

LEADERS OUT OF THE GATE

By Steve Chagollan



LOOKING BACK AT select pilots launched since 2000, it's clear that the first decade of the New Millennium paved the way for the current Platinum Age of Television. Of course, strong material and canny casting provides the raw material for success, but without strong execution behind the scenes by directors (who are rarely mentioned in reviews), these shows would not have cast such a giant shadow on the TV landscape.

Some of these series put their networks on the critical map, such as *Mad Men* for AMC and *Gilmore Girls* for The WB, and, with keen directorial guidance, advanced more than a few acting careers, including those of Jon Hamm, Elisabeth Moss, Jason Bateman, Steve Carell, Bryan Cranston, Kyle Chandler, Connie Britton, Adam Driver and Sandra Oh, among many others.



GIRLS Lena Dunham (April 15, 2012)

► Lena Dunham drew from her own life (not unlike her breakthrough indie feature *Tiny Furniture*) to create this series, set in New York, which many considered a kind of 20something slacker relative to *Sex in the City*. The multi-hyphenate said in 2013 that she had evolved as a director. "I am far more aware of camera, sound, costumes and blocking than I was when I started," she said. "I try and let myself grow and expand while also recognizing that the show has an aesthetic that shouldn't vacillate wildly." Dunham would end up winning a DGA Award for her direction.



MAD MEN Alan Taylor
 "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"
 (July 19, 2007)

► As *The New York Times* aptly pointed out in its review of this game-changing series pilot, "There were seven deadly sins practiced in the dawn of the 1960s: smoking, drinking, adultery, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and racism. In its first few minutes, *Mad Men* taps into all of them." Rather than condoning the kind of behavior that would be considered fatal in today's #MeToo era, the series cast an unflinching, if jaundiced eye on Madison Avenue hucksters, with dapper Don Draper (Jon Hamm) as its conflicted spirit animal. The pilot—marked by distinctly etched performances—was elegantly framed, sumptuously photographed and impeccably attired, seducing critics across the land and earning a DGA Award for director Alan Taylor.



ATLANTA Hiro Murai
 "The Big Bang" (Sept. 6, 2016)

► This series, about a Princeton dropout who seeks salvation by managing a rapper who's on the verge of stardom, revels in a sense of place and the realistic frustrations of an intelligent protagonist (star and creator Donald Glover) who nevertheless makes reckless decisions. Pilot helmsman Hiro Murai shot on authentic, unromantic Atlanta locations, and has directed the bulk of the series. He credits the "meandering, existential comedies" of the Coen brothers and Sophia Coppola as influences. "They have a really cool way of milking comedy out of a tone poem almost."

"Pilots are tricky because there are so many things you have to accomplish. For FX, it's about letting the audience in." —HIRO MURAI



MALCOLM IN THE MIDDLE

Todd Holland (Jan. 9, 2000)

► Another instant classic in the quirky, eccentric family genre, *Malcolm in the Middle* revolves around the title character, played by Frankie Muniz, who occasionally addresses the camera directly. Other directorial flourishes orchestrated by director Todd Holland included whiplashing camera movement and frequent wide-angle and extreme close-ups. In this sitcom, the parents often act like adolescents and the kids are a source of reason, but with an undercurrent of love and support. *Variety* called the show a "fresh Valentine to dysfunctional clans everywhere."



DEADWOOD Walter Hill
 (March 21, 2004)

► It's only fitting that Walter Hill, the director of such big-screen Westerns as *The Long Riders* and *Wild Bill*, which both share DNA with *Deadwood*, would direct the pilot of this series set during the Dakota gold rush of the 1870s. "This was a period piece ahead of its time," wrote *The New York Times'* Alessandra Stanley when she revisited the series in 2015. "This depiction of the West was sophisticated and deeply layered, sometimes comical but always brutal." Hill would win a DGA Award and an Emmy for his efforts.

PHOTOS: (TOP) CRAIG BLANKENHORN/AMC; (BOTTOM LEFT) COURTESY TODD HOLLAND; (BOTTOM RIGHT) PHOTOFEEST

PHOTOS: (TOP & BOTTOM LEFT) PHOTOFEEST; (TOP RIGHT) GUY D'ALAMA/FX; (BOTTOM RIGHT) HBO

GREY'S ANATOMY Peter Horton
"A Hard Day's Night" (March 27, 2005)

► This midseason replacement became one of the longest-running shows on television, and the pilot, directed by Peter Horton (who earned a DGA and Emmy nomination for his effort), established the series' stylistic template. "We really wanted to give a sense of the interns always trying to get into the surgeries, what it is to be a doctor," said Horton in the episode commentary. "We didn't want to do what *ER* had done a million times, and so we found that doing lots of these pieces handheld but in a steady way with some long lenses created this same hectic feel that we had imagined these people would feel when they're in there."



"We tried to create a comedy that doesn't look like any other comedy." —MELINA MATSOUKAS

THE PEOPLE v. O.J. SIMPSON: AMERICAN CRIME STORY

Ryan Murphy
"From the Ashes of Tragedy"
(Feb. 2, 2016)

► The first season of the FX true crime anthology series deals with race, celebrity and the court of public opinion. Director Ryan Murphy set the table with the discovery of the bodies, the infamous Ford Bronco chase, and the introduction of several major real-life characters, including deputy D.A. Marcia Clark (Sarah Paulson), co-prosecutor Christopher Darden (Sterling K. Brown), defense attorney Johnnie Cochran (Courtney B. Vance) and defendant O.J. Simpson (Cuba Gooding Jr.). *The Atlantic* called the series "shockingly well-acted and sensitively rendered" and "one of the most compelling TV dramas in recent memory." Murphy earned a DGA nomination, and the series raked in 22 Emmy noms and nine wins.



PHOTOS: (TOP LEFT) SHONDA RHIMES; (TOP RIGHT & BOTTOM) PHOTOFEST



INSECURE
MELINA MATSOUKAS
(Oct. 9, 2016)

► This prickly comedy series, loosely based on Issa Rae's popular web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, explores the contemporary black experience from a female perspective, touching on the complexities of friendships and relationships, as well as social and racial issues. "We tried to create a comedy that doesn't look like any other comedy," said director Melina Matsoukas, who filmed much of the pilot on location in South L.A. and Inglewood. "The way we shoot *Insecure* is motivated by the mental state of each of our characters."

PHOTOS: (TOP) HBO (2); (BOTTOM LEFT) PHOTOFEST; (BOTTOM RIGHT) 20TH CENTURY FOX



ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT
Anthony & Joe Russo (Nov. 2, 2003)

► This landmark comedy centers around the dysfunctional Bluth family, oddballs who indulge in extravagant lifestyles until their patriarch, a real estate developer, is arrested for defrauding investors. The show's outrageous humor and eclectic style—using handheld cameras, voice-over narration and quick-cut inserts—would influence myriad sitcoms in its wake. The Russo brothers, who won an Emmy for the pilot, established the show's controlled mayhem. *The Hollywood Reporter* called it "easily the smartest, funniest and most original new comedy of the season."

FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

Peter Berg (Oct. 3, 2006)

► Emmy-nominated pilot director Peter Berg—who also directed a film version of the source material, the nonfiction *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team and a Dream*, by H.G. “Buzz” Bissinger—has said that one of his motivations for developing the series about high school football culture in Texas was to flesh out many of the book’s interpersonal relationships that were excised from the film due to time constraints.

Berg also insisted on shooting in Texas and giving the actors freedom to roam without artificial marks. “The core philosophy of the shooting style,” said Berg, “is that the cameras should organize their movements and behaviors based upon what the actors are doing”—like a documentary crew going after the action.



THE WIRE Clark Johnson
“The Target” (June 2, 2002)

► Although this series—which ambitiously tackles everything from Baltimore’s drug trade to the interworkings of its city government, educational system and news media—received mixed reviews upon its initial outing. It has come to be regarded by several critics as one of the most rewarding TV shows of all time. Clark Johnson, who directed three of the first five episodes, including the pilot, helped establish *The Wire’s* gritty authenticity. “The show has a look of its own, and the place that it’s set in (Baltimore), is an important character,” Johnson told NPR. “And because of the theme of the show, which is to surveil and observe and watch from a distance, we took the idea to use a long lens and watch from afar. That’s been the look of the show—that detached view.”



“The goal [on *The Office*] was to create the illusion that we were trying to keep up with the action, not always successfully.” —KEN KWAPIS



THE OFFICE Ken Kwapis
(March 24, 2005)

► Ken Kwapis, a leading practitioner of the single-camera sitcom, brought his savvy sensibility to this comedy about the employees of a fictional paper sales company, utilizing the “mockumentary” style that stayed true to the series’ original BBC incarnation. In this regard, recalled Kwapis: “It was important for me to announce to the crew that certain kinds of ‘mistakes’ were quite welcome. The goal was to create the illusion that we were trying to keep up with the action, not always successfully.” In its review of the pilot, *The Hollywood Reporter* noted: “It is ironic that this series, though an adaptation, is one of the most unique and creative new comedies on NBC in years.”

PHOTOS: PHOTOFEST

PHOTOS: (TOP) PHOTOFEST; (BOTTOM) GETTY IMAGES