

The anatomy of a successful television drama

The commonalities of a successful show

Linear time problems aside, all a show needs to succeed is two things: character development and a compelling plot (and audience relatability/believability as to both). You can apply this theory to every successful television show, movie, or book, and they all have it (even Harry Potter, whose reader/watcher audience can relate to in their probable hopes that they are born to do something great, and the whole good v. evil theme most people can understand as well). I also think that online media presents a third unique way of drawing a broader audience in and fostering success, and I allude to this possibility toward the end of my commentary.

A. Character Development

First, the success of any drama, science fiction or otherwise, depends in large part to character development and the audience's ability to relate to them. Thus, primary to a show succeeding in today's society, it must be able to capture its intended audience through its characters, and it must do so quickly. The characters are the ones telling the story in any number of ways. Like most bands who have only five members, the optimal range for a show has only four to six characters; with many more than that, it becomes difficult for the audience to follow and start rooting for any one character. Obviously, there are exceptions (case in point, *Lost*, which succeeds because it made the Island, a non-speaking or actual character, central to the plot).

The large cast of *Heroes*, in contrast to *Lost*, may work to its detriment. I just feel that the seemingly large cast, given the way the pilot developed, makes it difficult to believe the series will be able to develop adequately any one character such that the general 18-49 demographic (or elder demographic) will relate. In other words, they just tried to do too much in a very short amount of time, and I think that in such cases, there are other, more effective methods. Maybe the jumping around and multiple character storylines will change over the next five episodes. If it does not, I don't see its share increasing for its time slot or really surviving past more than one season.

B. Theme

The second key to a drama's ultimate success and at least as important as character development is that the audience must be hooked into a believable theme almost instantly, and this theme must pervade the pilot episode. Granted, for any television show, science fiction or otherwise, you're going to have to suspend belief a bit (and sometimes more than a bit). For *Grey's Anatomy*, you knew the friction between the central characters instantly (general theme: love and work; target market = 18-49 women and their husbands). For *Lost*, you knew the plane crashed and something else was on the island (general theme: mystery, survival – examination of humanity in

a Lord of the Flies type manner; target 18-49 men and women). For 24, you knew some bad shit was about to go down (general theme: good v. evil; target 18-49 men). And so forth.

For science fiction shows, you not only have to capture initially an audience beyond those who like the genre, you have to convince them to suspend an incredible amount of disbelief. The possibilities for success are certainly there (e.g., the Spiderman movies, or any other comic book type movie that grossed better than \$100 million). For a weekly television show, however, asking the audience to suspend disbelief requires almost a leap of faith, which can be accomplished effectively and completely only through trust (hence, the importance of character development).

Take a show like Medium, for example. While talking to ghosts seems far-fetched to the casual viewer, the idea of police departments using psychics can be squared in the realm of possibility if it were true, and this show simply elaborates on that initial presumption. If the characters in the show believe it (after some convincing sometimes), the audience will tend to believe it. It's the same way people can watch Jack Bauer evade every attempt at his life through various criminal ineptitudes (see Austin Powers for their take on this when Scott asks Dr. Evil why he just doesn't shoot him). How Medium tries to capture the larger audience, however, and how it does an admirable job of doing so (despite the crutch of its time slot) is through its development of the Alison's character beyond her "gift": Medium is really about the struggle of a mother and wife trying to balance her work and talents that go with it along with her family. I submit that more people can relate with that in the 18-49 demographic than those who can relate with the ability to talk with ghosts, and it could probably carry a 9 PM Tuesday slot rather than Monday at 10 (or whenever it will be airing if and when it does come back).

Unlike Medium, however, Heroes faces an uphill battle because the pilot failed to engage the audience into developing any sort of meaningful relationship with any of the characters. This isn't fatal, but maybe it would have been worthwhile to develop it online a bit and then air the show – think lonelygirl. NBC blew their initial attempt at doing this, but I am cautiously optimistic they can recover.

1. The importance of storyboarding

Furthermore, for a well-themed story (and Heroes certainly has this potential) to develop itself fully, the writers essentially have to have the entire storyboard for the series written in order to a) provide consistency for the individual plots, and b) to convey to the audience (through various connections) where they are going. It helps develop trust of the characters and encourages a deeper suspension of disbelief and desire to find out "what happens next." This obviously was done with Lost, and it may have been done with Heroes; it just remains to be seen. What I mean by this element may be better described as "believability-B" – meaning every episode serves a purpose to advance the overall storyline.

Too many shows on television do not plan ahead for this. Case in point, Alias. Alias had a great storyline that ran through the entire first season and despite some Felicity-esque deviations,

concluded with the takedown of SD-6. I suspect that the Rambaldi plot (which reappeared toward the end of the fifth season) had meant to conclude around this time as well, but when ABC signed onto another two years, they had to figure out a way to drag it along. If I had to speculate, I would say that JJ Abrams must have thought, "well, I'm ready to move onto another project and yet I've been roped into this one for another couple of seasons. I know, I will create another double agent and another shadow organization and largely duplicate the storyline from the first season." Genius! (read: sarcasm, but good for him for making a ton of money either way off it). The end result to this point is that the storyline had to be stretched out much longer than it probably should have been and the latter seasons simply fell off the scale of the already generously suspended disbelief the show called for.

For Heroes, you saw a guy jumping off a building and then all of a sudden he's waking up, and then you're in India. While this jumping around does have its merits in the movies, it does not translate as well to the small screen. Obviously, you know what the show is about from the previews; the jumping around in the pilot of Heroes, however, simply didn't advance the plot significantly or appropriately develop the theme of the series or its characters to capture the general audience. Further, the theme did not even materialize until the end of the episode, and even then, if you weren't paying attention, you would have missed it. I can suspend disbelief to a lot of things, and assuming my views represent the average 18-49 viewer, the limits of disbelief suspension weren't even reached in this episode. As I mentioned in the subsequent pilot review, the Heroes generally are pretty reluctant, and I feel this reluctant hero theme, while okay, has been beaten down as of late. Other than the teleporter and the guys who fly (or will fly), the heroes don't really want this power that has (to my understanding) come out of nowhere. It's just tough to relate to, even if you can suspend the disbelief of such evolutionary jumps.

Even though the exact theme of Heroes came out in the end, the idea that they were coming together was hinted at throughout the episode, and this is what led me to give it a six episode run. My disagreement with the writer's theory of plot development is just an opinion; there are many ways it could have been done, and this was simply one of several. Obviously the central plot/theme is that these "Heroes" have developed power, largely concurrently, and by hook or by crook they will be brought together for the common good. A good old American heroes theme. Nothing wrong with that; people can relate because many have superman/superwoman type complexes. But too many cooks can spoil the pot, and too many storylines can spoil the plot. As such, and not to keep beating on the point, but I found the pilot both difficult to relate to any individual character, and I'm just not sure if the plot of "saving NYC" by banding together can carry through an entire season. Again, maybe I will be proven wrong, which is why I think the show at least merits a few more watches.

2. The maximum stretch of any storyline

This being said, a single storyline of a show today can probably be advanced to its logical completion within three seasons. Even the most successful dramas ratings peaks last only three to five seasons at best, and usually by the fifth (if it makes it that far), its general audience's interest level has already begun to decline (I would point to the inconsistencies of 24's various seasons as one example, and Alias's final two seasons from the cloning plot on as another

example). Supposedly *Lost* is following this premise, as JJ Abrams has apparently not signed on for a fourth season. I tend to hope this is the case as I am not sure they can keep dragging this story much longer.

Given the assumption that most storylines can't be extended past one or two seasons (e.g., *Desperate Housewives*), I believe that for a successful show to carry ratings past that and still be able to compete with popular "variety" shows such as *American Idol*, the storyline must be compelling, and also one which draws the audience in. Mysteries seem to have done well these past few years, other stories, while so-called critically acclaimed ones (e.g., *Jack and Bobby*, *Dead Like Me*) tend to falter. I would go as far to say these so-called failures may simply have been cursed from the start by the network or time slot. The pilots on the major three networks with initial success tend to instantly receive an increase in publicity to develop further the audience base and increase ratings, and those shows that receive lower ratings initially are effectively left to die in a sort of "I told you so" manner. I'm not sure what the need to cut loose is, but nevertheless, it's a president's prerogative.

I don't mean to imply by these latter comments that only mysteries succeed in television dramas; I am only stating that the audience must be captivated to the storyline such that they must see how it continues from week to week and mysteries have a greater likelihood of doing so. Action shows like *24* (Season 1 toward the end, Season 2, and Season 4) and *Alias* (season 1) also do a good job of engaging the audience; the drawback is that missing an episode in such serial shows acts as a deterrence to continue watching the series. Online media has effectively resolved this problem.

Whether *Heroes* can succeed with its storyline remains to be seen. They have five episodes to capture my attention with their potentially compelling storyline and potentially relatable characters, and if they do not, I will simply engage my free time with a (hopefully) more productive outlet. I can't imagine I am the only one who watches tv this way; whether my remarks are representative of the 18-49 demographic generally or just an unmarketable segment of it does not matter to me in the least. I'm just using it to give me something to do when I need a break.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for a show like *Heroes* to succeed with such a massive character base and loose plot, it will have to develop the characters and focus the plot in such a fashion that encourages a broader audience to be compelled to continue watching the series. I suggest that an easy means for this to be accomplished would be to air an exclusive online scene (five to ten minutes) that supplements/advances the plot, but not so much that you *have* to watch it online.

As far as I know, no television show has adapted this type of strategy; *Lost* comes closest with its online game. I suspect that the time is near when all shows will eventually engage in this particular marketing scheme; perhaps NBC will use *Heroes* to bring itself to the forefront in this

realm in order to captivate further a wider audience, supplement its storyline, and survive past its initial six episode run. We shall see.

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