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The 72nd Primetime Emmy Awards are this weekend and things will be decidedly different this year in the wake of Covid-19. That means no big show at Downtown L.A.’s Microsoft Theater, no red carpets, no designer promo parades, and no after-parties are planned. Instead, the virtual ceremony may take on a talk show or variety show feel, with Jimmy Kimmel hosting and at the helm as an executive producer. We’re intrigued to see what Kimmel and company will do within the confines of online presentation because truth be told, most of the virtual programs of this kind have been uninspired Zoom-style affairs thus far. This is “TV’s biggest night” after all, so there’s no reason the program shouldn’t engage viewers as powerfully and creatively as the content it celebrates. Here, L.A. Weekly’s film and TV writers share their picks for the shows and performances that deserve the most celebration.

The Emmys air Sunday, Sept. 20 on ABC and via livestream on Hulu with Live TV.

Outstanding Television Drama: Ozark

In its third and arguably best season, Netflix’s Ozark drops us back into the saga of the Byrde clan, who are still waist-deep in Missouri mud as they continue to launder money for the Mexican Cartel. This time, Marty (Jason Bateman) and Wendy (Laura Linney) come to blows on how to utilize the cartel’s cash flow. Not only are they forced into couples therapy but Bateman ends up in the cartel leader’s torture den. Meanwhile, Wendy’s bipolar brother Ben (Tom Pelphrey) unexpectedly shows up, engaging in a relationship with Ruth (Julia Garner), while making mob lawyer Helen (Janet McTeer) a little anxious with his capricious behavior. Season One was a gut punch which introduced us to a cast of characters that was both Don Winslow and William Faulkner. Season Two was a bit of a slog as the Byrdes struggled to gain a foothold in the community. Season Three strikes a perfect balance with a narrative that’s both gritty and immersed in character. And for all its pulp and backwoods melodrama, Ozark’s third season is an honest reflection of a country at war with itself.

Outstanding Comedy Series: Schitt’s Creek

With a year like 2020, it’s great that we have so many great comedies to choose from – who doesn’t need a good laugh? While every comedy series nominated is no doubt deserving of the award, it’s Schitt’s Creek that should take it home this year. If you haven’t fallen in love with the Roses then you must not be watching the show. Schitt’s Creek manages to find the perfect balance between acerbically witty and universally heartwarming. Its sharp writing and masterclass comedic performances hooked in more and more viewers every season before culminating into a pop culture behemoth which most recently included a tour, social media pop-ups and three-story billboards. The show’s sixth and final season was packed with laughs but wrapped up each character’s arc beautifully, making their journeys from season one to six rewarding and transformative to watch. (Micheal Cooper)

Outstanding Competition Program: RuPaul’s Drag Race

If you are not watching RuPaul’s Drag Race, it is safe to say your life is half lived. The show is not only challenging for its contestants – who must compete as designers, singers, actors and models – but also challenges everyday norms. While Season 12 saw the final showdown between Gigi Goode, Jaida Essence Hall, and Crystal Methyd competing from home, the positive message of the show remained intact. By bringing LGBTQ+ figures to the forefront of pop culture and focusing on themes of inclusion, community, and support, Drag Race breaks down previous prejudices, creating extraordinary spokespeople for societal issues and allowing once taboo subjects to become part of a national conversation. Now with a decade under its belt, Drag Race has not just evolved, but forced the genre in which it thrives to evolve as well. (Erin Maxwell)

Outstanding Variety Sketch Series: Saturday Night Live

As of 2020, John Oliver is no longer hosting a comedy show. He is saving the world, one sarcastic remark at a time. A sane voice that counters the insane situations we’re all living through, Oliver offers acumen through the lens of laughter in a time where few things are funny. In a year where Murder Hornets is a reprieve from larger horrors, his reactions to the lunacy of the current news cycle mixed with British sensibility is the exact amount of snark we need to carry us through the tough times. But what makes him stand out from his fellow late-night funny folks is that he isn’t merely reporting the absurd, he’s along for the ride. He is just as angry and scared as we are, and it’s a comfort to know we are not alone in our exasperation. (Erin Maxwell)

Outstanding Variety Talk Series: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver

In a world where current events have taken on an air of absurdism, SNL not only maintained its rep as the definitive showcase for comedy reflecting and dissecting culture, it rose to the moment, making us laugh, even when the news cycle made us want to do anything but. This year, the show adapted to quarantine by presenting “at home” editions that conveyed (and in the process unified) the country. But even before that, Season 45 had some stellar guests (Woody Harrelson, Adam Driver, Harry Styles and Eddie Murphy, to name a few), and some of the funniest cold opens ever, with returning players including Fred Armisen, Rachel Dratch, Maya Rudolph and Larry David.
portraying the Democratic candidates for Prez and Alec Baldwin channeling Donald Trump in all his narcissistic (un)glory. (LINA LECARO)

Outstanding Limited Series or Movie: Watchmen
Defying the usual superhero cliches while maintaining the usual wonder and visual spectacle we’ve come to expect from comic book inspired entertainment, Watchmen is easily one of the most unforgettable shows ever to air on HBO (and yes, that’s saying something considering its formidable company). Foreshadowing the issues and imagery that were always there but are now on the forefront of our cultural conversation concerning white supremacy, police brutality, government manipulation and identity (the mask wearing stuff is downright eerie watching in the Covid era), the show deservedly made history scoring 26 Emmy nominations this year, more than any other limited series (it was re-classified as such after creator Damon Lindelof announced there would not be a second season). Watchmen is the kind of stunning, statement-making experience that sticks with you long afterward and it’s not a stretch to say that its thought-provoking elements covering historical truths about racism have played some part in where we are today. Capturing how trauma from the past can manifest repercussions in the present, the show was a revelation that we wish wasn’t limited to just one season. The fact that it is – even with questions unanswered and climactic twists unexplained – makes it all the more special. (LINA LECARO)

Outstanding Lead Actor in a TV Movie or Limited Series: Mark Ruffalo, I Know This Much Is True
HBO’s I Know This Much Is True is not everyone’s cup of tea. It’s hard to imagine Watchmen lovers clicking over to a grim portrait of mental illness directed by the guy who brought us 2010’s Blue Valentine (Derek Cianfrance). Not what anyone would call a good time. But who cares, it stars Mark Ruffalo! Ruffalo brings his A-game playing the dual role of twins Dominic and Thomas Birdsey. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, Thomas has been shuttled to several homes before chopping off his own hand. His brother Dominic struggles to get him transferred out of a lockdown facility as he wrestles with his own stability and family history. Ruffalo is spot on as the schizophrenic brother Thomas, but his portrayal of Dominic, a seemingly “normal” guy who is trapped in a cauldron of despair, is grit personified. With a cigarette lodged in his mouth and his
Lauren van der Kolk portrayed the Democratic candidates for Prez and Alec Baldwin channeling Donald Trump in all his narcissistic (un)glory.

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Outstanding Lead Actress in a TV Movie or Limited Series: Regina King, Watchmen

Regina King's Sister Knight was the badass superhero we didn't really know we needed until we got her. When HBO's Watchmen ended it was hard to say goodbye to the character, in part because of the dimensional way she was written (wife, mother, cop, vigilante asskicker) but mostly due to the real and nuanced way she's played. The role of Angela Abar aka masked nun dynamo Knight, was in fact, written with King in mind, and that makes sense. There's a realness and strength to almost everything King does and here, she gets to flex it full-on in a performance that conveys pain and empowerment oftentimes at the same time. A definitive role not just for King, but for the uncertainty and unrest of the times, Sister Knight's too brief presence on our TV screens was more than enough to land her alongside the iconic hero list, and if there's any justice in the world it should land the actress an Emmy to place next to the Oscar on her awards shelf.

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Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series: Issa Rae, Insecure

While his fellow (trans) actress should have been nominated as well, no one can deny that Billy Porter brings soul, passion and pain to TV that resonates onscreen with power and conviction. His portrayal of Pray Tell, an HIV-positive ballroom emcee and DJ is unnerving in the best way, making audiences question their fears surrounding queerness, racism and anti-blackness. Porter does a phenomenal job commanding our attention, both with his biting commentary at the Balls and in his personal life, where he’s a father figure who guides others but has challenges of his own. The character is a formidable reminder of reliance and hope within the LGBTQ+ community and reminding us that in a world of death and disease, being fabulous isn’t always as glamorous as it may sound. (Danielle Broadway)
us cry as we follow her relationship woes each season, her compelling presence always makes us care. Four seasons in, Insecure's star reflects the journey to self-actualization better than ever, showing us how lonely, isolating, seemingly selfish and above all, delightfully awkward it can be.

(DANIELLE BROADWAY)

Outstanding Supporting Actress In A Drama Series: Julia Garner, Ozark

It's almost impossible to imagine Ozark without the spitfire force of Julia Garner's Ruth Langmore. She might be small but her brittle glare and razor-sharp lacerations can cut tough any bike or backwoods drug dealer. Returning as Marty Byrde's (Jason Bateman) trusted associate, Ruth runs the newly acquired casino boat with an iron fist as she goes head to head with the mob boss' privileged son, Frank Jr. (Joseph Sikora). We've seen Ruth get pissed before. It's a little scary and kind of a hoot.

But it's also in season three where we discover Ruth's soft side (yes, she has one) when she strikes up a romance with Wendy's brother, Ben (Tom Pelphrey, robbed of a nomination). Her romance with Ben not only inspires her to reestablish a relationship with her estranged family but forces her to view the Byrde's in an unflattering light. This would be Garner's second Emmy win playing Ruth, but hell, give it to her again. Would you say no to Ruth Langmore? (CHAD BYRNES)

Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Drama Series: Giancarlo Esposito, Better Call Saul

The role of a particularly nasty villain is like an indulgent dessert to a good actor: delicious, decadent, and usually the best part of the meal. Such is the case of Giancarlo Esposito's Gus Fring, a miscreant so memorable he transcended two series' to terrorize Albuquerque locals. Gus is evil incarnate with a name badge and Esposito's ability to shed his customer service smile at a moment's notice is a masterclass in acting as he projects an energy that can make both drug lords and Los Pollos Hermanos employees cover in fear. Behind Fring's grin is a volatile nature, indiscriminate in its cruelty when it comes to protecting his own interests, a personality quirk of which he is well aware. "I am what I am," declares Fring. For some, he is a monster. For others, a businessman. But for fans of Better Call Saul, Esposito's Fring is a true marvel in character construction. (ERIN MAXWELL)

Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy: D'Arcy Carden, The Good Place

One of the biggest snubs from last year's Emmys, D'Arcy Carden failed to garner even a nomination for her brilliant performance(s) in the 2018 "Janet(s)" episode, which found her playing Janet iterations based on each of her castmates. Just a year later, after The Good Place aired its final season, D'Arcy finally received her first Emmy nomination ever for the role. And even though "Janet(s)" may have aired in the previous season, D'Arcy's performance throughout season four is certainly just as deserving of accolades this year – one episode even featured an entire Janet army! (MICHAEL COOPER)

Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Comedy: Daniel Levy, Schitt's Creek

The charming and hilarious comedy that could, Schitt's Creek, will no doubt rack up some bling at this year's awards since airing its final season earlier this year. While the show featured many stand out performances, it's perhaps Daniel Levy's Pansexual, gender-bending character of David Rose that had the biggest impact on representation. Fashion-loving, eye-rolling, bad at sports, femme queers had someone to relate to on screen. But perhaps it was Dan's mom Deborah Divine who summed it up best in an April 2020 Tweet on the eve of the Schitt's Creek series finale: "Today I regret every single second of worry back in the uninformed 80's wondering how the world was going to treat my brilliant little boy who loved to twirl. Little did I know that he was going to kick that old world's ass to the curb and create a brand new one." Can we get an Amen up in here and give him an Emmy? (MICHAEL COOPER)

See our full list of critic's Emmy picks on LAWeekly.com

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