

New on US television: *Arrested Development* (again), *Behind the Candelabra* and *Family Tree*

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Season four of *Arrested Development*

The much anticipated new season of the comedy television series *Arrested Development* was released in the US in its totality, 15 episodes, by Netflix on May 26. Launched seven years after the original program (2003-2006) was dropped by Fox, the Bluth family saga's updated version, unhappily, is a disappointment (although perhaps not a surprising disappointment).

Much of *Arrested Development*'s popularity and reputation developed in the wake of its cancelation in 2006, until it became recognized as one of the funniest, best-scripted situation comedies in American television history. After its early demise, the show developed a devoted, even fanatical following.

The slightly surreal activities of a wealthy family "that lost everything" always spoke to something real and convincing. Although everybody and everything in the show was slightly off-kilter, it was all rooted in real relations, in real human beings.

In its own genial and empathetic fashion, *Arrested Development* pointed to various aspects of a collapsing American society in the 2000s. Flimsiness and instability were motifs throughout, as houses, businesses, vocations, reputations and relationships—and even communication and language—gave way far more often than they held up.

Viewers watched as a relatively well-meaning group of people, albeit spoiled and more than a little silly, navigated a series of cave-ins, some of them entirely of their own making. The earnest goofiness and indefatigable resilience in the face of almost continuous disaster was not bad as a metaphor for the way a good many Americans conduct their lives.

The distance between the series and everyday realities, in other words, was large enough to allow for comedy, which depends on that gap, but not so great as to make virtually any of the absurd goings-on inconceivable.

Along the way, with a fresh and disarming ingenuity, *Arrested Development* poked fun at lawyers, real estate agents, corporate malefactors and government officials, as the bankrupt Bluths tried to keep up appearances within the walls of a model home that was as ill-constructed and ill-equipped as they were.

There were the imperishable scenes of George Sr.'s (Jeffrey Tambor) hucksterism in prison, an incarceration that had something to do with Halliburton-like dealings in the Iraq war. Who can forget the immortal "chicken dance"? The family stair-car? Or Buster's stint in the army and his unfortunate encounter with a man-eating seal? Lindsay and Michael's on-again, off-again relations, transparently manipulated by their mother? GOB's unwilling and unwitting fatherhood? The state fair's "inner beauty" contest entered by George-Michael's girl-friend Ann (whose

name and presence everybody always forgot)? The family frozen banana stand? The mock trial presided over by Judge Judge Reinhold? ...

The first three seasons delivered a good many insights in a lively and irreverent manner. Through it all, the show did not take itself too seriously, which only aided its comic efforts.

The core cast, including Tambor, Jason Bateman, Jessica Walter, Tony Hale, Will Arnett, Michael Cera, Portia de Rossi, Alia Shawkat and David Cross, were assisted by guest stars, among them Martin Short as lecherous, paraplegic "Uncle Jack"; Martin Mull as private investigator Gene Parmesan; Judy Greer as Kitty the conniving secretary; Julia Louis-Dreyfuss as a "blind" defense lawyer; Henry Winkler as the family's vaguely corrupt, bumbling attorney, Barry Zuckerkorn; James Lipton as "Warden Gentles" and Liza Minnelli as the vertigo-stricken Lucille 2.

Each Bluth had a distinct character and personality that only became truly three-dimensional within the hothouse family unit. Hale as Buster Bluth ("mother-boy") was hilarious in relation to his impossibly domineering mother, the incomparable Jessica Walter, who was nastily sharp in relation to her lazy, self-absorbed daughter Lindsay (de Rossi), her foolish magician son GOB (Arnett) and criminally-minded, self-promoting husband (Tambor).

Bateman as the straight-laced Michael Bluth had the Sisyphean task of holding the family together, while George-Michael (Cera) and Maeby Fünke (Shawkat) were the oft-neglected offspring—who occasionally and all too willingly became "kissing cousins." Maeby's standard response to opposition (including during a stint, marvelously, as a 15-year-old film studio executive—who fits right in!) or a vexing question was the cheerful, "Marry me!"

Every fan, including this one, wanted this comedic roller coaster ride to continue. So, by popular demand, as it were, a new season was developed by creator Mitchell Hurwitz.

Under the most favorable conditions, it is probably best not to try to "go home again." Not surprisingly, the show's relaxed and zany light-heartedness is gone, making season four somewhat tired and strained. Out of the gate, the artistic challenges were bound to be significant. It appears the creative talent and social insight to overcome them were not sufficient.

The new *Arrested Development*, a "semi-original series," tag-lines the Bluths as a "family whose future was abruptly canceled." Indeed, the show's updates include references to the economic crisis and the sub-prime mortgage scam (the NINJA loan—no income, no job or assets). It features an anti-immigrant black politician, who campaigns on "low taxes for high-income earners" and supports the Bluths' money-making scheme of building a "Mexican-proof" wall on the US-Mexico border.

As in the original series, organized religion is a major target. Back are the glassy-eyed Pastor Veal and his Church of the Holy Eternal Rapture. Then there is Lucille 2's Austerity Clinic.

Episode 10 of the new season skewers the noxious trend of reality television shows, with “Real Asian Prison Housewives” dominating an upscale, boutique prison (“four-star hellhole”) in which “they hold no prisoners because *they are* prisoners.” Another reality television knock-off is “To Entrap a Local Predator.” A greasy real estate agent boasts that, “I’m a predator. I sell giant houses to people who can’t afford them.” Some of this is amusing, much is not, or only mildly so.

Reportedly, the series’ creators had difficulties coordinating the schedules of the leading actors who play the Bluths. This meant a format change in which each main character had to carry an episode (or more) essentially on his or her own—in some cases, doubles shot from behind stood in for other lead performers. Whether the problems were strictly logistical-budgetary, or the show’s own creators did not really understand why the original series worked so well, the results are not effective. Ripped out of the dynamic of the core ensemble, individual cast members are not able to conjure up their former magic—or energy. While some scenes are funnier than others, no episode is entirely successful and most are plodding and rudderless.

Essentially it becomes a series about a family—but without the family. Largely lost was the opportunity to lampoon the political elite, through the character of the toxic Herbert Love, fond of “red heads and greenbacks.” The premise is good, his name is great, but the dialogue is simply not sharp-witted or hard-hitting enough.

In addition, the insertion of actors to play a younger Lucille and George (Kristen Wiig and Seth Rogen) falls flat. It was more amusing when Walter and Tambor played younger versions of themselves donning ridiculous wigs and other props. It was also better when Tobias’ (Cross) sexuality was ambiguous. Also, while actor/director Ron Howard again provides effective narration, his on-screen presence is less welcome, as the script does not adequately support this modification.

There is also the matter that the problems of American society have qualitatively worsened and deepened since 2006. That a television series would keep up—in tone and content—with events, all while remaining manically and confidently comic ... is a great deal to ask under the present circumstances.

However, major flaws and all, season four of *Arrested Development* is better than 90 percent of current television offerings. It’s just not nearly as good as its original self.

Behind the Candelabra

Steven Soderbergh’s *Behind the Candelabra*, a biopic about Liberace, based on the book by the performer’s longtime lover Scott Thorson, debuted this week on HBO. The first broadcast attracted a near-record (for HBO) 2.4 million viewers and the second, later on the same evening, an additional 1.1 million. A big marketing push was involved, but clearly there is still residual fascination with the legendary performer.

Liberace (known as “Lee” to his friends) was born Wladziu Valentino Liberace on May 16, 1919 in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin suburb of West Allis. Although his family called him Walter, he says in the movie, “Walter’s fine for pigeons”—a reference to famed actor Walter Pidgeon. With his flamboyance and mastery of the piano, he eventually became a Las Vegas sensation, calling himself a “one-man Disneyland.” He hid his homosexuality from the public, dying of an AIDS-related illness in 1987.

The movie begins in 1977 when Thorson (Matt Damon) meets Liberace (Michael Douglas) after a show he attends with mutual friend Bob Black (Scott Bakula). Scott and “Mr. Showmanship” soon become lovers, while the latter’s previous boy-friend (Cheyenne Jackson) is escorted out of Liberace’s opulent home (“palatial kitsch”). Showing off his costumes,

Liberace says he single-handedly supported “the entire Austrian rhinestone business.”

Liberace is generous to his new love, even desiring to adopt him. After hearing the story of Scott’s deprived childhood, the older man quips: “What a story, you have everything but the fire in the orphanage.” Liberace engages his plastic surgeon, Dr. Jack Startz (Rob Lowe), to reconstruct Scott’s face in his own image.

Eventually, the relationship unravels in a painful manner. Liberace once again has a wandering eye and Scott develops a substance abuse problem. They reconcile only as Liberace lies on his death bed. *Behind the Candelabra* is made with gloss and style by the visually talented Soderbergh (also responsible for the cinematography). The HBO film is appealing to look at, but, unfortunately, does not have much heart. The movie’s central preoccupation is with Liberace’s homosexuality. The fact that it is based on a book by a jilted lover leaves one a bit skeptical about all of the film’s details, which are not terribly flattering to the pianist. (The liaison ended in 1982, with Thorson filing a \$113 million palimony suit against the performer.)

The 42-year-old Damon performs well in the role of a much younger man. Debbie Reynolds as Liberace’s idiosyncratic mother is striking, while Lowe as the star’s plastic surgeon is just plain weird—I suspect through no fault of his own. But Douglas as Liberace is too much of a cold caricature, the summary of the entertainer’s mannerisms. He is a competent mimic, under which there is not much of a real human being. Douglas’ biggest impact is to leave us with a bad taste in the mouth.

It is therefore surprising to read an interview with Soderbergh in the *Los Angeles Times* in which he makes some useful comments about his subject: “I have memories of seeing him [Liberace] on TV ... I found him very entertaining but also sensed that he was atypical. And now of course, I can have a much broader appreciation of what a talent he was, and understand that he sort of created a kind of persona that a lot of other people appropriated. This was before Elton John, before Cher, before Madonna, before Lady Gaga, before all of these often single-named, flamboyant, very entertaining performers. ...

“That combined with what everyone acknowledges as a profound technical ability—[composer and conductor] Marvin Hamlisch said he’s technically the best keyboardist he ever saw—that made it more compelling.

“I have to think that most people upon seeing the movie are going to want to check out some of the material that’s available, to see him perform, which would be great. ... There’s a layer of melancholy to the piece for me because of the knowledge, if it were today, he wouldn’t have to hide all this stuff ... It’s sad to think of how much effort went in to keeping these things hidden and how much stress it caused for him and the people around him, and there was no reason for it.”

This is a sensitive and just perspective on Liberace. But it is at odds with Soderbergh’s film, which is a fairly vindictive pronouncement about the artist. Curiously, little of Liberace’s piano prowess is presented in the movie. Despite the director’s apparent intentions, there is not much in *Behind the Candelabra* that explains Liberace’s immense appeal to wide sections of the population, including Soderbergh himself.

Family Tree

Family Tree, an eight-part comedy series co-written and co-created by Christopher Guest premiered May 12 on HBO. Guest again employs his mockumentary style, this time to present the life and adventures of 30-year-old Tom Chadwick (Chris O’Dowd), who has recently lost his job and been dumped by his girlfriend (“My mourning got in the way of

my wallowing”).

Although only a few episodes have aired, *Family Tree* looks promising. Irish comic actor O’Dowd (born 1979) is a delight to watch and an apt vehicle for Guest’s distinctive, wry humor. The television show is something of a departure for the latter, whose movies have each tended to focus on a specific popular cultural genre, institution or lifestyle. For example, his films have dealt with folk and rock music (*This is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman* and *A Mighty Wind*), soap opera-melodrama (*For Your Consideration*) and the world of dog-owners and dog shows (*Best in Show*). *Family Tree* is somewhat more open-ended—a look at a wider swath of society. And the show is set in the UK. It begins when Tom, whose unemployment and heartbreak have caused him to lose a sense of his identity, inherits a box of oddities from a great aunt he has never met. This sets him on a genealogical search to discover the limbs of “the great Chadwick oak.”

Tom’s living relatives include his father Keith (frequent Guest collaborator Michael McKean), an inventor of useless gadgets who is hooked on awful and unlikely British sitcoms. Keith, divorced from Tom’s mother, is married to Luba (Lisa Palfrey), whose accent is hard to figure out.

Tom’s sister Bea (Nina Conti), traumatized in childhood by a randy puffin, uses a monkey hand puppet “to let out my inner voice.” “Monkey” is amusingly transitioning from a therapeutic device into an independent character. And then there is Tom’s best friend Pete Stupples (Tom Bennett), who has so far fixed Tom up on a date with a woman who believes that dinosaurs are not extinct and another fascinated by bones.

Future episodes will introduce new characters played by the likes of Bob Balaban and Fred Willard, and will cross the ocean to California (Ed Begley Jr. plays Tom’s American cousin). So far, so good...



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