

A&E

TV treasures you may have missed

BY BRENT LAWSON

So your favourite TV show is in hiatus — or cancelled, or out of new episodes, or waiting to be renewed — and you're coming down with the rerun blues. Well, with a little advance planning you won't have to fall into the trap of mindlessly watching the Least Objectionable Program. Scope out a few DVD collections. It means you don't have to be held hostage by the TV gods. Here are a few to consider:

Danger Man/Secret Agent Man (U.S. title)

Patrick McGoochan's cool, urbane take as spy John Drake is a treat that holds up well after 40 years. Drake is a low-tech, black and white, no frills, no-nonsense spy, the antithesis of gadget-loving James Bond of the movies. While Bond had ejector seats in his car and exploding suitcases, Drake was more likely to employ a few firecrackers, a smoke bomb — and guile. The series was successful in several countries, earning McGoochan the chance to launch the ambitious series *The Prisoner*, which vexed some viewers and left others transfixed. It's also readily available on DVD.

Twin Peaks

David Lynch's series is fascinating, surprising, inspiring and truly unique. Also, at times annoying, self-indulgent and unfathomable. Spawned several theories about the meaning of it all. Still, enough mystery and compelling characters to keep you involved and trying to unravel the mystery. Just like life, not all stories have neat, happy endings.

Fernwood 2 Night / America 2-Nite

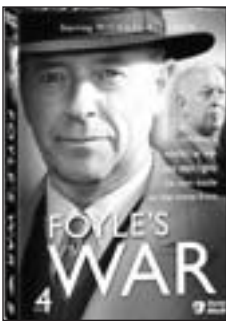
An engaging pioneer of the "mockumentary" style, from the Norman Lear (*All In the Family*, *Maude*) stable, with several episodes directed by Canadian Alan Thicke. Martin Mull (Barth Gimble), Fred Willard (Jerry Hubbard), Frank De Vol (Happy Kyne) are the perfect trio of has-beens and want-to-be's who cobble together a talk show featuring small town talent. Mull and Willard were never better. Frankly, many fans prefer the original version (*Fernwood 2 Night*) with its no-name character actors to the newer reincarnation



Gary Shandling and a talented supporting cast were superb in lampooning the talk show genre in *The Larry Sanders Show*.



If you haven't seen the original British version of *The Office*, take an extra-long lunch break and track down the sitcom on DVD. Ricky Gervais is perfect as the prince of incompetence.



Dive into the world of odd, compelling and truly good TV, with series such as *Twin Peaks*, *Foyle's War*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *Secret Agent Man*.

(*America 2-Nite*) which made more use of "real" stars, playing along with the gag. Sadly, this series is hard to find on DVD, but you can usually find episodes on eBay until they get around to an official release.

Foyle's War

Quiet and understated, Michael Kitchen is subtle but superb as Detective Chief Superintendent Christopher Foyle of the Hastings police department in this realistic portrayal of life in England during the Second World War. Automobiles, airplanes, uniforms and settings are letter perfect and fans say the show does a first-class job in capturing the spirit of the times. *Foyle's War* is the brainchild of Anthony Horowitz, who also created *Midsomer Murders*. See: foyleswar.com

The Office (British version)

There's no question the U.S. version of *The Office* (starring Steve Carell) has surprised fans by finding its own formula for success, and it deserves full credit. But you owe it to yourself to watch the original British series, starring the perfectly inept Ricky Gervais. He's awkward and unaware he is the crown prince of incompetence. The strained silences, the embarrassing moments, and when you least expect it, a tiny sliver of heart from this shallow little man who tries to be everyone's friend and but more often than not just loses everyone's respect. The series was first broadcast in 2001. Untouchable.

The Larry Sanders Show

Garry Shandling nailed the talk show genre with this funny depiction of life in front of and behind the camera. Very strong supporting cast (Rip Torn, Jeffrey Tambor) and excellent writing. Shandling/Sanders has all the foibles and insecurities we associate with self-centred show business weasels. The show mocks the industry and attracted visits from several stars, who appear thrilled to portray themselves as shallow and self-absorbed. Gee, what a stretch.

Sherlock Holmes

The late Jeremy Brett is exquisite in the role. His pale, wan face and haughty, impatient manner bring the required depth to the storied role. Basil Rathbone was excellent in several movie versions of the Arthur Conan Doyle series. But Brett reflects a more troubled, eccentric and darker side of the character.

Prime Suspect

It's premise may seem dated today — a woman finally getting a chance to lead a high-profile murder investigation. But Mirren is vulnerable but strong as she endures the put-downs and struggles in male-dominated police force. She is determined in her resolve to survive the harsh environment characterized by male chauvinism, cronyism and favouritism. The character was compelling enough to lead to several reprises for Mirren.

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NEW ON DVD

Oscar winning Coen film on DVD

No Country for Old Men

Joel and Ethan Coen's crime thriller dominated with four Oscars at his year: best picture, directing, adapted screenplay and supporting actor for Javier Bardem. Adapted from Cormac McCarthy's novel, the film follows the aftermath of a drug deal gone bloodily bad in the west Texas desert as a wily cowboy (Josh Brolin) makes off with a satchel of cash and is pursued by both a relentless killer (Bardem) and a world-weary sheriff (Tommy Lee Jones). The DVD and Blu-ray high-definition disc come with three featurettes. (Miramax)

Bee Movie

Jerry Seinfeld's animated comedy is sweetened with a huge load of extras. Seinfeld served as writer and voice star in the tale of a bee that sues humanity for profiting off the honey his species toils to produce. The movie comes with a handful of featurettes or fully packed two-disc DVD and HD DVD versions whose extras include alternate endings. (Paramount)

Dan in Real Life

Steve Carell's a widower doing his best as an advice columnist with three daughters and lousy timing when romance comes calling. Attending a family reunion, he falls for a woman (Juliette Binoche) who turns out to be the new girlfriend of his brother (Dane Cook). (Disney)

Hitman

Timothy Olyphant stars in an action thriller adapted from the video game, playing a genetically engineered assassin hired to take out criminal masterminds and ending up on the run as an Interpol agent (Dougray Scott) and the Russian military pursues him throughout eastern Europe. (20th Century Fox)

Nancy Drew

The queen of teen detectives returns with Hollywood's latest adventure inspired by author Carolyn Keene's mysteries for young readers. Emma Roberts, daughter of Eric and niece of Julia, stars as the old-fashioned, plaid-skirted Nancy, who clashes with the hip crowd in Hollywood as she adjusts from her small-town life while trying to solve the death of a legendary screen starlet. (Warner Bros.)

August Rush

Freddie Highmore stars in the title role, playing an orphaned music prodigy on a magical quest to New York City in search of the parents (Keri Russell as a classically trained cellist and Jonathan Rhys Meyers as an Irish rocker) he senses are still out there somewhere. Robin Williams co-stars as a street musician and Terrence Howard plays a social worker at the kid's orphanage. (Warner Bros.)

By David Germain,
The Associated Press



Comedy *Bee Movie* has alternate endings on some DVD editions.

HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTOS

TV: A paradigm shift in program scheduling

Continued from A&E

Now, top shows such as *Prison Break* are escaping from those narrow confines. Last week's program, for example, ended the show's third season — in February.

What's a loyal viewer to do? Daniel Malen, editor of the Canadian website theTVaddict.com, understands the frustration. But he said viewers must recognize that the networks face more competition for an audience, and also have fewer goods on the shelf because of the lengthy strike by the Writers Guild of America.

"Viewers can no longer be counted to tune into reruns," argues Malen.

"So rather than have a series like *Lost* or *Prison Break* play out from September to May with reruns sprinkled in between, networks are compacting the shows into fall/winter seasons with virtually zero reruns."

It used to be that you'd catch up with your favourite episodes with reruns. But now thanks to iTunes, video on demand, DVD and online streaming, it's up to fans to catch up with their favourite shows whenever it fits into their life. Or wait, and buy the DVD.

In fact, for many shows the

credits should come with an alternate soundtrack, like the closing theme to *The Carol Burnett Show*:

"Seems we just got started and before you know it, comes the time we have to say, 'So long!'"

Take the latest instalment of *The Terminator* franchise, *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. A handful of episodes (nine) and whoosh — gone, season ended. Fans have to wait to see if the show will be picked up by Fox for Season 2.

But "theTVaddict" fans know the answer. They maintain the show will be picked up because it essentially serves as a glorified commercial for where the serious money is made: Foreign sales and DVD box sets. Plus, *Terminator* is much more than a TV series — it is a brand. And with a fourth film planned, the TV series is a perfect promotional vehicle.

There is compelling evidence that sometimes the tail wags the dog: The animated series *Family Guy* was originally cancelled because of poor ratings. But after strong DVD sales demonstrated the program had a loyal audience, the show was put back in production.

The strike really knocked the nail-biting, edge-of-your-seat

suspense series 24 for a loop.

Faithful fans of the critically acclaimed show, starring Canadian actor Kiefer Sutherland, will have to wait until January 2009 to see Jack Bauer in action. The seventh season was already shifting time, out of the fall straitjacket, and the new season was scheduled to premiere in January 2008.

Then the writers strike hit, like a smart bomb that left TV sets operable but new programs scarce.

"I definitely agree that it can be frustrating, for fans to have to wait, in 24's case until 2009 for new episodes," Malen said. "But that is just another unfortunate result of the strike."

Still, Malen said, fans should make the most of a bad situation. "I much prefer 13 weeks of uninterrupted episodes. It really helps build up the excitement."

Another result of TV trying to

make an omelette from broken eggs is the tactic employed with *Lost*. Prior to the new show each week, ABC has been running the previous week's episode with onscreen explanations, a kind of Coles Notes rendition that has fans divided. Malen says the pop-up video style commentary is cheesy and insulting to viewers.

"But what most average fans forget is that TV is a business. And rerunning an episode is just another way ABC makes more money off what amounts to a very expensive show to produce." So despite the competition and the strike, *Lost* is finding ways to live, just like the survivors.

Sources: thetvaddict.com;
Wikipedia.org; *Canadian Press*

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