

### **"Happy Family," B - 7:30 p.m. on NBC (debuted Sept. 9)**

Annie (Christine Baranski) and Peter (John Larroquette) are the proud parents of three grown children. Well, not quite. Their eldest, Todd, is a dentist with a fiancée . . . and a girlfriend. Sara is a successful businesswoman, but her relationship with Eric - you know, her bird - isn't panning out. And then there's Tim, the one who has truly taught the Brennans patience. He's 20. He's flunked out of junior college. He's moved in with an older woman, who just happens to be Annie's best friend and next-door neighbor. Baranski and Larroquette are comedy veterans who really know how to get the laughs. Whether their coattails are big enough to carry their young costars remains to be seen.

### **"Navy NCIS," B- - 7p.m. on CBS (debuts Tuesday)**

If you're a "JAG" fan, you already met the characters of this new forensics show last season when a female officer was found dead and the show's main character, "Harm," was accused of the crime. Mark Harmon as Special Agent Jethro Gibbs helms a team in the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, or NCIS. They poke fun at themselves in the first episode when someone asks "NCIS, is that anything like CSI?" The answer is "Only if you're dyslexic." But the bottom line is that "NCIS" is, in fact, "CSI" for the "JAG" fan. And that's OK.

### **"Rock Me Baby," B+ - 8 p.m. on UPN (debuted Tuesday)**

I dig this show. The theme song is sung by the band that, if I ever get married, I hope will play my wedding. Dan Cortese stars, and he's hot. He portrays a morning shock jock who plays bands like R.E.M. and the Strokes. Moreover, it's a cute, quirky, quick-witted comedy about a hip couple with a new baby.

### **"I'm With Her," C - 7:30 p.m. on ABC (debuts Tuesday)**

Creator and writer Chris Henchy has "Spin City" and "Life With Bonnie" to his credit, but what best informs this everyman-meets-celebrity sitcom is Henchy's personal experience. The very idea for the show, and many of the scenes in the first episode, come almost directly from his own experience with wife Brooke Shields.

**"Whoopi," C- - 7 p.m. on NBC (debuted Sept. 9)**

Nobody ever accused Whoopi Goldberg of being politically correct. And with all the race cards she plays in the first episode alone (white girl acting black, black guy acting white, Persian guy with a gun who's irate because he's mistaken for Arab), she might just be upping that ante. Whoopi plays Mavis Rae, a one-hit-wonder singer who now runs a small hotel in Manhattan. Her brother's an out-of-work brainiac dating a trashy white girrrrrl with attitude. Her Persian friend is an employee. The show's OK, but the hate mail will be an A+ read, guaranteed.

**"All of Us," B- - 7:30 p.m. on UPN (debuted Sept. 16)**

The divorce papers are in. TV reporter Robert James is ready for his future with his girlfriend, Tia, and she's got the rock to prove it. But his ex (and mother of his baby, Bobby) Neesee, isn't making things easy on the happy couple. Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith executive produce and even plan to make some guest appearances.

**"One Tree Hill," C- - 8p.m. on WB (debuts Tuesday)**

High school half-brothers meet for the first time while living in the same small town. One's a cute popular jock (Nathan). The other's a cute brainy guy (Lucas). This show's got about as much depth as "Dawson's Creek" after a drought. That won't stop high school girls from diving in.

**"The Mullets," D - 8:30 p.m. on UPN (debuted Sept. 11)**

When mom (Loni Anderson) marries into classy wealth, two boys with bad haircuts and a last name to match listen to lots of metal bands, drink lots of cheap beer, and fight to maintain their white-trash integrity in a world that mocks them. The only thing more plastic than this premise is Loni Anderson's face. And you thought reality was dragging television down? Maybe it's hard to spitball ideas when you've got a wicked case of cottonmouth. Instead, UPN execs have shaped a new show out of an old steaming pile of pop culture poop. Besides, didn't David Spade run this joke into the ground years ago with "Joe Dirt"?

## **WEDNESDAYS**

### **"Karen Sisco," A- - 9p.m. on ABC (debuts Oct. 1)**

The idea comes straight out of "Out of Sight." Sisco is a Miami-based U.S. marshal, a tough girl with a gun and a great figure to back it up. She's killed two men (make that three), and she's not afraid to call her ex-marshal father "daddy." No forensic evidence. No dramatic reenactments. Just light drama, a couple of chuckles and a great cast anchored by Carla Gugino and Robert Forster.

### **"Jake 2.0," B- - 8 p.m. on UPN (debuted Sept. 10)**

Geeky government employee Jake Foley has been more than promoted, he's been upgraded. One day he's just tech support who can communicate with computers. Next thing you know, he's in the middle of a shootout in a laboratory, accidentally inoculated with experimental goop. Now he's an intelligence agent who can hear through walls, throw stuff really hard, and really communicate with computers, as in telepathically. Remember TRS80s and "The Six Million Dollar Man"? Welcome to the age of laptops and "Jake 2.0." Despite such supercool superpowers, this one may be too narrow for a second season if it even survives its first.

### **"The Brotherhood of Poland, New Hampshire," B - 9 p.m. on CBS (debuts Wednesday)**

Creator David E. Kelley may not inspire a lot of confidence these days, but names like Mare Winningham, Randy Quaid, Chris Penn and Cusack (Ann, John's older sister) do. The premise (three brothers run the town they were raised in) is as quaint as the setting. Both get more appealing as the show plods along. If "Brotherhood" succeeds, credit the acting. If it fails, blame the writing. That is, unless Kelley fires most of the essential cast like he did on "The Practice."

### **"It's All Relative," C - 7:30 p.m. on ABC (debuts Oct. 1)**

Boy meets girl. Boy proposes to girl. All hell breaks loose. Boy's parents are Irish Catholic working-class Republican bar owners. Girl's parents are two upper-class gay men. Will and Jack meet Archie and Edith. You do the math.

### **"A Minute With Stan Hooper," A - 7:30 p.m. on FOX (debuts Oct. 29)**

"Saturday Night Live" alum Norm MacDonald has a new odd-ball comedy show, but that's not what's weird. He plays a guy who doesn't drip of bitter sarcasm. And yet it's chock-full of funny. Stan Hooper is a big city newscaster who decides to move to a small town to "live a simple life." So of course things get complicated. For instance, he pays remarkably cheap rent for an obscenely huge house with a butler he doesn't want who makes him drink tea and won't let him answer the door. It's silly. It's funny. It's a pleasant surprise worth watching. Hands-down the best comedy of the season.

## **THURSDAYS**

### **"Threat Matrix," A- 7 p.m. on ABC (debuted Thursday)**

The Threat Matrix is a piece of paper - a report the president gets which outlines outstanding terrorist threats. Or so they tell us in big white print just before opening credits. "Threat Matrix" is a show about former government agents - FBI, CIA, NSA - who investigate those threats and occasionally swipe a nuclear warhead (armed only with bees) just to make a point. John Kilmer is the special agent in charge of the team we follow on these adventures. Ex-wife Frankie is a member of that team.

### **"Steve Harvey's Big Time," B - 7 p.m. on WB (debuted Sept. 11)**

On his new variety show featuring everyday people doing weird stuff, Harvey shackles a skinny guy named Rick who then shimmies into a washing machine. Harvey hits the "on" button, prays aloud, and cracks wise about the time he'll do if he kills a white man, but he pours in some soapy water. The next guest, 4-year-old adorable Abby, isn't so much insane as crazy smart. Harvey quizzes her on the state governors, any cabinet member, prime ministers. The audience is in awe wondering whether the child's genius necessarily makes them morons. "My son is going to a foster home Monday. I'm obviously failing him as a parent," he quips. Abby's finale: reciting the end of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream . . ." speech. If you aren't entertained by this show, phone for a hearse.

### **"Coupling," B- - 8:30 p.m. on NBC (debuts Thursday)**

Several convoluted semi-breakups, a chance meeting in a ladies' room, too many sexual innuendos and yadda yadda yadda, you've got a first date and this new series set-up: "Your ex, my ex, your best friend, my best friend. Every new relationship has baggage. Let's invite it all to dinner." America's recent history with British adaptations has been disastrous and this show's probably no



different. Luckily, I've failed to see the BBC version. With my standards so lowered, let's just whistle, wink, call this premiere a cutie and see if we get can get any play.

**"Tru Calling," B+ - 7 p.m. on FOX (debuts Oct. 30)**

Preparing for med school, Tru Davies (Eliza Dushku, formerly a vampire slayer on "Buffy") gets a job at the morgue storing bodies. It's a little creepy for her, since the last time she was in a morgue she was 12 and her mother had just been murdered. Then there are those weird moans, groans and whispers she hears. Tru realizes that she has a very special gift. She can go back in time one full day and rewrite the fates of those who die before their time. Sometimes she can even help her druggy sister and gambler brother. Like "Groundhog Day" meets "Run Lola Run." If you've ever regretted missing the "Buffy" boat, hop onboard because old slaying fans are sure to make this a success.

**"Run of the House," C- - 8:30 p.m. on WB (debuted Sept. 11)**

This siblings-on-their-own comedy stars Joey "I go by Joseph now" Lawrence (a joke that's just as pathetic when it shows up in the show's dialog via a minor character). Listen, Joey: The grown-up name game was just as silly when Ricky "I go by Rick now" Schroder went from "Silver Spoons" to gold badges on "NYPD Blue." Anyway, Joey Lawrence's character declares himself man of the house when his parents take off for Arizona to deal with his father's health. Under his care but definitely not under his thumb are his promiscuous sister, his law school drop-out brother, and the baby of the family - a 15-year-old with raging hormones. The outcome isn't promising when you find yourself rooting for the kid to get some action behind everybody's back in the first episode.

## **FRIDAYS**

**"The Handler," A - 9 p.m. on CBS (debuts Friday)**

Glad I have TiVo. Choosing between "Boomtown" and this masterful new show could have been devastating. And it's not the "Sopranos" factor. Joe Pantoliano, who plays good guy Joe Renato, earns this one on merit alone. Renato is a kind but tough L.A.-based FBI agent responsible for preparing and preserving a crew of deep-undercover agents. The multiple plotlines will keep you glued to your seat for the whole hour. The ever-changing scenarios will keep you tuned in for the whole season. This and "Las Vegas" stand out as the best dramas of the fall.

**"Miss Match," A - 7 p.m. on NBC (debuts Friday)**

Divorce lawyer by trade, matchmaker by practice. Alicia Silverstone plays Kate Fox, a smart, sassy gal whose career hasn't curbed her faith in true love. Not even her own breakup could do that. When the New York Times spills her secret talent, Kate finds herself swamped with requests to fix strangers up. Nothing too deep here, but a sweet way to spend an hour.

**"Joan of Arcadia," B- - 7p.m. on CBS (debuts Friday)**

Joan Osborne asked "What if God was One of Us?" Joan of Arcadia asks "What if God is many of us and keeps appearing to me as my lunch lady or a hot guy just to get me to do seemingly trivial stuff like apply for a job in the bookstore?" Well, what if? What if Dad's Joe Mantegna and Mom's Mary Steenburgen? Then would it make for a good show? The premiere doesn't quite answer those questions, but maybe if we have faith . . .

**"Hope & Faith," C - 8 p.m. on ABC (debuts Friday)**

When Faith Ford played Corky on "Murphy Brown," she was excellent in the goofy role. Now Ford goes for the opposite as Hope, the responsible lead character. She's a convincing control freak who runs a pretty tight ship looking after a husband, two daughters, a son, and a father. Well, who else is going to keep her family's ship together? Then her flighty little sister, Faith (Kelly Ripa), an out-of-work soap star, moves in and starts to shake things up. And gentleman, she does shake. More than a pretty face and cleavage to die for, Ripa's real soap background gave her the ability to deliver a line well enough. Working with Regis Philbin even got some of that tricky comedic timing down. Unfortunately, daytime didn't give her much practice executing a heartfelt laugh on cue.

**"Like Family," C - 7:30 p.m. on WB (debuted Friday)**

Tanya's middle-class black family gets bigger (and whiter) when best friend Maddie and her teenage son, Keith, move in with her, her husband, her father-in-law, her teen daughter, and her young son. While the crew adjusts to the expansion, Keith learns to be part of a family. The big name here is Holly Robinson Peete as Tanya, but the real star, it seems, is a neverending toilet-seat joke. It's not that this sitcom stinks, necessarily. It may just be too sanitized for its own good.

**"Married to the Kellys," C - 7:30 p.m. on ABC (debuts Oct. 3)**

Manhattan boy marries Midwestern girl and tries to survive her "Twilight Zone"-ish Walton family. Fart walks. Massive bug collections. Team cheers for after-dinner rounds of Taboo. And as the toilet is to "Like Family," pork-steak on the grill is to this one. Needless to say, a strong stomach is required to appreciate it.

**"All About the Andersons," C- - 8:30 p.m. on WB (debuted Sept. 12)**

If Anthony Anderson acted as well as he acts like he can act when he portrays an aspiring actor on his new self-named show, the show itself would be a lot better. Let me break that down. When Anthony Anderson the character is trying to prove to his father, played by John Amos ("Good Times," "The West Wing"), that he's destined to be a great actor, Anthony Anderson the real guy is totally on. He proves his ability and he gets the laughs all at the same time. But for most of the series premiere he plays it too straight, taking his own history of "single-dad actor with big dreams" too seriously. Lighten up, Anderson. It's a comedy.

**"Luis," F - 7:30 p.m. on FOX (debuts Friday)**

Luis Guzman plays a doughnut shop owner in New York's Spanish Harlem. He's also landlord of the building where his daughter shacks up with a starving artist, much to his chagrin. The show is one long string of forced ethnic jabs. The characters are one-dimensional, glazed stereotypes with cliché sprinkles on top.