

"Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip"



What's on TV this fall

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For the first time in a long time, we're looking at a TV season devoid of bad shows. Not everything is Emmy worthy. No. Some are downright mediocre, and a few certainly shine more brightly than the others. But nothing is really bad, like "The Mulets" bad. Maybe it's the overlap in concepts between shows. We've got a

couple about burglars (one drama, one comedy), a couple about behind-the-scenes network TV crews (one drama, one comedy), a couple about high-profile lawyers (drama), a couple about recently dumped saps (comedy), a couple about wrongly accused men (drama) and a couple more about kidnap recovery aces (drama). Here's a closer look at what's in store.

(even the teacher and the lunch lady) to celebrate the day he met his fiancée. But the gesture proves too sweet, and she dumps him in front of everyone. Now, 20 years since they knew one another, everyone has his/her own quirky issues to deal with. But the biggest issue of all might be asking John Ritter's son (who did a fine job as a crippled former jock on "Joan of Arcadia") to carry the lead in a sitcom.

10 p.m. "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip" (NBC)

"West Wing" mastermind Aaron Sorkin's new project has received a lion's share of the hype for the coming season — rightfully so. This drama about the behind-the-scenes workings of a weekly comedy sketch show ("Saturday Night Live" but live from Hollywood, not New York, on Friday nights) not only makes some bold social statements, but also boasts an incredible cast of actors to boot. A censored sketch is the last straw for the producer of the fictional TV show (Judd Hirsch), inciting an on-air rant (packed with truly impacting points) that results in his dismissal. The newly named head of the NBC network (Amanda Peet) wrangles former writers for the show who have gone on to garner Hollywood acclaim (Matthew Perry and Bradley Whitford) to save the day. Steven Weber plays the chairman of NBC. Peet's boss, Timothy Busfield is the show's control room director. And Sorkin has scored again.

10 p.m. "Smith" (CBS)

FX has "Thief." NBC has the short-lived "Thief." Now CBS attempts a from-the-criminal's perspective drama with the generically titled "Smith." Good-Fella Ray Liotta plays master thief Bobby Stevens. He's surrounded by a cast of movie names, including Amy Smart ("Just Friends") Jonny Lee Miller ("Trainpotting"), Franky G. ("The Italian Job") and Simon Baker ("The Devil Wears Prada"), rounding out his crew. Virginia Madsen ("Sideways") plays his wife, whose unknown past has led to parole and NA meetings. Sultry-voiced Shohreh Aghdashloo (Behrooz's mom on "24" season 4) is the cool-headed boss calling the shots from afar. CBS is giving "Boston Legal" a worth-watching run for its star-power money.

TUESDAY, SEPT. 19

8 p.m. "Jericho" (CBS)
Jake Green (Skeet Ulrich) returns to his small-town Kansas home, where his estranged father (Gerald Mcaney) immediately drives him away. But a massive mushroom cloud explosion in Denver forces him to return to find the town residents unsure about what has happened and what they should do. Wake up when the finale explains what happened.

10 p.m. "Kidnapped" (NBC)

A season-long single goal series like "24" and "Prison Break," but about (duh) a kidnapping. Jeremy Sisto ("Six Feet Under") is Knapp, a for-hire ex-FBI agent specializing in finding the lost and fighting the by-the-book bureau's multipurpose approach. Timothy Hutton and Dana Delany are the desperate parents of a kidnapped child (Will Denton), and Delroy Lindo is the almost-retired FBI agent who has a history with Knapp. Maybe when this goes under, Hutton can revive the depressingly short-lived "Nero Wolfe" series.

All photos provided

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ALREADY IN PROGRESS

MONDAY, AUG. 21

9 p.m. "Vanished" (Fox)
Something's strange about the disappearance of Sara Collins (Joanne Kelly), a second-grade teacher and the wife of a powerful senator (John Allen Nelson). We learn as much from a cryptic phone conversation in the opening minute of the show. It seems Sara wasn't always Sara. And her past is something the FBI agents on the case (Gale Harold, Ming-Na of "ER") have to sort out in order to track her down. That is if an overly ambitious reporter (Rebecca Gayheart) doesn't get in their way. So far it's benefited from a "Prison Break" lead-in and has offered some twists. But it's bound to get buried once the other networks join the fray.

WEDNESDAY, AUG. 30

9 p.m. "Justine" (Fox)
At the beginning, we're shown the crime. At the end, we're shown what actually happened. And in between, we're shown what goes down behind the scenes in high-profile criminal cases: acquiring scientific testimony, predicting the prosecutor's case, media spin, focus groups and mock juries. Victor Garber ("Alias") stars as a superstar defense lawyer. Keri Smith ("Dawson's Creek"), Eamonn Walker and Rebecca Mader round out the dream defense team. Procedural fans couldn't save "Law & Order: Trial by Jury." But maybe there are enough people who haven't gotten hooked on "Lost" to keep this afloat.

SERIES PREMIERES

TUESDAY, SEPT. 5

8 p.m. "Standoff" (Fox)
It's not exactly a novel idea, or even compellingly executed, but at least it's not Goofy. Ron Livingston ("Swingers," "Office Space") and a stint on "Sex and the City" stars as a hostage negotiator who's not afraid to spill a big secret to keep Michael Cudlitz ("Grosse Pointe Blank"), the



THURSDAY, SEPT. 7

8 p.m. "Til Death" (Fox)
Brad Garrett stars as Eddie Stamm — a veteran husband, wise and weary about the ways of so-called wedded bliss after all his years with his equally aserbic wife (Joely Fisher). When newlyweds (Eddie Kaye Thomas, Kat Foster) move in next door, Stamm tries to advise his young new neighbor (not to mention boss) about how to deal with a married woman, learning a few lessons himself along the way. A safe older demo choice in a TV era that finds networks clueless about what constitutes "funny" these days. Hint: "The Office," "Earl" and the sadly dead "Arrested Development."



8:30 p.m. "Happy Hour" (Fox)

After following his girl friend from Missouri to Chicago, Henry (John Sloan) finds himself dumped and kicked upstairs. Upstairs, work-from-home entrepreneur Larry (Lee Medlin) is in search of a new 4 p.m. martini pal; his old cohort Brad (Nat Faxon) has been lost to bitchy controlling girlfriend Tina (Jamie Denbo). Like "Will & Grace" without the gayness, Beth Lacke plays Larry's Messing-esque sidekick Amanda. Cute? Sure. Worth giving up "The Office" for? Not a chance.

MONDAY, SEPT. 18

8 p.m. "The Class" (CBS)
"Friends" creator David Crane gives us a character even more pathetic than Ross Geller. Ethan (Jason Ritter) invites his third-grade class



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THURSDAY, SEPT. 21

10 p.m. "Six Degrees" (ABC)
The guy who gave us "Alias" and "Lost," J.J. Abrams, offers this new drama. A defense lawyer, a wild-child with a mysteriously dangerous past she's trying to keep ahead of, a limo driver with a gambling fetish, an ad exec, a washed-up photographer and a newly single mom contemplating her options — the show follows these seemingly unrelated individuals, revealing how, through chance, they're actually connected. Fans of spooky undertones and ensemble casting will prefer this to the "Shark" and the

increasingly pathetic "ER" (will someone please pull the plug?). But an Irish gang ("The Black Donnellys") might cause some tension come January.

10 p.m. "Shark" (CBS)

Sebastian Stark (James Woods) has made his name as a ruthless defense lawyer. But a mid-career crisis hits when a client he's just helped exonerate for the attempted murder of his wife turns around and actually kills her. A month later, Stark gets back up on a different horse: he joins the prosecutor's office, where he reports to his former nemesis (Jeri Ryan). The pilot was not-so-obviously directed by Spike Lee. And

there's not much originality left to squeeze out of court/criminal-based shows. Still, Woods is compelling. Sentimental father/daughter interludes need to gain depth or disappear.

FRIDAY, SEPT. 22

9 p.m. "Men in Trees" (ABC)
A New York gal is trapped in Alaska with the newly acquired knowledge that her fiancé has been cheating on her. Now best-selling relationship writer Marin Frit (Anne Heche) has plenty of time, space and new cultural experiences to figure out what her next move will be. Cue cheesy catchphrases like "Iceme to love."

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	MONDAYS	TUESDAYS	WEDNESDAYS	THURSDAYS	FRIDAYS *	SUNDAYS
7 p.m.						Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (ABC Sept. 24) Everybody Hates Chris* (CW Oct. 1)
7:30 p.m.						All of Us* (CW Oct. 1)
8 p.m.	"Wife Swap" (ABC) Sept. 18 "The Class" (CBS) Sept. 18 "7th Heaven" (CW) Sept. 25 Prison Break* (Fox) Aug. 21 Deal or No Deal* (NBC Sept. 18)	"Dancing With the Stars" (ABC) Sept. 12 "NCIS" (CBS) Sept. 19 "Gilmore Girls" (CW) Sept. 26 Standoff* (Fox) Sept. 5 "Friday Night Lights" (NBC) Oct. 3	"Dancing With the Stars" (ABC) Sept. 13 "Jericho" (CBS) Sept. 20 America's Next Top Model* (CW) Sept. 20 Bones* (Fox) Aug. 30 "30 Rock" (NBC) Oct. 11	Ugly Betty* (ABC) Sept. 28 Survivor: Cook Islands* (CBS) Sept. 14 Smallville* (CW) Sept. 28 Til Death* (Fox) Sept. 7 My Name Is Earl* (NBC Sept. 21)	"Ghost Whisperer" (CBS) Sept. 22 Friday Night Smackdown* (CW) Sept. 22 Nanny 911* (Fox) Sept. 8 Crossing Jordan* (NBC Oct. 20)	Girlfriends* (CW) Oct. 1 The Simpsons* (Fox) Sept. 10 Sunday Night Football* (NBC Sept. 10 pregame at 7 p.m.)
8:30 p.m.	"How I Met Your Mother" (CBS) Sept. 18		"Twenty Good Years" (NBC) Oct. 11	The Office* (NBC) Sept. 21 Happy Hour* (Fox) Sept. 7		The Amazing Race 10* (CBS) Sept. 17 The Game* (CW) Oct. 1 American Dad* (Fox) Sept. 10 Desperate Housewives* (ABC) Sept. 24
9 p.m.	"The Bachelor: Rome" (ABC) Oct. 2 "Two and a Half Men" (CBS) Sept. 18 Runaway* (CW) Sept. 25 Vanished* (Fox) Aug. 21 Heroes* (NBC) Sept. 25	The Knights of Prosperity* (ABC) Oct. 17 The Unit* (CBS) Sept. 19 Veronica Mars* (CW) Oct. 3 House* (Fox) Sept. 5 Law & Order CI* (NBC) Sept. 19	Lost* (ABC) Oct. 4 Criminal Minds* (CBS) Sept. 20 One Tree Hill* (CW) Sept. 27 Justice* (Fox) Aug. 30 The Biggest Loser* (ABC) Sept. 23 (2-hour premiere beginning at 8 p.m.) Day Break* (ABC) Nov. 15	"Grey's Anatomy" (ABC) Sept. 21 CSI* (CBS) Sept. 21 Supernatural* (CW) Sept. 28 Celebrity Duets* (Fox) Sept. 7, regular slot (premiered Aug. 28) The OC* (Fox) Nov. 2	Men in Trees* (ABC) Sept. 22 Close to Home* (CBS) Sept. 22 Friday Night Smackdown* (CW) Sept. 22 Celebrity Duets* (Fox) results Sept. 8 Las Vegas* (ABC) Oct. 20	Cold Case* (CBS) Sept. 24 Family Guy* (Fox) Sept. 10
9:30 p.m.	"The New Adventures of Old Christine" (CBS) Sept. 18	Help Me Help You* (ABC) Sept. 26				The War at Home* (Fox) Sept. 10
10 p.m.	"What About Brian" (ABC) Oct. 9 CSI: Miami* (CBS) Sept. 18 Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (NBC) Sept. 18	Boston Legal* (ABC) Sept. 26 Smith* (CBS) Sept. 19 Law & Order SVU* (NBC) Sept. 19	The Nine* (ABC) Oct. 4 CSI: NY* (CBS) Sept. 20 Kidnapped* (NBC) Sept. 20	Six Degrees* (ABC) Sept. 21 Shark* (CBS) Sept. 21 ER* (NBC) Sept. 21	Numb3rs* (CBS) Sept. 22 Law & Order* (NBC) Sept. 22	Brothers & Sisters* (ABC) Sept. 24 Without a Trace* (CBS) Sept. 24

KEY: ♦ = If you're in front of a tube, this is what you want to watch. ✱ = TVO this baby. It's worth seeing. \$ = There's just too much on TV right now. Better buy another TVO!
* Saturday night is rerun night. Get off the couch!

Fall TV preview

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SUNDAY, SEPT. 24
10 p.m. "Brothers & Sisters" (ABC)
In the large, close-knit Walker family, only Kitty (Calsita Flockhart) has left the nest, moving from L.A. to New York, where she's a conservative political radio show host. But when the possibility of a job up (on TV) brings her back into the fold, the circle, as Dad (Tom Skerrit) puts it, is complete. Just in time for her boyfriend to propose and Dad's big secrets to spill. Some familiar faces pop up among the equally drama-ridden siblings (Rachel Griffiths, Balthazar Getty), not to mention Mom (Sally Field) and Ron Rifkin ("Alias") as Uncle Saul. If you're up for a star-studded night soap, this one's for you.

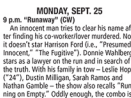


TUESDAY, SEPT. 26
9:30 p.m. "Help Me Help You" (ABC)
Group therapy: Put a bunch of messed-up people in a room to talk about their problems. Now put Ted Danson, as premier psychologist Dr. Bill Hoffman, in charge. Add Hoffman's own issues: the slow, painful death of his 25-year marriage (Jane Kaczmarek plays his wife) and his daughter's uncomfortable relationship with her psychology professor. It's no "Cheers," but it'll do in a world without much TV comedy.

THURSDAY, SEPT. 28
8 p.m. "Ugly Betty" (ABC)
Based on the telenovela "Betty la Fea," this hourlong comedy stars America Ferrera ("Real Women Have Curves") as Betty Suarez, a homely but sharp young woman who lands her dream job for all the wrong reasons, but keeps it for the right ones. The fashion mag world is a cruel place, and Betty's boss (Eric Mabius) and his nemesis (Vanessa Williams) fight it in. It's executive-produced by Salma Hayek, who appears as an over-the-top actress on a Mexican soap. "The Office," now this. Finally the networks are remembering how to rip off another country's show well. Let's try to forget "Coupling," shall we?

SUNDAY, OCT. 1
8:30 p.m. "The Game" (CW)
This aired already as an episode of UPN's "Girlfriends." Now a show on its own. "The Game" isn't for guys who dig football, but women who dig guys who dig football. Tina Mowry ("Sister, Sister") is the girlfriend of a rookie football player on a pro team, the Dallas Cowboys. Now she's got to balance pursuing her career, being the supportive girlfriend and playing by the rules set by wives of other team members.

TUESDAY, OCT. 3
8 p.m. "Friday Night Lights" (NBC)
A Texas town, once a movie, now the tale of a first town obsessed with its high school football team comes to TV, with a few tweaks. Eric Taylor (Kyle Chandler) is a first-year coach charged with taking the team, the Dillon Panthers, to the state championships — a goal in which the whole town is invested. The movie's director takes the reins for the story's modernized TV incarnation. The pacing is intense, creating a sense of spectral interest. Since the show's not skipping on the action sequences — rumor has it they're seamlessly splicing shots of real athletes into the acting scenes — expect not only high-impact plot lines but also game plays.



MONDAY, SEPT. 25
9 p.m. "Runaway" (CW)
An innocent man tries to clear his name after finding his co-worker killed. Murdered. No. It does a star Harrison (i.e., "Presumed Innocent," "The Fugitive"). Donnie Wahlberg stars as a lawyer on the run and in search of the truth. With his family in tow — Leslie Hope ("24"), Dustin Milligan, Sarah Ramos and Nathan Gamble — the show also recalls "Running on Empty." Oddly enough, the combo is good, and surprisingly fresh.

9 p.m. "Heroes" (NBC)
"Every hero must learn his purpose. Then he'll be tested and called to greatness." If you're looking for originality in drama this season, look no further than this heady show. You don't need to be a comic book fan to follow a handful of people from around the world as they discover, embrace and hone their supernatural gifts. But it does help. Milo Ventimiglia ("Gilmore Girls") and Ali Larter ("Varsity Blues") might be names/faces you recognize. Matt Oka and Sendil Ramamurthy could soon become household names. And Greg Grunberg ("Alias," "Felicity") isn't in the pilot, but is introduced in the second episode and is positioned to take on a major role during the season.



WEDNESDAY, OCT. 4
8 p.m. "Twenty Good Years" (NBC)
Maybe if John Lithgow hadn't been Dick Solomon on "Third Rock from the Sun." Maybe if Jeffrey Tambor hadn't been George Bluth on "Arrested Development." Maybe then these fine actors' new "Odd Couple"-esque characters wouldn't fall so flat. Lithgow plays John, an egomaniac master surgeon forced into retirement. Tambor plays Jeffrey, an indecisive judge. John convinces Jeffrey that they've got to seize the day while they still can. NBC has strategically scheduled this in a time slot with no other competitors — unless you count "Dancing With the Stars."

WEDNESDAY, OCT. 11
8:30 p.m. "30 Rock" (NBC)
An early version of the pilot elicited "Oh, no. Tina Fey just quit SNL for this?" Sure, Alec Baldwin as a relentless network exec/appliance inventor is funny. And Fey is smart, both as an actress and writer (evidenced by "SNL" and "Mean Girls"). Tracy Morgan as a twisted movie star saving the day was totally out there but humorous. Rachel Dratch as the lead in a comedy show within a comedy show was off, though. The good news is that somebody else saw this (thanks, Lorne), and the pilot has been overhauled, adding Jane Krakowski ("Ally McBeal") to replace Dratch, who has been recast to play multiple roles. Copies weren't available by press time, but, for Tina's sake, we're hoping it's good.

WEDNESDAY, OCT. 11
9 p.m. "The Nine" (ABC)
They say it themselves: "Issue one. That name sucks." Why ABC changed the title of this witty, guffaw-heavy sitcom (essentially this season's new "My Name Is Earl") from "Let's Rob ..." is inconceivable. The old name set it all up. Let's rob whom? The answer, this season, is Mick Jagger, who makes magnificent cameo appearances throughout. Donald Logue ("Grounded for Life") is Eugene, a night janitor with dreams of owning a bar. He has an epiphany to rob Mick Jagger and organizes a crew: another janitor, a doorman, a cab driver and a waitress. For a local laugh, SUNY New Paltz gets name-checked when a kid is sacked into interning for the ragtag bunch.

WEDNESDAY, NOV. 15
9 p.m. "Day Break" (ABC)
It takes five minutes and the possibility that a dog's been murdered to care at all about anything. But hang in there; once the seemingly clichéd plot — a cop (Taye Diggs) is wrongly accused of murder and needs to clear his name — gives way to the true "Groundhog Day" premise, you're in for the ride.

TUESDAY, OCT. 17
9 p.m. "The Knights of Prosperity" (ABC)
They say it themselves: "Issue one. That name sucks." Why ABC changed the title of this witty, guffaw-heavy sitcom (essentially this season's new "My Name Is Earl") from "Let's Rob ..." is inconceivable. The old name set it all up. Let's rob whom? The answer, this season, is Mick Jagger, who makes magnificent cameo appearances throughout. Donald Logue ("Grounded for Life") is Eugene, a night janitor with dreams of owning a bar. He has an epiphany to rob Mick Jagger and organizes a crew: another janitor, a doorman, a cab driver and a waitress. For a local laugh, SUNY New Paltz gets name-checked when a kid is sacked into interning for the ragtag bunch.

10 p.m. "The Nine" (ABC)
Nine strangers form an indelible bond after they're held hostage together in a bank robbery. Scott Wolf ("Party of Five"), Timothy Daly ("Wings"), Chi McBride ("Boston Public") and Kim Raver ("24") are among the new post-trauma friends. If they can make us care, they might keep us watching.