

“THE SOPRANOS”

Chekhov And Sophocles Meet *The Godfather*

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What can screenwriters learn from the hit television series “The Sopranos?”

A lot! So let’s take a closer look whether you think of yourself as a *feature film* writer or someone open to trying the whole carnival of television, film, and all forms of media.

A father takes his high school senior daughter on a trip to visit New England colleges before applying to them and along the way murders an old enemy while the daughter is taking a campus tour. Thus we have the outline of just one episode of the popular HBO series, “The Sopranos” tracing the hugely contradictory life of Tony Soprano (indelibly portrayed by James Gandolfini), a New Jersey mob boss.

Just when many television writers began to despair that Survivor styled “reality” shows and simply bad episodic shows would rule the future of American and indeed, international television, “The Sopranos” appeared. The creation of David Chase, the Writer/Director whose credits include work for “Northern Exposure,” “The Rockford Files” and “I Fly Away,” the HBO show that ran a first season (1999-2000) of 13 episodes took

the country by surprise. Suddenly there was a show that, as *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden notes, had the force of *The Godfather* but which also had “the force of Greek tragedy. Or is it a Chekhov comedy replayed in the foul-mouthed street language of New Jersey hoodlums (Holden. *The New York Times* on “The Sopranos”)?”

What is the key premise of this remarkable series? Simple: a Mafia boss also tries to live a “normal” American upper middle class East coast family life.

It is the contrast, conflict and interaction of these two worlds that hold our rapt attention. For as Holden rightly sums up, “The Sopranos” more than any American television show, looks, feels, and sounds like real life as it’s lived and experienced in the United States in the cluttered environment of the Internet, mall shopping, rap music, and a runaway stock market.”

Quite simply, “The Sopranos” suggests the multi-layered echoes that such finely tuned writing exhibits. Critic Vincent Canby goes further in identifying the show’s originality in not only comparing it to European television classics such as Dennis

Potter’s “The Singing Detective” (Britain, 1988) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s “Berlin Alexanderplatz” (Germany, 1980), but in exploring how “The Sopranos” suggests the best of films interacting with television format (Canby 59). For while everyone “gets” that the show owes much to Coppola’s *Godfather* trilogy, the real point, is that rather than simply being a new television series, “The Sopranos” in tone, scope, and quality is really a “megamovie.”

European countries have long worked in a “middle ground” between film and television in ways that “The Sopranos” is moving toward as Canby suggests.

I am speaking of a tradition of writing and filming simultaneously a feature film and a mini series for television to be released six to nine months later after a film has had its first run in the cinemas that I mentioned in the first chapter in regards to my own first film, *Something In Between*.

I see “The Sopranos,” not only as an example of fine television writing and as a landmark case of how film and television are blending and playing off each other in ever changing ways, but also as an example of how a work

can be “global” in its texture, implications, themes, and character development rather than by direct use of foreign or multi-cultural sources or multi-national writing teams. All the writers under David Chase’s keen eye are Americans, yet the critics are unanimous in how “international” the feel and effects of these intensely funny and dramatic episodes are.

Consider five elements that make the writing of “The Sopranos” something “other” than American television screenwriting, as we have known it.

Going for a thirteen episode season rather than the traditional twenty six episodes of most shows

As we have noted above, this fact alone puts the show in a new category that really can’t be called a “mini-series” or a regular show. It has simply redefined what a “season” can and may mean on national television.

Fusing dark comedy and crime drama so completely

Traditionally on American television, crime shows and sitcoms have been kept apart with little

or no real overlap. The sitcom is based on comedy surrounding American families, the traditional viewing audience. But "The Sopranos" is yet a further extension of changes in American comedy as sitcoms of the 80s and 90s moved toward ensemble shows such as "Cheers," "Friends" and "Seinfeld" rather than family based shows.

Like films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Run Lola Run*, "The Sopranos" manages laughing out loud comic moments punctuated by extreme violence, yet all are tied to character revelation, as we will suggest next. The result is a unique blend of the two approaches that Vincent Canby reminds us means "The Sopranos," "...which plays as a dark comedy, possesses a tragic conscience" (67).

Increasing violence, but violence with a point rather than gratuitous violence

In the third season (2001), the fear of the producers was clearly that Tony Soprano was becoming too popular as a likeable guy despite his mob life. Thus a show that was already pushing the envelope on levels of violence upped the stakes steeply. Tony almost murders his girlfriend in a scene that could only play on HBO at the moment. But as Caryn James points out, the violence is not simply added for shock value. According to James, "On 'The Sopranos,' every act of violence comes directly from and offers a comment on Tony's life" (B6).

Creating richly nuanced characters not only for the lead protagonist—Tony Soprano—but all the others as well

Everyone credits the fine writing that brings out so many contradictory aspects of Tony Soprano's character. He is the dutiful son with a hateful mother, he is trying hard to be a good husband, but he indulges in mistresses and lovers, he wishes to be a caring father even if it means trying to murder a high school soccer coach so that he won't take another job, and he tries to be friends with many of

his colleagues even when mob business pushes him into actions that contradict all his efforts.

But the same care and skill go into each character's development. Let's mention Tony's mother, Livia Soprano (Nancy Marchand) as just one shining example. As Caryn James comments, "When the series began (1999), Mama Livia Soprano was an irascible old woman, addled and comic enough to hit her best friend accidentally with a car" (*Addicted to a Mob Family Potion 25*). But as the seasons have progressed, she has become "a matriarchal figure rooted in Greek tragedy and Roman history" (Ibid.). Her name, for instance, is a clue, for it is the same as the ruthless grandmother of Emperor Claudius (which was well portrayed in the mini series "I Claudius").

Portraying a diverse ethnic mixture of characters

"The Sopranos" is not just a television version of Italian American gangsters. Creator David Chase has drawn from the richly ethnic neighborhoods he grew up in around northern New Jersey. There are Czech criminals and Russian prostitutes in many episodes, as well as Polish sausage shops, Irish bars, Jewish shops, black neighborhoods, Italian restaurants and Portuguese bakeries. Global characters and tastes fill the screen in every episode! And they are all part of New Jersey! As Chase says himself about the multicultural society he has captured in his show, "I knew I lived someplace special. I knew it was not like any place else" (Strum 18).

Screenwriters everywhere, such a show can make us all proud and teach us a lot about our own projects past, present and future! ■

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