It might be the most beloved one-and-done sitcom ever produced, even if many of its biggest admirers didn’t discover it until 10, even 20, years after its abrupt cancellation by NBC. But as a launchpad for talent in front of and behind the camera, *Freaks and Geeks* (1999–2000) commands its own pedestal—a kind of University of Hollywood for some of today’s most sought-after names. The 18-episode series, which treated brainy teens and deadbeat slackers with equal compassion as social outcasts, offered the first significant roles for several notable greenhorns—James Franco, Linda Cardellini, Seth Rogan and Jason Segel among them. Watch closely and you’ll see future stars Lizzy Caplan and Ben Foster in guest appearances.

“We looked for special people and adapted the scripts to them,” the show’s writer-director-producer Judd Apatow told an interviewer in 2016 about creator Paul Feig’s initial two scripted episodes, which were combined to make a strong pilot and tailored to suit the individual actors’ strengths.

Apatow, whose production company supplied the engine, and Mike White, the eventual mastermind behind *The White Lotus*, pitched in as writers, with Apatow wearing several hats. Their alchemy was giving talented players meaty roles to chew on, while nimbly spreading the wealth to more than a half dozen characters—with a tone that ranged from broad to startlingly dramatic.

Apatow knew the show was doomed from the start, since the programming chief who greenlit the pilot was replaced by an executive who was not a fan. The lack of support was reflected in a weak time slot, poor marketing and an erratic schedule. “There was no rhythm to create a relationship with the audience,” he said.

Sensing the proverbial clock ticking, the creative team shot the final three episodes out of sequence, so they’d have some semblance of closure when the axe came down. “When you think your show is going to get cancelled at any second, you use all of your good ideas,” said Apatow. “Nothing gets saved for seasons two and three.”

Those three episodes would end up being unveiled at the Museum of Television and Radio before airing on broadcast television (Fox Family inherited the show in 2000), a testament to the show’s already growing stature.

Apatow’s subsequent rise as a producer-writer-director is well documented, as are the careers of Feig and White. Many of the *Freaks and Geeks* cast members, too, would excel in multiple disciplines, moving in and out of Apatow’s orbit.

“From the moment I got the script from Paul Feig and opened it up and it said *Freaks and Geeks*, I knew right there this was going to be the best thing ever,” recalled Apatow. “It was everything I thought about: I felt like a geek; I hung out with freaks. I understood what Paul was attempting to do.”