

'Office' war intensifies as US version sobers

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Allow me to pose to you one of the most debated questions in television history: Which version of the "The Office" is better, British or American?

There was a time when the obvious answer was the original series from across the pond. The show from the UK became a hit in its home country and eventually caught on in others as well. In 2004, it became the only British program ever to win the Golden Globe for best comedy series. Naturally, it was adapted and re-made for American audiences but it didn't fare as well in the beginning. The first season of the U.S. version did little more than imitate its predecessor; the pilot was almost a carbon copy of the British premiere. Season two changed all that.

The show's cast and writers found their own voices, veering away from their British counterparts and creating one of the best seasons of TV. The American program picked up steam, finding its own fan base and critical success, capped off by winning the 2006 Emmy for outstanding comedy series. Since then, the gap between original and remake has been closed. There's no longer an obvious answer to the question of which is better. The real question is: can't we stop arguing and appreciate both?

"The Office" (U.K.) ran on the BBC network from 2001 to 2003. The show consists of two six-episode series and a final two-part Christmas special. The plot revolves around the day to day operations of the failing Wernham Hogg Paper Company but the driving force of the show is the branch's manager, David Brent, played expertly by Ricky Gervais. Gervais gives an iconic performance as Brent and creates what just might be the most cringe-inducing character in the history of the tube.

"I've created an atmosphere where I'm a friend first, boss second. Probably entertainer third," says David in the first episode. In reality, none of his co-workers consider David a friend. In fact, he's one of the worst bosses on the planet and his office floor is his only stage. He has the ability to make the worst out of any situation. His jokes are unfunny and almost always fall flat. He humors none and offends many. He's obnoxious, tends to fly off the handle and can be unapologetically mean. Yet we can't take our eyes off him. Gervais succeeds in making the worst character on the show the focal point. David makes us sigh, squirm and maybe even sick at times, but he remains true to his word, never failing to entertain.

David's American counterpart is Michael Scott, played less like a jerk and more as a moron by Steve Carell. Michael is the regional manager of the Dunder Mifflin Scranton branch and the main character on "The Office," (U.S.) currently in its sixth season and airing on NBC.

Michael and David will always be compared as will the versions of the shows they appear in. The truth in both cases however, is that they have less in common than you think. Yes, Michael loves his jokes and impressions and neither are very funny. But where David is mean, Michael is childlike. David wants to be viewed as a hero, an inspiration to his employees. Michael wants to be friends with his. Michael has his flaws. He has no self-awareness, he offends his staff and loves to drop a "that's what she said" at every opportune moment. But Michael has certain redeeming qualities that David lacks. He's one of the best paper salesmen in the company's history and he's even had a few warm moments with other key characters, mainly Jim, Pam and Dwight. Carell made it a point not to watch Gervais' performance in preparation for his role and it pays off. Rather than poorly imitating Gervais' tour de force character, Carell creates a character all his own.

The boss is the centerpiece of each series, but it's the relationship between the romantic lead and receptionist that gives both shows a relatable human element. Tim and Dawn (U.K.) are the realistic, sympathetic characters we root for. Both of them have given up on their goals. Tim, played with quiet desperation by Martin Freeman, wants to go back to school but his insecurity and lack of self-confidence keeps him working a job he knows he's too good for at a company that has no future.

There's also his longing for Dawn, played by Lucy Davis. She's given up on her goal of becoming an illustrator in favor of a steady paycheck and her fiancé Lee. She's down to

earth and sees the best in Tim but she's trapped in a pointless job and lame relationship. Both of them can do better, but like so many people, they spend their lives dreaming until one day they wake up and they're thirty, wondering what could have been. They have some fun torturing Gareth in various ways, but we know they can do so much better than Wernham Hogg. We also know they're meant for each other. Their long awaited kiss in the Christmas special leaves us optimistic about the couple and their future together.

John Krasinski and Jenna Fischer play Jim and Pam, our favorite American "Office" couple. Originally they looked to be heading down the same path as Tim and Dawn but as the show's success grew so did Jim and Pam. The extra seasons allowed for more development of the characters, both singularly and as a couple. Tim lacked self-confidence; Jim lacked motivation. He spent more time pulling pranks on Dwight than he did selling paper. When Pam rejected his initial advance, his mindset changed. He transferred to Stanford, came back as Michael's number two, asked Pam out again and eventually rose to the position of co-regional manager.

Pam however, is the character who has undergone the most change. Originally the quiet receptionist stuck in a boring relationship with Roy, she breaks free of her inhibitions and becomes her own woman. She reveals her feelings for Jim in front of his girlfriend and the rest of their co-workers, enrolls in art school and eventually rises to a sales position. Tim and Dawn dream; Jim and Pam act.

The comedic foil for our love birds is the assistant (to the) regional manager. Gareth (U.K.) and Dwight (U.S.) are cut from the same mold but are essentially different. Gareth, played by Mackenzie Crook, is a military man. Dwight, played by Rainn

Wilson, is a volunteer sheriff's deputy. Both respect authority, strive for power and do things by the book. They're suck ups, looking for any bit of responsibility they can get from the boss. Most importantly, they are the quirkiest characters of their respective series although Creed is a close second to Dwight.

The titles of the shows are the same but they have little else in common. Most of that is due to the life span of each version. The British series is comprised of only 14 episodes. Each one is tight and gets the story across. The program showcases David Brent, possible downsizing and the longing between Tim and Dawn. The lack of extended story arcs and ongoing themes makes for a satisfying conclusion to show. The success of the British version proves that less is more.

The American series on the other hand, consists of over one hundred episodes. This longevity allows the show to develop the characters and storylines in ways the British version could not.

The brilliance of the supporting cast is one of the show's crowning achievements. The addition of Ed Helms as Andy was an inspired move. He has developed into a fifth main character. The others have settled into their own personas: Creed is creepy, Stanley is crotchety, Angela is uptight, Kelly never met a conversation she couldn't join in and Ryan thinks he's too good for Dunder Mifflin, even if he is a temp. Even short-term characters like Jan, Karen and Holly have had their time to shine. Everyone on the show has evolved in way or another. Same goes for the story lines. Longer arcs like Jim and Pam's relationship, the Dwight/Angela/Andy love triangle and the Michael Scott Paper Company only work because of the time they are given to develop. The American version argues that more really is more.

So, do you prefer your incompetence with or without a British accent? Either way, you get TV comedy at its best. In 2007, both were selected to TIME magazine's list of the 100 greatest television shows ever made. I respect the British show and recognize its greatness, but the American version is my favorite TV show of all time. That leaves me in the minority, but I won't apologize for preferring the fun remake to the melancholy original. There are countless classic moments in each series. Whether it's David's dance in "Charity," his rendition of the song "Free Love Freeway" in "Training," Jim and Pam's first love scene in "Casino Night," or their wedding in "Niagara," there's good times galore. The entire British series is available on DVD, as are seasons 1-5 of the American version. Pick them up, experience both versions and make the choice for yourself. Fair warning, it is extremely hard... "That's what she said."



Photo courtesy of BBC4.com