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Sr. Rose's Emmy picks

by Sr. Rose Pacatte



Neil Patrick Harris is the emcee for the Emmys Sept. 20.

Although the Academy for Television Arts and Sciences has not deigned to nominate my favorite shows, they have singled out some worthy programs and actors for this year's Emmy Awards (September 20, 2009). Here's my take on the nominees and those I hope will win.

I enjoy television even though the only consistent thing about television, regarding depictions of human behavior, is that it is inconsistent. One of my favorite shows was the recently canceled, "Without a Trace" (2002 - 2009); it received a Catholics in Media Award (CIMA; www.catholicsinmedia.org) this year for its focus on a fictitious FBI unit's search for the lost while searching for the meaning of their own lives. Another favorite show is ABC's "Desperate Housewives" -- a true testimony to inconsistency. Yet sometimes it hits home runs in terms of humanity and spirituality. Life is inconsistent, too -- and this is a comedy.

Comedy

It's no secret that I think comedy in the United States is in crisis demonstrated by the unending focus on body parts and functions. The show that should have been nominated is "The Big Bang Theory" (CBS, Monday); nerd-dom was never so funny. Given its absence from the roster, I would like to see "30 Rock" win again. It's smart and consistently funny.

Drama

My community is a fan of "Damages" for its study of human behavior and I like the CBS version of Showtime's macabre "Dexter." A sister in my community recently asked me why people watch the story of a genetically determined vigilante (psychopath) serial killer of serial killers. I had to consider why I watch it.

I recalled for her a miniseries on St. Teresa of Avila that is quite good; the acting is genuine and production values are high. It was produced by a company in Spain (that my own publishing house, Pauline Books & Media www.pauline.org used to distribute but is now carried by Ignatius Press).

After the saint's death, in the final episode, John of the Cross does a monologue on how supple they found St. Teresa's body nine months after burial in dirt and lye and so many bricks that it broke open the casket. He speaks of how amazed he was that her breasts were "full and high"; how he took a hand from her body and then a finger that he kept for himself. Another friar continues the monologue recounting how he reluctantly took a knife to her arm at the request of his superiors and how wonderful it was, "Without effort I separated it at its joint". Then a priest says how her body was "torn to pieces", the right foot and her jaw was taken off to Rome, "her right hand and her left eye, fingers and pieces of flesh are spread throughout Spain and Christendom" -- except for "her right hand and heart that are kept in Alba de Tormes shrines in Spain -- and what is left of her body." I can still recall our novice director's reaction when she saw this episode: "What was John of the Cross doing looking at her breasts?"

This example of Catholicism's infatuation with saintly celebrity by the possession of first class relics (body parts) or second class relics (an item touched to the body parts) of a saint, is about proximity to holiness, true. The context is different from that of "Dexter," certainly. However, what the two programs have in common is that they are stories both ghoulish and grisly and they have something to say about the human condition and the spiritual life, however unusual. These two programs also point to humanity's fascination with the body, sanitized and dismembered, or brutalized and dismembered. The St. Teresa of Avila series does not show the dissection of her body but the vivid narration, delivered in such solemnity, fully engages the imagination. I can only envisage what non-Catholics make of such a ritual, narrated or dramatized. "Dexter," as visual media does, turns what is invisible into the visible in its own violent ritual within its own mad logic.

Both programs reinforce the idea that context is everything when it comes to story-telling.

A friend of mine who is a brilliant arm chair critic, Rae Stabosz, is a fan of "Dexter." When I asked her why she liked it, she sent me this quote from the Dominican Simon Tugwell: "Some ancient ascetic writers recommended a practice whose most famous recent exponent is Chesterton's Father Brown: entering imaginatively into the heart of every kind of criminal, knowing that that criminal is oneself; finding the murderer, the blackmailer, the thief in oneself." (from *Prayer: Living with God*). I'll write more on "Dexter" and Rae's analysis later in the season.

"Mad Men" (2007), the reimagining of the image industry in the 1960s, is the favorite to win in the drama category, and I like this show as well. It is so s-l-o-w in our era of frenetic TV action ushered in with "ER" in 1994 pre-dated by the British "Casualty" (1986.) The feel the show evokes is one of suburban banality underpinned by the moral and social complexities of the United States in the 1960s. It also tells how advertising and consumerism were orchestrated to feed off the other, creating the dominant advertising industry and contributing to an economic dance between stability and instability, turning wants into needs.

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My vote is for "Dexter."

Actor in a Comedy

Jim Parsons from "Big Bang Theory." What an amazing fresh talent; he delivers deadpan with relish and verve. I wish they had an ensemble category; I'd give the cast two Emmy's. However, in terms of humanity "Scrubs" (2002) may be more deserving. In fact, at The Humanitas Awards www.humanitasprize.org luncheon today in Beverly Hills, writer Aseem Batra won an award and cash prize for season eight's episode 2: "My Last Words." It won't be up for a possible Emmy until 2010, but "Scrubs" is a comedy with heart, and it shows.

Actress in a Comedy

The best comedienne is Tina Fey in a field of brilliant funny women (though I am not a fan of all of them). But is anyone watching Kaley Cuoco in "The Big Bang Theory"? I met director/producer Tom Shadyac ("Bruce Almighty") at a press junket and complimented him on (executive) producing the then very successful "8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter" (2002 - 2005). He agreed and said that John Ritter, whose untimely demise in 2003 brought the show to an end too soon, was terrific. Surprised, I replied, "Ritter is Ok, but it's the girl, Kaley Cuoco, she's off-the-chart funny." He seemed a little confused, but nodded and moved on. Now she's back. If you missed the Season 2 episode 3: "The Barbarian Sublimation" of "The Big Bang Theory," where Sheldon turns Cuoco into an online gaming nerd like her neighbors, you might rent it. It is worth watching just to see her take the cheese curl out of her disheveled hair and eat it.

Supporting Actor in a Comedy

Your choice, though I think Rainn Wilson of "The Office" is deserving.

Supporting Actress in a Comedy

I am a loyal "Ugly Betty" fan so my vote goes to Vanessa Williams. She is a delicious villain and foil to all the characters but most of all herself.

Actor in a Drama

Gabriel Byrne plays Dr. Paul Weston, a psychotherapist, on HBO's "In Treatment" (2008). It is great watching and a favorite in my community. Paul's office is a microcosm of misery and humanity; his own inner demons could be ours. He asks good questions and sometimes gives advice but people are fragile -- and so is he. On the other hand, Simon Baker as Patrick Jane, a man who pays attention to what is going on around him in the police procedural "The Mentalist" (2008), makes for easy-going viewing (among an increasingly crowded genre of mind-readers) and is entertaining after a long day. But if you use my religious community as a barometer, we watched all the episodes of "In Treatment," going so far as to order the ones we missed through Netflix. We have not done this for any other show - ever. It is not possible to out-guess the Academy, but Byrne is my pick. John Hamm in "Mad Men" as ad exec Don Draper, has been called "elegant" but Don's feet are made of clay, too. The appeal of the show is how moral dilemmas and relationships are played out within the context of the shifting '60s. This category is anyone's guess.

Not to be a name-dropper but I met Gabriel Byrne today as well as Paris Barclay, co-executive producer of "In Treatment" at The Humanitas Awards and told them that "In Treatment" is a convent favorite because of its humanity; they both said this is what they like to hear.

Actress in a Drama

Again, you choose; I like all of the nominated actresses. For complexity of character, Glenn Close as Patty Hewes in "Damages" wins the Emmy. Yet she is not easy to like, nor is Holly Hunter's flawed Grace Hanadarko (interesting name) in "Saving Grace," a show many people of faith like because of its obvious religious themes. Everyone in my community watches "The Closer" and we love Kyra Sedgwick as Deputy Police Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson. Her character is not complex and the show is pretty lightweight, but I think that is its appeal. Or it could be her secret love for chocolate and how she sneaks it on the sly. Some things just resonate.

Supporting Actor in a Drama

The field is wide open but my vote goes for William Hurt, the whistleblower in "Damages." Conscience is not always a black and white issue, but when it prevails it is a winner.

Supporting Actress in a Drama

Hope Davis as Mia, a lawyer and Dr. Paul Weston's former patient in "In Treatment" (see above), is a therapist's worst nightmare. Riveting performances. I like Chandra Wilson in "Grey's Anatomy" (2005). She's brilliant. But "Grey's Anatomy" has lost some of its luster so I am not sure she can pull off a win here. Kudos if she does.

Reality Shows: Competition Program

I lived and worked in New York City for too long; I dislike "The Amazing Race" intensely. (Remember Arthur Hiller's 1970 film "The Out of Towners"? Why would anyone put themselves through such stress, even for money?) I am a faithful fan of "America Idol," "Dancing with the Stars" (though I like "So You Think You Can Dance?" Much more), "Project Runway" and what I have seen of "Top Chef." "The Amazing Race" is favored to win but I would like to see any of the others take the prize instead. Relax already.

Lead Actor for a Miniseries or a Movie

Kevin Bacon in "Taking Chance" stands at the head of the class. This story of a Marine officer, who volunteers to accompany home the body of a young, fallen fellow Marine who died in Iraq, is television at its best. It is the hero's journey -- but how many heroes can there be in death? "Taking Chance" shows that heroes are everywhere -- those who witness to self-sacrifice even in a war that never should have happened. It also deserves an Emmy in the Outstanding Miniseries or Movie category. This HBO movie won a Humanitas Prize today for the writers, Lt. Col. Michael R. Strobl and Ross Katz. If you choose to watch this on DVD remember it has a BK rating (bring Kleenex).

Lead Actress in a Miniseries or a Movie

To tell you the truth, I didn't see any of the nominated movies or miniseries named in this category so all I can do is guess. I want to give a shout out, however, to Hallmark's "Accidental Friendship" starring Chandra Wilson ("Grey's Anatomy"). I met the writer Anna Sandor today at The Humanitas event and

promised prayers that her project might pick up an Emmy on Sunday. Read the review on Wikipedia en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accidental_Friendship; I am sorry I missed it.

For the rest of the categories I am just listing my favorites; if a category is missing it's because I didn't see the program or movie.

Outstanding Supporting Actress in Mini-series or Movie -- Marcia Gay Harden as Jenina in Hallmark's "The Courageous Heart of Irene Sendler." This seems kind of a consolation prize; Harden's role was small. The film, however, deserved a nomination and Anna Paquin her own nomination in the lead role. This film is based on the play "Life in a Jar" written by a high school girl, Megan Stewart, in 1999. The play's title highlights that Irena Sendler, a Catholic social worker and nurse, wrote down the names of every child she smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto during World War II and the names of the families she places them with. She hid the pieces of paper in jars and buried them for safe-keeping. After the war these papers enabled many children to be reunited, when possible, with family members.

Outstanding Guest Actress in a Comedy Series -- Tina Fey on "Saturday Night Live" for her impersonation of Gov. Sarah Palin. I heard somewhere that when Fey's young daughter saw her on the television as Palin, she patted the TV screen saying "Mommy! Mommy!" Does it get better than that? What is the place of political satire in a democracy? Ah! This is the question.

Outstanding Guest Actress in a Drama Series -- CCH Pounder in "The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency." Again, another consolation prize for an exquisite HBO television series that deserved several nominations. If you haven't read the books by Alexander McCall Smith, treat yourself. This series was the last project produced by Anthony Minghella (he also co-wrote) and Sydney Pollack; they both passed away in 2008 before the series aired in the United Kingdom or in the United States. Themes such as dignity, heart, courage and the desire to do something with the life that the good Lord gave us permeate the plots. Most of the time it's better, I think, to reflect on themes rather than search for a message.

Outstanding Comedy, Music or Variety Series -- "The Daily Show" with Jon Stewart or "The Colbert Report" with Stephen Colbert. Take your pick.

Outstanding Children's Program -- I admit to not watching a lot of kid's programming, but I did take in several episodes of "Hannah Montana" -- where the biggest moral dilemma the kids face is how to get to the mall. I don't think so. I also take issue with using an after school program whose main raison d'être is to create brand awareness and sell music, merchandise, and lifestyle to 'tweens. That it lacks sex, violence and bad language is not a good enough reason to let kids watch the show without guidance. You cannot define good television (or movies, songs, etc.) by what's missing.

Enjoy the Emmy's!

A note about The Humanitas Prize www.humanitasprize.org founded by Paulist Fr. Bud Kaiser, who died in 2000, from the Web site: "The HUMANITAS Prize is an annual screenwriter's award founded in 1974 to encourage, stimulate and sustain the nation's screenwriters in their humanizing task, and to give them the recognition they deserve."

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