Our entertainment guru Mitch Cyrus is back, and this time with reviews of four of the hottest new shows of the fall television season:

The new television season is upon us, and what are we seeing? Copycats galore…as is pretty much the norm every season. But at least this season the studio heads are copying some of the good shows, realizing that it's the one hour dramas that are garnering all the attention now. There are still numerous reality shows cluttering up the airways, but other than "Dancing with the Stars", they are a lot more low profile than before and none are really "new". Unfortunately for music lovers everywhere, "American Idol" will return at the first of the year, but let's try to forget about that abomination for now.

Edgy is in. So what is going to be the next "24", "Lost", or "House" for the guys, or "Grey's Anatomy" or "Desperate Housewives" for the gals?

This week, I'll look at four new shows; "Smith", "Heroes", "Shark", and "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip". In Part II, I'll take a look at "Friday Night Lights", "The Nine", "Kidnapped", and something else that catches my eye between now and then. I'll also give you a little blurb about what to avoid this year as well.

Smith

CBS, Tuesdays at 10 PM.

Ray Liotta is one of the baddest mofos ever. Yeah, he's pudged out a bit from his "Goodfellas" days, but he still has those wild assed eyes that can either freeze lava or melt stone, based on his mood, along with that diabolical grin and sinister laugh. So he is perfect in this series as the mastermind leader of a group of reprobates specializing in high profile armed robberies. His crew consists of Simon Baker as the trigger man, a murdering scum bucket who is currently entertaining offers to play for either the Bengals or Ravens, Jonny Lee Miller as the electronics expert, Franky G as the wheel man, and Amy Smart as the master of disguise diversion (and quite a diversion she is). Virginia Madsen plays Liotta's wife, a character that I first equated to Edie Falco's Carmela Soprano, a woman too wrapped up in her own creature comforts to care about how her husband makes his money. Bzzt…wrong on that one. She's got some secrets of her own, and is currently on parole with weekly "pee in a cup" meetings with her P.O.

The "Sopranos" comparison is valid here, as these are characters that you are interested in, but never truly sympathetic towards, as they have no problem killing innocent people if they get in the way. Liotta's Bobby Stevens ("Smith" is the name assigned to the crew leader by the FBI) is an intriguing character. You can tell he's still juiced by the action and payoffs, but he's growing weary of it all nonetheless, and is trying to get to a point where he can retire from the lifestyle permanently. The paradox then becomes that he must take riskier jobs to get to his $10 million goal as soon as possible. Madsen's aptly named "Hope" looks to be a very unique character in this type of show; someone who may be just as "bad" as her husband. The other characters aren't as well defined as of yet, although Smart's "Annie" is being set up as the show's second most important character. She was identified on the first heist from an old high school friend in Pittsburgh. (Wait a second! She can't be from Pittsburgh! She has an education and a full set of teeth!). She promptly tasered her old friend…something I'd LOVE to do to several of my old classmates.

The show is filmed in a manner reminding me of Michael Mann's movie version of "Miami Vice"; dark and edgy. The capers are slick, and the action sequences loud and violent, starkly contrasting the intimate dialog that seems to go on whenever there are only two characters on screen.

The only thing I don't want to see would be too much emphasis on the FBI agents tracking them. Like "The Sopranos", this should be about the hoods, not the cops. The producers and writers need to trust the intelligence of the audience and not try to make the criminals too

sympathetic by having them always on the run. If they avoid that trap, this has the makings of an excellent series. But I do question whether this format has the ability to last for more than a season or two.

Preliminary Grade: B+

Heroes

NBC, Mondays at 9 PM

I really, really wanted to mock the hell out of this one, coming on the heels of the over saturation of superheroes at the box office. Mostly, I was sick of over produced, over directed, over acted and under written visions of spandex and leather prancing about the screen. “Fantastic Four”, “X-Men: the Last Stand”, and “The Covenant” were all rotten movies, and even the OK “Superman Returns” left something to be desired.

So here comes a series with more people with superpowers. Ho. Hum.

But wait as second. This is actually Good Television. Sort of a “Lost” meets the “X-Files”. For some reason, various people across the world are just developing these powers around the time of a solar eclipse, and they are all pretty much freaking out about it. A perky little Texas high school cheerleader becomes impervious to injury. OK; I take that back. She gets injured in some of the grossest ways imaginable (fingers in the disposal), but regenerates immediately. A slacker male nurse with an overly ambitious politician brother finds that he (they) can fly. A heroin addict artist sees the future when he paints. A Japanese office wonk can bend time and space. A cop can “hear” others’ thoughts. And perhaps the strangest (at least not really detailed through two episodes), a Las Vegas web cam stripper who has an

alter ego that evidently appears when she blacks out and does very, very nasty things…like brutally killing two thugs.

One thing that always bugs me in these types of shows: why is it that the only people that develop superpowers are losers? Heroin addicts, strippers, slackers, nerds, and dopey cops. The only two non-screwed up people are the politician and the cheerleader…but something could be said about anyone wanting to be a cheerleader or a politician has some mental deficiencies as well.

As I said, the comparison that best suits is “Lost” in regards to having multiple characters, all flawed, who are totally confused about what’s happening. A genetics professor from India has traveled to New York to continue his murdered father’s work in unraveling the mystery, trying to stay ahead/out of the way of some mysterious bad guys…one of which just so happens to be the “adopted” father of the cheerleader. You know he’s a bad guy due to the bad flat top haircut and horned rimmed glasses straight out of Central Bad Guy Casting.

“Heroes” has the chance of being one of the breakout series this year. That is, if it can keep up with the tight rope act of staying mysterious and interesting without getting too convoluted or going off into the world of Camp.

Preliminary Grade: A-

Shark

CBS. Thursdays at 10 PM

If “Smith” tries to emulate “The Sopranos”, and “Heroes” takes from the book of “Lost”, then “Shark” attempts to recreate some of the magic from “House”.

Take a central character that is extremely charismatic and flawed, surround him with talented, attractive subordinates, and watch him teach/berate/badger them into assisting him solve a mystery. In “House”, it’s Hugh Laurie solving medical conditions no one else can figure out. In “Shark”, it’s the talented James Woods as a former hot shot defense attorney now serving as the head of a D.A. department specializing in high profile cases.

Sebastian Stark’s last case as a Johnny Cochran type defense attorney ended when the celebrity scum bag he defended for wife beating ended up murdering his wife a few days after the trial. Stark is burned out and unable to practice law again until the mayor convinces him to alleviate his guilt by putting bad guys away instead of defending them. This doesn’t make the county District Attorney, played by Jeri Ryan (Seven of Nine on “Star Trek Voyager”…sadly no longer wearing her spandex), too happy. She assigns Stark “loser” stereotyped young ADAs to pretty much guarantee his failure.

You guessed it; Stark whips his young charges into shape, and they proceed to kick ass and take names. You have the ice princess WASP, the jock frat boy, the gay Hispanic, and the Angry Young Black Woman. And that’s all you need to remember them by, since through two episodes, they’ve managed to forget something important that makes “House” work; make the supporting characters interesting. Foreman, Chase, and Cameron are extremely fascinating characters in their own rights on “House”, each with their own unique styles that don’t necessarily take the focus off the star of the show. That’s not happening yet for the young lawyers.

But for all its flaws, “Shark” is pretty decent simply due to James Woods. His guilt is every bit as much of a handicap as House’s bum leg…and not just guilt over the murder, but also in his dealings with his sixteen year old daughter, who has decided to live with her father after her mother and soon to be stepfather relocate to New York. It’s been all about work for Stark, and he’s having a hard time figuring out how to be a father; although he is making an effort. And with Woods, it’s the effort that is so enjoyable to watch as he tries to get his daughter to call his expensive designer when she wants to paint her room or when he threatens a driving school instructor after she fails her driving test.

Woods is also mesmerizing in the courtroom scenes. Like “A Few Good Men”, you know he’s going to get someone to crack on the witness stand; the fun comes from figuring out how he’ll do it.

If this series figures out how to make proper use of Jeri Ryan (nothing more than a bitch boss at the moment) and the Stark-ettes, this show has some potential as Woods is definitely on his “A” game.

Preliminary Grade: B-

Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip

NBC, Mondays at 10 PM.

Aaron Sorkin is back, and the man can still write some serious dialog for people that love hearing people talk, and talk, and talk, and talk. And who better to serve as the overly talkative stars than Matthew Perry and Bradley Whitford? They play hot shot Hollywood partners (a writer and director) who are hired to resurrect an “SNL” live comedy sketch show that has hit the dumps, culminating in the old Loren Michaels type producer (Judd Hirsch) to have a Howard Beale type meltdown on live TV regarding how crappy television has become.

We know it’s a Howard Beale type meltdown from the movie “Network” because they reference the movie about 30 times within ten minutes. We get it, Aaron.

This all happens on the first day of employment for the new head of programming, Jordan McDeere (Amanda Peete), and the signing of the Perry's Matt Albie and Whitford's Danny Tripp doesn't exactly please the new CEO, played by former "Wings" star Steven Weber, who looks to be something better than the stereotypical bad guy stuffed suit.

The other major characters in this ensemble drama about a comedy (confused yet?) are D.L. Hugley, Sarah Paulson, and Tom Jeter as the three main stars of the SNL-Lite show, along with Timothy Busfield as the harried control room director.

Sorkin's lost none of his writing ability from his halcyon days on "Sports Night" and "The West Wing" or his ability to be as preachy as possible while still being entertaining. Danny Tripp has to take the job as he's not able to direct outside the country for eighteen months due to a positive cocaine test…mirroring Sorkin's well documented drug problems. Sarah Paulson's Harriet Hayes is a devout Christian trying to deal with the derogatory viewpoints of a secular Hollywood, just as former Sorkin girlfriend Kristin Chenoweth had to deal with being an actress derided for her devout faith. Jordan McDeere is a near patron saint of the show, homage from Sorkin towards former ABC executive Jamie Tarses.

But despite the ham-handedness at times, the show really clicks. The chemistry is excellent, especially between Matt and Danny, reminiscent to the give and take seen on "Sports Night" between Dan and Casey (does Sorkin ALWAYS has to have a character named Dan/Danny?). The scripts are intelligent, funny, and poignant, and the acting superb.

The only quibble I truly have is a very minor one that is not really related to the show itself. The noble characters keep harping on the show about wanting to make television better and not be a cultural wasteland. A laudable objective, but one that is slightly outdated as over the past few years, television has gotten much smarter and much better. Give HBO the credit if you will (I certainly do), but there is a plethora of excellent shows on TV right now, many of which I have mentioned throughout this article. From the early returns on this year's crop, there may be a couple added to the list.

Preliminary Grade: B

What Sucks?

Happy Hour. FOX comedy about “Odd Couple” type roommates has already been cancelled. The 12 people that liked the show are aghast.

Standoff: Formulaic police drama from FOX about hostage negotiators. If I had to listen to these two whiners for more than a minute, I’d take the whole freaking building down with me.

Help Me Help You: ABC tries to merge Sam Malone and Becker into one being…and fails miserably.

Men in Trees: Another ABC show about to be pulled. Anne Heche playing a famous relationship author exiling herself in Alaska after she discovers her boyfriend was cheating on her. No indication yet whether her closet has a revolving door. (Cheap and easy shot…but I couldn’t resist).

The Bachelor: Rome. Please make it stop.

The Biggest Loser: No, this isn't a documentary of Al Davis. But anyone really watching this show might want to consider that that title might refer to THEM.

Survivor: Cook Islands: The shark has been jumped. Hopefully it eats all of these narcissistic assholes.