

## EXPERIMENTAL TV

BY BENJAMIN CARR

WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF television's golden age, which has led to an array of quality programming including some shows that can be described as truly bizarre, zany, even revolutionary. Three of these experimental programs are definitely worth a look.

**WHO IS AMERICA?** (Showtime)

Sacha Baron Cohen's brazen, hilarious and sometimes terrifying new program on Showtime has already dropped a bomb in local politics. Because of his racist rhetoric and naked, homophobic antics on Cohen's prank / mockumentary show, Georgia state lawmaker Jason Spencer has already quit his job. And that was just the impact of the second episode.

Cohen has done this sort of show before with his characters of Borat, Ali G and Bruno on Da Ali G Show. But *Who Is America?* tackles modern politics from a variety of angles and has no set format unlike his previous program. Cohen pretends to be a leftist college professor, a right-wing blogger, an art critic or a weapons expert - managing to ensnare a variety of guests and politicians into nightmare interviews and scenarios.

How on Earth did former Vice President Dick Cheney think it was remotely acceptable, even in jest, to autograph a waterboarding kit? Ted Koppel ended his interview when it took a turn for the ridiculous. Others haven't been as savvy. Other targets reportedly include Sarah Palin in a future episode.

Because the show is so daring and so insane, it's possible that Spencer is but the first of many careers ruined by *Who Is America?* Its comedy is more than funny. It's savage.

**HANNAH GADSBY: NANETTE** (Netflix)

Storytelling and comedy itself are dissected with near surgical precision by New Zealand stand-up comic Hannah Gadsby in her must-see Netflix comedy special. It is a searing, hour long triumph that will make you both laugh and cry. There hasn't been anything like it on television before and it may change comedy forever. It is one of the year's best programs.

Gadsby, who originally performed the show as part of the international fringe festival circuit is an unexpected presence to find within a comedy special. She presents herself as a shy, large butch lesbian who would rather be at home with her cats than onstage.

But within the monologue, which starts simply as a comedy routine with self-effacing jokes, the comic begins to deconstruct the nature of jokes - and what makes punchlines effective. Gadsby asserts that she should quit comedy because the nature of



the business means that she must humiliate and misrepresent herself in order to release the tension within moments she describes. Because she is a maestro at manipulating that tension she is able to turn the show into an examination of why we tell stories at all.

**CASTLE ROCK** (Hulu)

Stephen King is no stranger to television. His novels have been adapted into movies and miniseries before. In fact, his novels *The Colorado Kid*, *11/22/63* and *Under the Dome* were all used as the basis for full series in recent years.

But the new Hulu series *Castle Rock* - from King and producer J.J. Abrams - isn't an act of adaptation. The idea at its center is wilder, spirited and experimental.

Using King's full body of work as an inspiration and jumping-off point, *Castle Rock* - set in the fictional Maine town wherein many of King's best works took place - evokes the spirit of King while telling an entirely original story. Elements feel familiar, a little bit scary, but there is no guide to help you determine where the show is going.

Starring Andre Holland, Bill Skarsgard, Melanie Lynskey, Jane Levy, Sissy Spacek, Scott Glenn, Terry O'Quinn, and Frances Conroy, *Castle Rock* is a slow-burn mystery thriller with a very talented cast that should soon take a turn for the scary.

A young man imprisoned in a tiger cage deep within a hidden wing of Shawshank Prison has been discovered. His name and history is unknown. He barely speaks yet there is something ominous about him. A lawyer with his own questionable history returns to his hometown of Castle Rock to find justice and help the prisoner. From the first three episodes, it feels as though all hell is about to break loose.

Bold approaches to television are the future. And the future is here.

## HOME THEATER

## NEW RELEASES

THE LATEST DVD, BLU RAY &amp; VOD RELEASES

By John Moore

**ONE MAN'S MADNESS** (Cadiz Music)

Over the years, the music documentary genre has become fairly predictable. VH1 set up the template years ago with *Behind the Music* and a whole generation of filmmakers seems to be on autopilot recreating it again and again. But, thankfully the British ska band Madness, who've bucked convention from the very beginning, continue their streak of non-conformity and bring it to this doc.

*One Man's Madness*, a documentary about Lee Thompson, band co-founder, sax player and one of their chief songwriters, dresses in various costumes and wigs and lip synchs (sometimes horribly) the audio of everyone interviewed for this doc. The ridiculousness of this spectacle is enjoyably compelling, and perfectly in line with Madness as a band - irreverent, creative and above all else, fun.

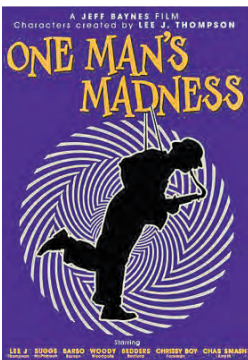
**THE AWESOMES: THE COMPLETE SERIES** (Mill Creek)

It would seem *The Awesomes* had all the right elements to be another adult-themed cartoon in the mold of *Bob's Burgers* or *Archer*. The show was co-created by Seth Myers and included voices by a slew of

former SNL cast members like Maya Rudolph, Fred Armisen, Bill Hader and Andy Samberg. Unfortunately, that talent never translated easily into the series about a group of young, inexperienced superheroes taking over for a band of retiring superheroes. The jokes are simply predictable and largely uninspired. The fact that the Hulu series was initially passed over by both Syfy and MTV before landing at the streaming service was probably an obvious sign worth paying attention to.

**HERE TO BE HEARD: THE STORY OF THE SLITS** (Cadiz Music)

The Sex Pistols and The Clash may have soaked up most of the international press when British punk rock first took off in the late-'70s, but The Slits were just as subversive with even more obstacles to overcome: an all-female group fronted by a 14-year-old singer. This doc does a commendable job of telling their story through surviving members and plenty of grainy black and white footage from their early days. While the bulk of the movie's focus is rightfully on the band's initial run up until 1982, the last 20 minutes or so are devoted to their reformation - with mostly new members - from 2005 to 2010. A great look back at one of the underrated pioneers of the British punk movement.



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