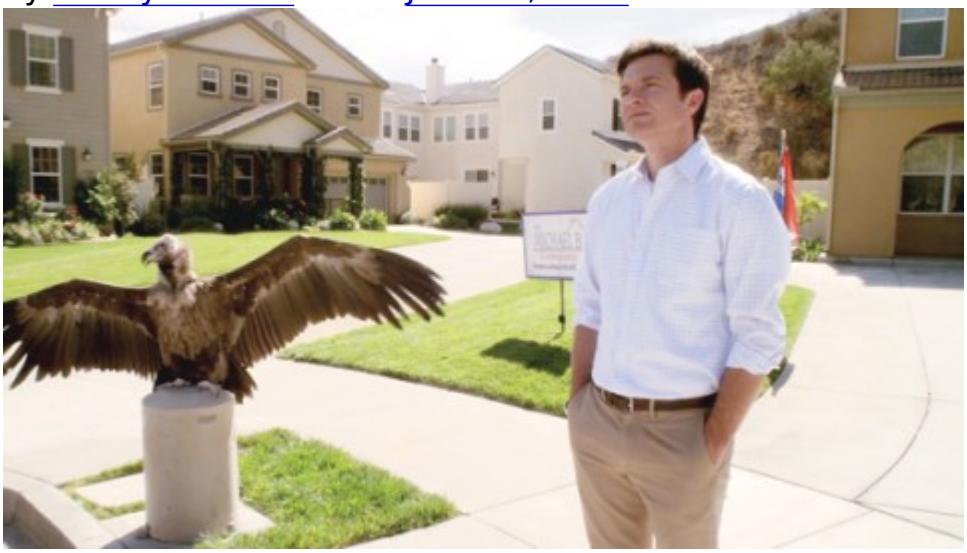
The Bluths’ school for virtue

by Kathryn Reklis in the June 12, 2013 issue



The comedy series *Arrested Development* has returned for a long-awaited fourth season as a Netflix original series. If you haven’t watched the first three seasons, let me catch you up: “It’s the story of a wealthy family who lost everything and the one son who had no choice but to keep them all together.” Or so the narrator (Ron Howard) reminds viewers at the start of every episode.

When the patriarch of a wealthy, dysfunctional family, George Bluth (Jeffrey Tambor), is imprisoned on charges of corruption and “light treason” (building homes in Iraq without government sanction), his son Michael (Jason Bateman) takes over the family construction business and corrals his morally inept siblings and manipulative mother into living together so he can prevent them from using company money to fund lavish lifestyles they can no longer afford.

Such a description might not lure new viewers, but story arc is not what keeps you watching. Few shows are as side-achingly funny from moment to moment or as intricately written, acted or directed. The writers have a strong appreciation for the standard bag of comedy tricks—physical comedy, screwball characters, and more puns than an Abbott and Costello routine—which they have married to their own special brand of self-referential jokes and cutaway gags. It is the kind of humor that gets funnier the more you watch. The groundwork for a joke in the third season might be laid halfway through season one and simple throwaway lines that were

mildly funny in their first context (“No touching!” “Her?” “I’ve made a huge mistake”) take on a life of their own as they reappear in a variety of contexts throughout the seasons.

Half the jokes wouldn’t land if not for Michael Bluth’s slightly arched eyebrows and straitlaced rejoinders. He is the straight man of the group in more than just comedic terms. As the only morally upright Bluth, Michael is the show’s center, struggling to balance saving a failing business, raising his intensely earnest son George Michael (Michael Cera) and keeping his family together. The more he attempts to hold the reins, however, the more things fall apart.

It is easy to see the show as a wickedly smart and prescient satire of the 1 percent. Other than Michael and his son, none of the Bluths have worked a real job in their adult lives.

The youngest son, Buster (Tony Hale), spent 11 months in the womb (“they say there were claw marks on her uterus,” George Sr. tells Michael) and is so paralyzed by the devotion of his mother, Lucille (Jessica Walter), that he has spent a decade pursuing useless graduate degrees in advanced cartography and 18th-century agrarian business and suffering from crippling panic attacks.

Gob (Will Arnett), the eldest Bluth child (the name stands for George Oscar Bluth and is pronounced like the long-suffering servant of the Lord, Job), is a self-taught magician who is always trying to impress his family with his magic tricks (or as he insists, “illusions”) and to compete with Michael for their father’s attention. Lindsay (Portia de Rossi), neglected by her own parents, neglects her only daughter to throw lavish parties to support various causes, like the anticattle ranching campaign (“No more meat!”), the antifish farming commission (“No more fish!”) and the committee to improve school lunches (“More meat and fish!”).

This is a group of grown-up children whose parents went to elaborate lengths to teach them inconsequential lessons about leaving a note when the milk runs out but forgot to teach them not to lie, steal or cheat. Every so often, however, they overcome their arrested development to act out of real love for one another. When George Sr. escapes from prison, Gob saves Michael from going to prison in his place, even though it costs him his father’s approval. Just when he is breaking free from Lucille’s grasp, Buster takes George Michael’s place at the annual Motherboy convention to save him from Lucille’s maternal vices.

It turns out that the family is not just a good platform to show dysfunction—though that sitcom stereotype is pushed to its breaking point with the Bluths. It is also a school for virtue. A school for developmentally delayed pupils, perhaps, but it's the only chance these characters have to break free from paralyzing narcissism.

Maybe it shouldn't come as a surprise that the show's creator and main writer, Mitchell Hurwitz, was a theology and English major at a Jesuit college (Georgetown). Jesuit spirituality and pedagogy focus on building moral imagination and finding God in all things. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises require a month of imagining oneself in the shoes of various biblical characters and discerning signs of God's presence in the smallest details of one's life.

Somewhere in Hurwitz's own curriculum he learned a thing or two about the power of comedy to peel back the curtain on the self-turned-in-on-itself—and also about the possibility that one might encounter grace, even there.

*Arrested Development* gives us plenty of fodder to laugh cathartically at human nature at its worst. But the small moments of actual connection between the characters pull us back from the edge of farce to see the real humanity of the stunted Bluths and maybe just a glimpse of ourselves.

Or as Gob says to Michael as he presses his tearstained cheek to Michael's face when Michael promises to take him on the camping trip their father always canceled: "Taste the happy, Michael." Michael's reply: "It tastes an awful lot like sad."