

Throwback Thursday

- Amber Born

Since Headlight is published on a Thursday and Marblehead High School is currently attempting to be up-to-speed on technology and social media, I thought that I should start Headlight's Throwback Thursday (I apologize if someone else has already started one and I missed it). For those who don't know, Throwback Thursday (or #tbt, I suppose, but I'm hesitant to use a hashtag in print) is used on social media to reference something that happened "a long time ago," which can pretty much mean anywhere from the Roman Empire to last week. I am going to throwback to somewhere between those two, to the sitcom Arrested Development.

Arrested Development was created by Mitchell Hurwitz and originally ran on Fox from 2003-2006. There are always shows in the position that Arrested Development was in; the single-camera, phenomenally-written sitcom was critically lauded, but received low viewership, which resulted in the show's cancellation after a mere three seasons. Six years later, Arrested Development was revived in a fourth season that aired solely on Netflix and was in a different format than the original. It received mixed reviews. I don't have Netflix, so can't offer any opinions on it. However, I can definitely recommend the first three seasons, which are available on DVD and probably Netflix as well.

While it was unfortunate that Arrested Development was cancelled so early, I think it helped to preserve the show's reputation. The three original seasons contained a total of 53 episodes, and they were all of the same high caliber. Whereas even the greatest long-running sitcoms such as Frasier, M*A*S*H, and Seinfeld had some episodes and even whole seasons which were deemed to be of lower quality than the others, Arrested Development maintained consistently good quality for its entire original run.

So, what exactly is the point of Arrested Development, and why do I love it so much? The opening credits of the show introduce everything nicely: "Now the story of a wealthy family who lost everything, and the one son who had no choice but to keep them all together. [catchy music] It's Arrested Development." It's surprisingly serialized for a sitcom (I would recommend watching the episodes more or less in order), so I can't really explain much of the plot without ruining some of the episodes. The characters are extremely flawed and largely unsympathetic, but they're so accidentally funny that it doesn't become annoying.

The real beauty of Arrested Development lies in the writing. The show is very fast-paced, with self-aware jokes, sight gags, and obscure references. The only shows I can think to compare it to in terms of writing and style are 30 Rock and the majority of Community. Arrested Development contains so many jokes on so many different levels that I found it impossible to catch them all on the first viewing. There are jokes that unfold through multiple episodes, bits of foreshadowing to things that won't happen for another season, references to other shows and past careers of actors on the show, and detailed visual throwaway jokes that won't even be noticed unless the viewer makes quick use of the "pause" button.

One of my favorite examples of a multi-layered joke on Arrested Development is the following: in one episode, a character played by Henry Winkler (he portrayed Fonzie on the 1970s classic sitcom Happy Days) is standing on a dock with a small shark on it. When he exits, he jumps over the shark. First of all, “jumping the shark” is an expression used to describe TV shows that pull desperate stunts in the hopes that it will help their ratings. But the genius of the joke lies in the origin of the phrase, which came from an episode of Happy Days wherein Winkler’s character jumped over a shark on water skis. Arrested Development does not condescend to its viewers. You’re expected to know things that happened on TV twenty-eight years before the show was made, and you’re supposed to be paying attention at all times. I just consulted the internet, and apparently Arrested Development has at least two other Happy Days references that I didn’t notice despite three viewings. But even if you’re not quite focusing that closely on everything, Arrested Development is still a genuinely funny show that’s very enjoyable to watch.

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