

Parks and Recreation Showrunner Michael Schur Gives a Master Class on His Favorite Comedy, *Cheers*

Written by Josh Wolk



Shelley Long and Ted Danson on *Cheers*.

Back in the spring, we interviewed a dozen of TV's top showrunners for *New York Magazine's* television issue, and when we asked them all what show made them want to get into television, the majority cited *Cheers*. But the one who seemed the most passionate about the NBC comedy, which lasted eleven remarkable seasons (1982–1993), was Michael Schur, co-creator of *Parks and Recreation* and former writer for *The Office*. He spoke of it in the kind of loving terms usually reserved for one's parents, and the influence of the bar comedy shows through in *Parks and Rec*, which shares *Cheers'* sweet sensibility and surrogate-family characters. As we wallow in TV's dead zone, with only a few quality shows dotting the cable dial as we wait for the fall season to begin, we decided to have Schur provide an extensive master class on one of television's all-time great comedies, dissecting exactly what made it work and how it shaped him as a writer. Read on and suddenly you'll be racing to Netflix to plow through all eleven seasons before fall, but be warned: Extensive exposure

to the comedy will only make you judge the networks' upcoming new comedies all the more harshly.

What special place does *Cheers* hold in your heart?

To me it's the best sitcom ever made. Whenever I'm asked that question I always answer *Cheers*.

Without hesitation?

Yeah, I've always felt that way. I felt that way when I was a kid and I was watching it every week, and I felt that way as new TV shows emerged. There's a case to be made for the British *Office*, in terms of it being revolutionary, but that's more like a mini-series. *Cheers* did almost 300 episodes over eleven years. The thing that made it so great is it has a giant cast of incredibly great characters and they would get immense mileage out of just having them talk to each other. It wasn't fancy or tricky, they didn't have crazy plot moves. You just watched these amazing characters slowly change and evolve over eleven years. You watch these episodes and there are like four scenes sometimes in an entire episode. They're in the bar and this happens and that happens and you go to commercial, then you come back and they're still in the bar and they talk to each other and you're just following this delightful story of these people in this place. And their scenes were so wonderful. The idea that ... it's literally in the theme song: It's a place where everyone knows your name, it's a place where you can go when you're sad, when you're happy, when you just need to talk to somebody.

When I wrote at *SNL* I had this feeling sometimes that the difference between a good comedy sketch and a truly great comedy sketch is the truly great comedy sketch knocks out a thousand other ideas. I would come up with other sketch ideas and think, "Oh, that's really funny" and then I'd go, "I'm just doing 'Happy Fun Ball' again." You know a sketch is truly amazing is when you keep thinking that you're on to something and you realized that it's been done in this better version. The McLaughlin Group, *Wayne's World*, *Happy Fun Ball* ... There are certain things that just cut a very wide swath through the idea of sketches, and to me *Cheers* kind of cut that same swath through the idea of sitcoms because they just had these themes and characters and relationships that are just so archetypal and so great that, later in life, I would often find myself [writing something and thinking] "This is sort of like what *Frasier* and *Woody* were like," and then I'll think, "Well, too bad. It's great and I'm going to do it anyway."

The show deals with a group of people who all spend their entire lives together, both at work and after. That wasn't a new concept: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was essentially the same thing, for one. What made this show different?

I think one of the great aspects of *Cheers* is that it wasn't revolutionary at all. I personally think the best ideas for TV shows — at least comedies — are very low-fi ideas. High concepts often sell pitches in movies and TV, but, especially in TV when you're talking about hopefully a 100- or 150-episode proposition, those concepts just burn off and then you're stuck with nothing. The best shows are always the ones that are very, very low-concept and just about great characters. It's a very famous story — and it's true of *Seinfeld* and *Friends* and *Cheers* and a bunch of other great shows that are low-concept — they always start slow. Same with the American *Office*; at first people are like, "Mahh, I don't like it, there's nothing going on." But it's because there's no big hook-y thing. It's not "this guy has the ability to read people's minds" or something. [Those kind of concepts] make a good pilot, but what makes a good series is just characters and relationships that take a while to explain and grow. And to me, *Cheers* is the best possible example of that. There's nothing at the beginning of the series that's hook-y or grabby or bright and shiny that would make a good pitch in a room. It's just a place, a setting where a bunch of really great characters and great actors and great writers had a little laboratory.

A lot of times I'll be watching a sitcom and reacting scientifically, like thinking, *Oh, that's a funny line*, but it doesn't actually make me laugh. Or with others, I really like the cast, but I wish the writing was better. It's so rare to find one that works on all levels. What does it take to make a show that makes people want to come back again and again, like *Cheers*?

I think it's the chemistry and the mixture of the writing and the performance, certainly. At the very least you can write the best show in the world and put it into the hands of a mediocre actor and you will get no response, and you can take a terrible joke and put it in the hands of a great actor and get a pretty good response, but it's the combination of the writers knowing the actors and the characters so well that they know exactly where the sweet spot is on a moment-by-moment basis. And in a writers room you can almost hear a click in your ear when you get it right. When someone pitches a joke for a character that is just perfect and you can imagine that actor reading that line at your table read or on

the set, it's like the sound of a snap snapping into place. I think *Cheers* had the best, funniest writing on TV at the time it was on. I think it was a perfect concept for a show, but you have Sam Malone played by someone who's 10 percent worse than Ten Danson and have Diane Chambers played by someone 10 percent worse than Shelley Long and on down the line and you get, "Oh, I like that show" and you watch it once in a while, but it certainly doesn't hold the legendary place in time like it does currently.

I see glimmers of *Cheers* in *Parks and Recreation* in the idea that there's this insular group of people who never hang out with anyone else but their co-workers and a circle of immediate friends. Do you feel like there's a lot of *Cheers* in your show?

I don't know if that part is true of our show. Because they work in the government, we really try to have our characters interact with the public and they do a lot of public forums, and the government is big and there's media outlets that they interact with. I don't think our show is like *Cheers* in that sense, I think it's like *Cheers* in the sense that the humor is, generally speaking, very positive and good-natured. Yes, there was a fair amount of Carla almost never saying something that wasn't an insult, and they certainly picked on each other a fair amount, but the themes of the show were really about community and friendship and support of each other. [I picked four episodes to rewatch at random] and it was really shocking — the themes of the show are present in every single one, I mean *explicitly* present. There were moments when the characters literally give voice to the idea that this is their family. In season five's Thanksgiving episode [with the famous food fight], Frasier literally says family is not necessarily limited to blood relations. That's the theme of the show: You have another family. I think that's the theme of a lot of workplace shows; you want to believe these people really care about each other and that they are a surrogate family. I think *Cheers* did it the best of anybody.

You said earlier that *Cheers* wasn't revolutionary, but do you feel like it spawned any sitcom archetypes?

Yes and no. Again, I think they were building off what came before them. It wasn't like when *Seinfeld* came out and they had that rule on that show, "no hugging, no learning." And then a bunch of people tried to imitate that show with the same kind of cynical inside-out mockery of network sitcoms and what makes them work. But you don't have Michael Richards, Jerry Seinfeld, Jason Alexander, and Julia Louis-Dreyfus. If you don't have that cast, you don't make that show work. Sometimes there are shows that come out and people take the

wrong lessons from them; the only lesson they should've taken from *Seinfeld* is that's a one-in-a-million genius cast and a one-in-a-million showrunner and just don't try to imitate that at all. But *Cheers* was just building off the ideas of past sitcoms, which was to find a place where people come together and show them interacting and follow their lives and develop good scenes. It would be interesting to try to do a real forensic look at how much *Cheers* specifically influenced the next generation of shows. I think it's fairly significant in a subtle way in the sense that there are lessons to be taken from *Cheers* as a person who's creating shows, in terms of the way the relationships develop and the way that characters change. But I don't think it's as direct as how *Friends* was a show about six people who lived across from each other in an apartment [and] so let's just try to do the same thing.

Sam and Diane did seem like the Patient Zero for the will-they-won't-they setup.

Oh, that aspect yes, you're absolutely right, I'm completely ignoring that aspect. To this day, people will say to you, "What's the Sam and Diane?" and certainly on *The Office* Jim and Pam were our Sam and Diane. It's not that that didn't exist before *Cheers* and it's not that that won't exist for a long time after *Cheers*, but that idea of a central relationship [is now a staple]. There's a reason that the *Cheers* finale was about Diane coming back. That was the central thing that happened in the show, their opposites-attract relationship that had its ups and downs.

The Sam and Diane relationship was so intrinsic to the show, them getting together, breaking up, him proposing, her saying no, her wanting him back ... but you look back and think, *That couple didn't make any sense at all. It almost doesn't seem logical.*

To me, every part of it works. The beginning of it works, all the crazy parts in the middle work. It's also the writing and the beautiful idea that a washed-up former alcoholic ballplayer of limited intelligence and a perennial Ph.D. candidate can fall in love with each other. There's something incredibly romantic about the basic idea of it; that there are people out there who are completely unlike you with whom you have incredible intense emotional roller-coaster rides, and I think that's very relatable to people. I think everyone at one time or another has been completely in love with someone who's totally wrong for them, but they're just following their hearts. Both of those characters were completely lacking in a major aspect of personal growth and the other person was kind of helping them in that. It's a better formula than having two

pleasant, good-looking people get together. There's no conflict there; nothing interesting going on. There will never be a better "opposites attract" TV romance, I think, than Sam and Diane.

When you were first starting *Parks and Rec*, was the idea that Leslie and Mark would be your Sam and Diane?

We weren't 100 percent sure. We did a thing with those characters where they had a backstory. [Amy Poehler's Leslie had a lingering crush on Paul Schneider's since-departed Mark Brendanawicz, with whom she'd had a one-night stand six years earlier.] It's very standard in pilots, and in *Cheers* as well, where you have someone opening a door for the first time [like when Diane first enters the bar and meets Sam]. We didn't want to do that because we felt that you've seen it before. We thought it would be more interesting if you have this six-year-old backstory that's more important for one character than for the other. We'd always imagined Mark as the kind of the guy who would float in and out of the world, because the real people he's based on do that: You work for the government for a while, then you leave and come back and work for the private sector, so there would ideally be a nine-year-long on-again-off-again thing with them. The show sort of evolved in a different way, but certainly like the *Cheers* legacy, [we thought] you have to have some kind of central romance where there's tension. On TV, if the love story's successful, they end up being epic love stories because then they develop over years. That's why Sam and Diane are perfect, because you couldn't have started two characters at the more opposite end of the spectrum. She was running off to Barbados with her professor, and he's a barfly, hanging around in a bar, waiting for women to fall into his trap. So they started them at the far ends of the spectrum in terms of what people are looking for romantically and then they brilliantly brought them together and tore them apart, and on and on it went.

Is there a limit to how long you can drag out a will-they-won't-they? Shelley Long left after five seasons, but if she hadn't, would an audience have gotten tired of the construct? Like, *either stay married or don't; I don't want to go on this roller coaster with you anymore!* When Kirstie Alley took over in season six, Sam hit on Rebecca, but in a no-shot kind of way; it was as if the writers didn't want to take on another romantic arc.

I think Shelley Long's leaving was secretly the best thing that could've happened to that show. It was a central romance and they burned through an incredible amount of story moves. There were times they were dating, there

were times they were broken up. There were times where they were about to get married, and she was like, stop the wedding. It was very valuable. Kirstie Alley was great, and I always loved her. But it started this new arc for Sam, where he had to start to confront who he was. He wasn't 31 anymore and wasn't a ladies' man, and maybe there's something else in life worth searching for. And they got a lot of mileage out of that, and subsequently got a lot of mileage out of Sam and Rebecca's on-again-off-again flirtation or weird plans to have a child together. There's a phrase that we use on our show that Greg Daniels taught me on *The Office*, which is "slicing the baloney as thin as possible." It means if you have a good arc for a character, if you cut off too much at one time, you're going to burn through it too quickly. And at the same time, you need to give enough to keep people satisfied and interested. They were really good at parsing out Diane and the character growth in a way that remained interesting, but also kept the characters moving forward, but also had you watching them grow and change. It just was a masterful job.

Another sitcom archetype that I wonder if they started was the idea of the never-seen character, with Norm's wife Vera. There was Carlton the Doorman on *Rhoda*, but you always heard his voice. And that begat Niles's wife Maris on *Frasier*.

Well, *Home Improvement* did that as well. I remember very clearly getting ready for the finale and I was 150 percent sure we were going to meet Vera. And I'm really glad they didn't because one of my favorite moments in the finale is [at the very end, when the core group is sitting around after closing time] and the phone rings and they all say, "It's Lilith, Vera, my kids ..." and Frasier says "just let it ring, let them think we're on our way" and they all get up to go. They also have these moments where they go their separate ways and live their own lives. It's like they have two families, and this was a neat little moment where the outside world is intruding on our world. They did such a good job establishing this place at the bar where they spend all this time, and in certain ways, all the characters need it as a place to be. [Vera served as a] genuine reminder that there's a life that exists outside the camera. If they didn't have that, it would be *The Iceman Cometh* and it would be incredibly depressing: These awful fat alcoholics who didn't leave the stupid bar, but they did a great job reminding you that these people have lives outside of the bar.

I remember getting all prepared for the finale when it first aired and being underwhelmed. But when I just watched it again, I was much more moved by it. All of those jokes were so perfectly

character-based, and a reminder that they were about to stop saying these jokes forever. I found myself laughing and getting a little teary when ...

I know just the joke.

It's just Norm and Sam in the bar, and Sam says that Norm should go home and wake up Vera and give her a big kiss and "do what comes naturally." And Norm says, "Wake her up so she can watch me eat a bucket of buffalo wings?"

[Laughs.] That's actually not the one I thought you were going to say. I was thinking of the one where Norm says, "You know what I think is the most important thing in life? Love. And you know what I love, Sam?" And Sam says, "Beer, Norm?" And Norm goes, "Yeah, I'll have a quick one," and he goes and sits down. It's like there was never a moment when Norm wasn't going to have a beer and after eleven years it was a joy to see that even in that moment, in the middle of a very earnest discussion about the meaning of life and what's important, he's not going to turn down a beer and will assume at the slightest provocation that someone is offering him one.

When rewatching these episodes, do you think all the characters held up?

They all hold up for me, and I have my favorites certainly. One thing that struck me right off the bat is how completely and utterly Ted Danson owns Sam Malone from the first seconds of the pilot. The pilot begins with him walking down that hallway past the bathroom that led back to the pool table and he just has this incredible ease about him and this charm and this swagger. He swings his hips around a chair that's kind of sticking out from a table and he runs his hands kind of lovingly across the railing that leads back to the hallway and he just loves the bar. And that's how the series ends; Norm says, "I knew you were going to come back 'cause you can never leave your one true love." And Sam says, "Well, what is that?" and Norm says, "Think about it." And then you're left alone with Sam at the bar trying to figure it out and he suddenly realizes that Norm is talking about the actual bar. And that scene and that idea is present in the first seconds of the pilot, which is so impressive to me.

The cold open of the pilot is him talking to a 16-year-old kid who's trying to buy a beer and he has a fake I.D. that says he was old enough to fight in Vietnam. Sam says, "What was that like?" And the kid says, "Gross." And Sam says, "Well, that's what they say: War is gross." He's just so smooth and he's so kind and he says, "Sorry, soldier" and slides the I.D. back to him. He's just so good-

hearted and positive and endlessly confident in all matters and it was remarkable to me, because if you go back and look at the first two episodes of any show, the main characters are going to be different from the way that they ended up at the end of the series. Homer sounds completely different in the first half-dozen episodes of *The Simpsons* and Megan Mullaly's character Karen on *Will and Grace* didn't figure out her voice until a few episodes in and it's true of Tina Fey in *30 Rock* and Amy on our show. You're growing into the character and the writers are trying to figure out how to write it. But from the first second of the *Cheers* pilot Ted Danson is Sam Malone. He knows the character inside and out; he's completely fluent in the character. That really blew me away.

It's interesting to see how Sam gradually changed over the run, as he seemed less effective as an aging Lothario. There was a little Vinnie Barbarino in him at the end; he was attractive but kind of dumb and people would be in awe of him but just as often make fun of him.

He aged. Let me clarify: I don't mean that nothing happened as a character over the eleven years. Obviously the character got eleven years older and he went through significant life changes in terms of romance and his feelings about his role in the world and all that sort of stuff. I just mean that Ted Danson was incredibly fluent in Sam as a character from the very beginning. He knew how to play him, he knew where the jokes were, he knew how to deliver them, he knew how to be physically, he knew when to kind of swagger and when to disappear and fade into the background. He was great at physical comedy. It's a very rare thing. There were certainly times when he was more of an airhead while he's pretty funny, sharp, and cynical in the pilot. And I think they found over the course of the first couple years that, mostly because of Diane, that it was a little bit funnier to drag him more towards the airhead part. But they managed to do that in a way that it didn't conflict with Coach or Woody, which is in its own way impressive. Sam's lack of intelligence is really extreme vanity, which obviously wasn't Coach or Woody's problem, but wherever way they took the character he was so instantly on top of it and knew exactly how to do it.

You said you had your favorite characters. Who were they?
Well, my favorites while the show were Sam, Coach, Woody, and Cliff. The same is kind of proven true in rewatching some of these episodes. I have a new appreciation for *Frasier* because when I was a kid watching the show and he

would make a reference to George Sand or something I would have no idea what he was talking about. Having been to high school and college I now have a new appreciation for him. It really is an amazing performance from Kelsey Grammer, that's one of the all-time great characters on TV. But I loved Sam because I thought he was so funny and because he was so handsome and just confident and he played for the Red Sox so that certainly helped. I loved Cliff because he was a nerd and into trivia and I was a nerd who was into trivia. I loved Coach and Woody because Coach and Woody are very stupid and stupid is the nuclear weapon of comedy. In terms of pure belly laughs, nothing will ever beat stupid people.

You've filled the dumb guy slot in your shows.

On *The Office* it was sort of half Michael and half Creed. Creed's all crazy and stupid but Michael's really the moron, and on *Parks and Rec* it's Andy. You know pretty much every comedy show has one character whose primary character trait is stupidity, and they always are really funny.

When I drove cross-country with a friend in 1991 we got into a huge argument in the upper northwest over whether the Diane years or Rebecca years were better. It started as a joking argument and then we really got angry about it in an unhealthy way. Which side are you on?

Are you talking which character do I prefer or are you talking about the actual show during their years? There are a lot of other factors, because it's coincidence instead of causality in many cases. In general, I think the Diane years are better, but that's not just because of Sam and Diane, it's because the characters were new and fresh and exciting and they did all these great stories and established a lot of things that paid off down the line. And they made one of the most brilliant producing decisions in history; they had to replace Coach [in season four after Nicholas Colasanto died] and magically found [Woody Harrelson], a guy who was just as funny and who was almost exactly the same — it's truly a miracle that happened. But in the Rebecca years you also get a lot of Lilith, and Lilith was amazing, so there are all these ancillary aspects of the show that weren't necessarily just "Diane" or "Rebecca." But I think I very gently prefer the original, first five years or whatever it was. What did you say?

I came in on the Rebecca side because I think at that point the characters were so well worn in but not worn down. When I think about the season-nine episode "I'm Getting My Act Together and

Sticking It In Your Face," where Rebecca is despondent right after she backs out of her wedding to Robin, it had a whole subplot of Frasier reading Charles Dickens to the barflies and injecting action scenes with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to keep them interested. They could throw on these odd things that work because you knew these guys so well.

It's amazing that that was season nine, episode sixteen. Think about how many episodes they had done of that show and that B story or C story is so funny because you get the benefit of those years and years of character development. It's amazing that this show replaced two main characters including the main love interests and managed to not only hang on but really flourish and grow.

Near the end of the run they experimented with Rebecca and Frasier being an item, but it only lasted a handful of episodes. Is it always a temptation in a long-running show to keep pairing all the characters off in different permutations to keep things fresh?

Yeah, it's not only temptation, sometimes it's a necessity. You get in season ten of a show and you need the ideas, conflicts, and scenarios that can lead to episode generation. It's something that will be inevitable if you are doing a show that isn't about a family. I don't think *Friends* could have gone on for one more year because there were no more combinations. Monica and Chandler were married. Ross and Rachel were Ross and Rachel, Joey and Phoebe weren't going to get together, but they tried Joey and Rachel. If there is one *Über*-category that people care about and like to follow and like to root for on TV it's romances, so when you're in season ten and you have two main characters who are single and eligible you are going to try it. It might not work and it might only be for a handful of episodes, but you're going to give it a shot and see if there's anything there.

The other thing about *Cheers* is it seemed to avoid topical jokes. In the Thanksgiving show Cliff makes a reference to Hands Across America, and it was very jarring. Except for Sam's high-waisted jeans or a run of loud sweaters, there's not a lot that dates the show, as compared to shows that thrive on topical references such as *30 Rock* and *Family Guy*. Do you consciously avoid jumping on topical subjects that sets your show in a certain time?

We have a couple rules on the show. If possible we never show the year; like, if there's a banner for some event we never show "Harvest Festival 201" or something. Because we feel like visually that would be bad; we want people

ideally to be watching these shows long into the future and you don't want to date yourself. But on my show we are purporting that these are real people doing real things so you can't help it. One of the essences of Tom Haverford is he loves hip-hop and pop culture and the *Fast and the Furious* movies and it would be limiting to not have him reference those things. They're not hard and fast rules, and sometimes we'll break them but I think you kind of can't avoid it. A lot of comedy is about people getting references and recognizing and being able to relate to something. Pop things that are very big in the culture whether they're political scandals or recording artists, those are things that are points of reference for people, so I think at some point you're going to have to at least make reference to some of them.

Do you think that *Cheers* was ready to go, or do you think it could have kept on going?

The show was so huge that I'm sure that they would have had it go on forever if they could have. But comedies aren't like procedural dramas. *Law & Order* can be just as good in season twenty as it was in season one, theoretically, but comedy is a different animal. I think that at a certain point you've done 10,000 jokes about Woody being stupid and you've done 10,000 jokes about Sam chasing women ... it probably could have kept going but would it have been a good idea? Probably not. You probably want to say these characters have reached some logical conclusions and the characters had undergone a tremendous amount of change and growth, so I think it was probably a good move to end it.

When I think back to that show I still remember the names of the writers very distinctly from the credits: Ken Levine and David Isaacs, Cherie Eichen and Bill Steinkellner, Phoef Sutton, Rob Long and Dan Staley ... Have you worked with any of these people since then and shared your love of their work?

I haven't, but my wife worked with Phoef Sutton. I remember very clearly asking her, "Who's the showrunner?" and she said, "Oh, it's this guy Phoef Sutton" and I felt like she just said Mick Jagger. I got to meet him lately and told him how much I love *Cheers*. Those names in that font on the opening credits are still very resonant for me.

Were writing staffs much smaller then? I feel like the same names appeared over and over again.

Because *Cheers* was so good and because it was such a big hit, it was probably the case if you got a job there you didn't leave. It was a good gig. It might be that you remember their names because they were around for a long time. Because at the time you didn't miss an episode of *Cheers*. It was on, you watched it. And they had a long opening theme song, which no shows do anymore, and their credits played out very slowly and were onscreen for a good amount of time. As opposed to now the credits are being flashed at light speed in the lower third of the screen during the tag of the show. It's such a different world. The *Cheers* pilot timed out at 24:58. That's ridiculous! The running time for our show is 21:17. The four episodes we picked, it was the pilot, one from season five, one from season nine, and one from season eleven. I wrote down the times: They were 24:58 in the pilot, and 24:37 for season five and season nine it was 23:56 and the finale was 23:19, and that's probably with some extra time that they threw in because it was the finale and they didn't care if it ran long. Over the course of this show's life they lost a minute and a half of actual running time and that trend continues and things like writing credits and producing credits are just crunched down and buried somewhere and you don't have the same kind of connecting feeling when you see people's names on the screen.

It's also funny to look back at how long the theme song was compared to now.

When [*Brady Bunch* and *Gilligan's Island* creator] Sherwood Schwartz died recently there was a lot of talk about that. Because his whole thing was that you need the credit sequence to explain what the show is. That's why the *Gilligan Island* theme is "Sit right back and you'll hear a tale ..." and they tell you the whole story. Same with *The Brady Bunch*: Here's a guy, here are his kids, here's a woman, here's her kids, and now all the kids live together and also there's a maid. They just told you what the show is. And to some extent *Cheers* does the same thing. The theme song and these old sepia tone photographs of people in bars are essentially telling you without actually telling that as long as there have been cities there have been places like this — taverns, bars, and inns — where people go to have a drink and let the stress of the days and their cares sort of wash away. And that was also a very instructive credit sequence. Now what you get is nothing. You get the title of the show and a little three-note piano sting and you move on. When Greg Daniels was doing *The Office* and when we were doing *Parks and Rec* together, we really wanted a theme song and an opening credit sequence because it's really what puts you in the mood to watch the show. It transports you from your couch to the world

that you're entering, it has a very real psychological effect on people, it's almost Pavlovian: When they hear the theme song they think about your characters. There's a lot of pressure to get rid of it because of the time that gets crunched down every year, and they say, "Let's just jump into the show." I remember watching *My Name Is Earl*; I don't know when it started, but I was watching an episode and the theme song was a picture of Jason Lee and you just heard him say, "My name is Earl." It's like, well, I knew that from the title. I like that show, but it was sad that there wasn't a kind of mood-setting piece of music. Our opening title sequence is twenty seconds long, and if you can't carve twenty seconds out of the half an hour you've been given to try to set a mood and try to make the experience of watching feel like a little mini-journey for people, I think you're missing out.

You rewatched the Thanksgiving episode, which has the famous food fight. What strikes me in that scene is it looks like a group of people who really like each other having a food fight; like, that this might happen during their lunch break.

It's been said about *Parks and Rec* that the characters generally like each other, which I love hearing because it's true, and it's also partly that the actors really like each other. I have that same feeling about the food fight. You could almost see the delight in everyone's face in the moments leading up to it, you can really see they know what they're going to do and they're really excited for it, and when it finally erupts it's so cathartic. One of the reasons I suggested that episode and remember it so fondly is I remember thinking that looks like so much fun, like it's a bunch of people who are incredibly lucky that this is their job. It's also easily the only episode in the history of television of any show that mentions Caravaggio, Emily Dickinson, and Joan of Arc and also has a food fight.

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