

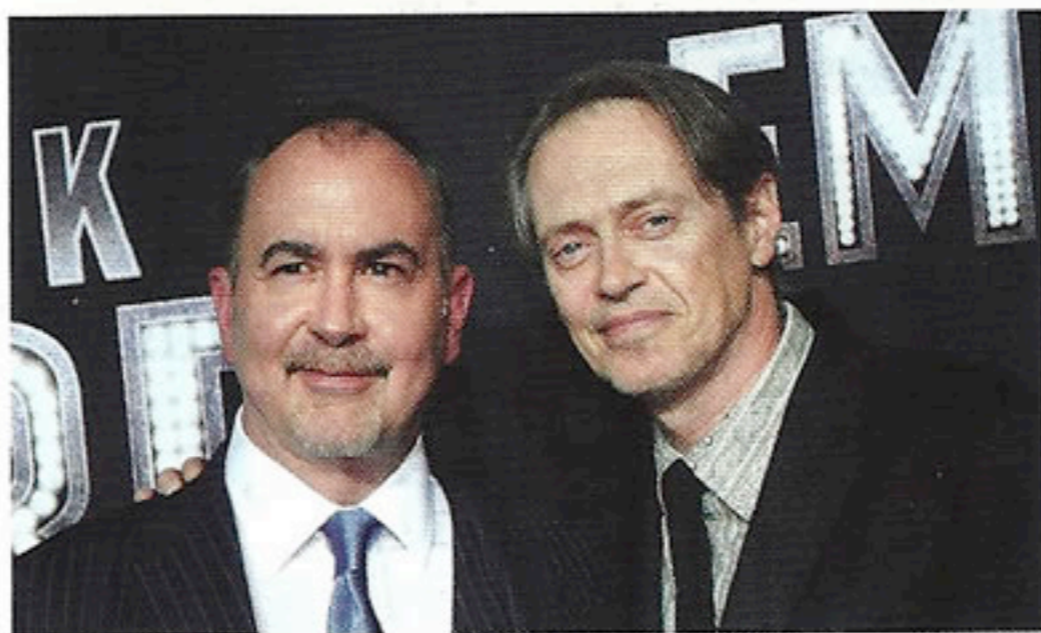
THE BRAINS

# TERENCE WINTER

The Emmy-Award-winning creator, writer and executive producer of Boardwalk Empire discusses working on The Sopranos, chopping meat for the Mob and his debt to an articulate dolphin

IF PLEASURES ARE greatest in anticipation, then HBO's new series Boardwalk Empire was a triumph before it even aired. As the US premiere approached in September you couldn't watch TV or ride the New York subway without being reminded it was coming. With a \$20m budget for its pilot, Steve Buscemi in the lead and Martin Scorsese directing you might have mistaken it for a movie. But look closer at the posters and you could see that this was different. Above the tagline, "Atlantic City 1920 — when alcohol was outlawed, outlaws became kings," above the director's name even, the series' writer was top of the bill. If this were a movie, you'd be searching for his credit in the small print. But just as HBO — as it is fond of telling us — is not television, Terence Winter is not your everyday scribe.

Eleven years ago, as the internet was starting to flex its cables, Vincent Canby, TV critic for The New York Times, announced that beyond our computer screens, a new age of television and a new form of series, the "megamovie", was dawning. It was a conclusion he reached having watched series one of The Sopranos, and he wasn't wrong. In the decade that followed, shows such as The Wire, Mad Men, The Shield, Deadwood and Six Feet Under meant that, for viewers of a certain disposition, there had never



TOP: TERENCE WINTER AND STEVE BUSCEMI AT THE PREMIERE OF BOARDWALK EMPIRE. ABOVE: WINTER'S FIRST GIG ON A "MEGAMOVIE", HBO'S THE SOPRANOS

been a better time to be watching television. Back in '99 though, The Sopranos was both the starting pistol and the noonday gun by which all the subsequent shows could be calibrated. And it was a shot that rang out from New Jersey all the way to LA.

It was there that Terence Winter, a writer on shows that included The New Adventures Of Flipper and Xena: Warrior Princess, received a copy of The Sopranos

pilot. "Like everyone else," he remembers, "I thought it was about opera." Why, he wondered, would his agent send this? His agent knew though, "that I grew up in Brooklyn. I worked in a butcher's shop in the Seventies that was owned by Paul Castellano, the head of the Mob who John Gotti had assassinated, so I was very familiar with this world. Twenty minutes into it I picked up the phone and said, 'You have to get me on this show. I have got to be on this show.'"

Just as the dawn of the megamovie might be compared to the hallowed age of rock'n'roll, Winter's secondment to The Sopranos' team in series two is akin to an already famous musician joining the classic line-up of an established band. Along with series creator David Chase and Mad Men's Matthew Weiner, Winter would complete the triad of the show's most prolific and awarded writers. It was a combination that underscored the programme's progress from mere goodness to true greatness. Boardwalk Empire, in effect, is his solo album. And HBO has handed him some impressive session players and a recession-busting budget to get it done. Does he feel the weight of expectation?

"Once Martin Scorsese got involved I knew, of course, that the expectations would be huge. But I put my blinders on and tried to do the best work I could do and let the chips fall where they may. That sounds very cavalier and I don't mean it to be. But otherwise I'd be in a constant state of terror, second-guessing 'is this good enough or not?' So I just did my job and hoped for the best, and I'm pleased with how it turned out."

Certainly, you can see where every cent was spent. For that kind of cash you could feasibly have built Atlantic City in 1920, and that is more or less what HBO has done. Scorsese moves his camera through these meticulous settings and stitch-perfect costumes with all the finesse you might expect. When it alights on talents like Buscemi, Kelly Macdonald and in particular Michael Pitt, Michael Stuhlbarg and Stephen Graham (as an up and



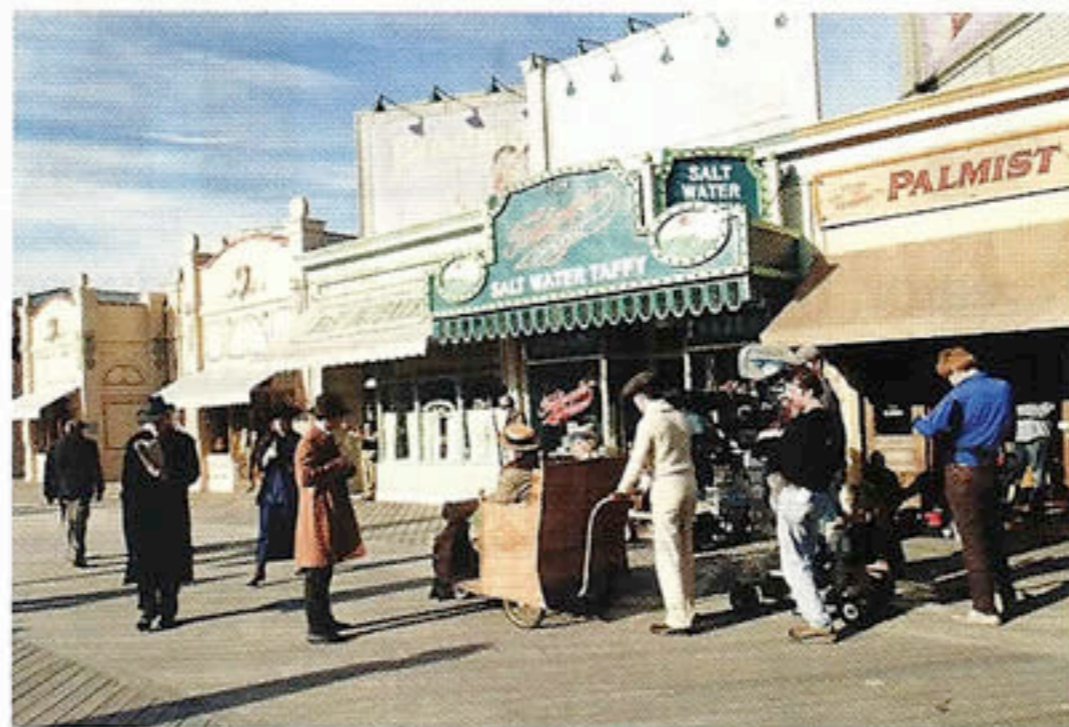
coming Al Capone), something special ensues. Buscemi plays Nucky Thompson, the benign if corrupt treasurer of Atlantic City, who on the eve of Prohibition is primed for the illicit income it might offer, if not the new wave of villains and violence that will follow. It's not until late in the episode, though, that Winter really starts to show his hand. After the essential exposition, the variant strands of plot are drawn together in such a way as to make you sense that you were being led by an expert all along. Certainly you want to see the next instalment as soon as you can.

Shaping familiar looking stories that take us instead to unforeseen places is one of the defining characteristics of Winter's work, and it's a reflex he's learned to cultivate. "Driving here this morning," he says, "I had an idea for season two and I realised, 'Oh, I can completely reverse that expectation', and it's a thing that we've been very excited about writing actually, and then I just thought, 'God, this is gonna be great if it's completely flipped on its ear now.'" One wonders how much of an outlet for these instincts he found in his earlier scripts. Can we see any of his dark left turns — the twists that brought Sopranos' characters to

their knees felling construction workers, or beating men to death with remote controls — in episodes of Flipper [which he worked on]? Winter, who in person resembles a warm, mischievous and less bald Hunter S Thompson, thinks not.

"Yeah, Flipper gets extorted! You might see shades of my sense of humour, but probably not. Network TV doesn't give you a lot of latitude,

THE RISE OF THE EMPIRE: ON SET ON THE BOARDWALK



Familiar stories that take us into unforeseen places are characteristic of Winter's work

although you will see it in David Chase's work, certainly... Rockford Files [on which Chase was a writer] no question, you'll see scenarios or lines or scenes and think, that's The Sopranos, or that relationship is very reminiscent of Tony and somebody else. But my career was so spotty, and I started out in sitcoms. I kept trying to reinvent myself back and forth, give myself as much latitude as possible, so I had a chance of getting hired. I worked on Xena: Warrior Princess, Sister Sister, which was a show for teenage girls basically, and the Cosby Mysteries. I was all over the map. If you look at my resumé you couldn't figure me out. But the answers are simple — I just wanted to work. I wanted to write and make decent money and survive. I was just amazed that people would let me do this at all. 'How much are you gonna pay me? Yeah, sure.' I would do anything I was offered. The idea that I'm gonna turn down a show because it's not good enough? I still have to pay my rent. There was no stigma for me writing on Flipper; I was thrilled to have that job. You were writing for a dolphin. It was fine."

A clear connection from Winter's sitcom years to The Sopranos — which was, he says,

## WHO YOU CALLING MUMMY'S BOY?

This Is England's Stephen Graham on playing Al Capone



"I didn't audition. I'd kept in touch with Martin Scorsese since Gangs Of New York — he said, 'One day I'll find something for you,' then I get this call asking me to play Capone. I said, 'I'll see you in New York.' You don't say no.

When you play iconic characters there's a lot of research to do, so I read biographies and was on the internet — once my wife showed me how to work it. I really wanted to capture him when he was young. Marty didn't want me to watch any other performances of him. If you go in with the fear then you're on a downward spiral.

De Niro's performance in The Untouchables was ingrained on my

mind, but Marty just gave me music from the era. So I watched a lot of documentaries on America and Prohibition. We wanted to create a character people hadn't seen before.

There's one line where I shake Jimmy's (Michael Pitt) hand and say, 'I'm Al Capone'; I was shitting myself. I've never been so nervous on a set. My voice coach was a guy called Charlie, the key grip, who's born and bred in Brooklyn [where Capone was born]. And the crew was rooting for me. Some of them had seen This Is England [Graham played ex-con skinhead Combo], so they adopted me as their own. So I did the line, we did around

five takes and Charlie gave me the thumbs up and I thought, 'Great, I'm accepted now. I can put these shoes on properly and walk for a bit.'

Capone's been played by more than 50 people. We decided to try and bring a bit of humour to him; hopefully we've achieved that. He's 20, 21 and trying to make his way in the world. I sound like his lawyer! But I have to find something in characters that's likeable to me. He's an opportunist, he's a loving husband and a mummy's boy. His mum was with him all his life. It was good to show that as well.

But when I was researching him I read that when he was about 12, he

and his friends would go down to the Navy yards and take the piss out of the sailors on parade. One of the sailors came over. Capone wanted to fight him — the commander calmed him down and said, 'Show me how you would do it.' Capone did the whole parade, beat for beat, just from having observed it. The commander sent a letter to one of his superiors saying, 'I've met this young boy — Alphonse Capone — he could either be the best soldier we've ever seen, or, I dread to think what might happen.' I always had that in the back of my head. That was my starting point. It was the toss of a coin which way he went."



“the first time I thought ‘Wow, this is really me. This is writing for a character but this is my voice, no filter’” — is how funny he can be. Perhaps his most celebrated Sopranos episode, “Pine Barrens”, in which Paulie and Christopher become lost in the woods, is as hilarious at times as any sitcom. It must be tough, one imagines, if you can write scenes that funny, to rein in the impulse when it’s time to cut back to the drama?

“I think the learning curve for me on *The Sopranos* was not to write to jokes, don’t write to the joke. If the joke comes organically through the situation, great, but don’t set up the situation so you can get to some punch line, which is what you would do on a comedy. I had to retrain myself to trust that there’s enough humour in everyday people reacting to each other. Especially people who were as absurd as the characters on *The Sopranos*. Uncle Junior was this neurotic old man, a murderer, yet he’s unbelievably cheap and petty. And there’s humour in those human qualities — and to just trust that. Or if you put two people in a room who don’t get along, inherently you’re going to end up with something funny.”

That same episode also contains one of the series’ most notorious unresolved storylines, as the gangsters lose track of the Russian they have come into the woods to kill. Aside from the show’s final scene, it has generated more speculation than any other. Winter gets asked about this all the time; it seems less gratuitous to enquire if *Boardwalk Empire* will grow up to operate under similar levels of artfulness and ambiguity?

“One thing I’m really proud of is that there are so many things set up in the pilot that pay off literally in episode 12. Or that go through the whole series and pay off later on. Things that, at first blush, don’t look like storylines or moments. Little throwaway things that turn out to be much bigger than they appear early on.” So the Sopranos ethic abides — we’ll sell you a thrill, but we won’t necessarily tie up the story? “Yeah, I don’t know that  
*Continued on page 132*

# ORIGINAL GANGSTER STYLE

Boardwalk Empire costume designer John Dunn on bloodstained suits, the importance of a good tailor and the difference between working-class thugs and gangsters

“About four months before we started filming, I hit the research libraries, I went to the Brooklyn Museum and the Met. I would go to the rental houses, and I would meet with the vintage dealers. I pored over tailoring books from the period — I just completely immersed myself in 1920.

With Marty [Scorsese] and Terry Winter, I developed the feel for each of the characters. We all wanted it to be very, very accurate and specific to the period. So I limited myself to the fabrics of 1920. It got to the point where a couple of times I had woollens manufactured for suiting because I couldn’t find exactly what it was that I wanted. I knew that we were going to have to build suits. I had to find a tailor; I didn’t want the suits to all be vintage, old and raggedy, so I used Brooklyn tailor Martin Greenfield.

[Back then] it was a big deal for a man to get his suit made. Men didn’t have many suits, so it was an important piece in their wardrobe.

Nucky Thompson is based on a real person who was known as a serious dresser. I tried to put myself in his place and see who he would be looking at. I thought, probably, someone who is well-known and trendsetting like the Prince Of Wales would influence him.

Atlantic City was a boom town where people were able to reinvent themselves, and presentation was becoming more and more important. A character like Nucky would understand the importance of the image he’s projecting. The minute he stepped out onto the boardwalk, he wanted everyone to know he was there.

Nucky wears a collar bar. The collars actually needed controlling back then, so the collar bar was very popular. You do have other characters that don’t have the financial means, or their social situation is such that they just didn’t have clothing. Al Capone and Jimmy [Darmody, played by Michael Pitt] are working-class Joes at this point.

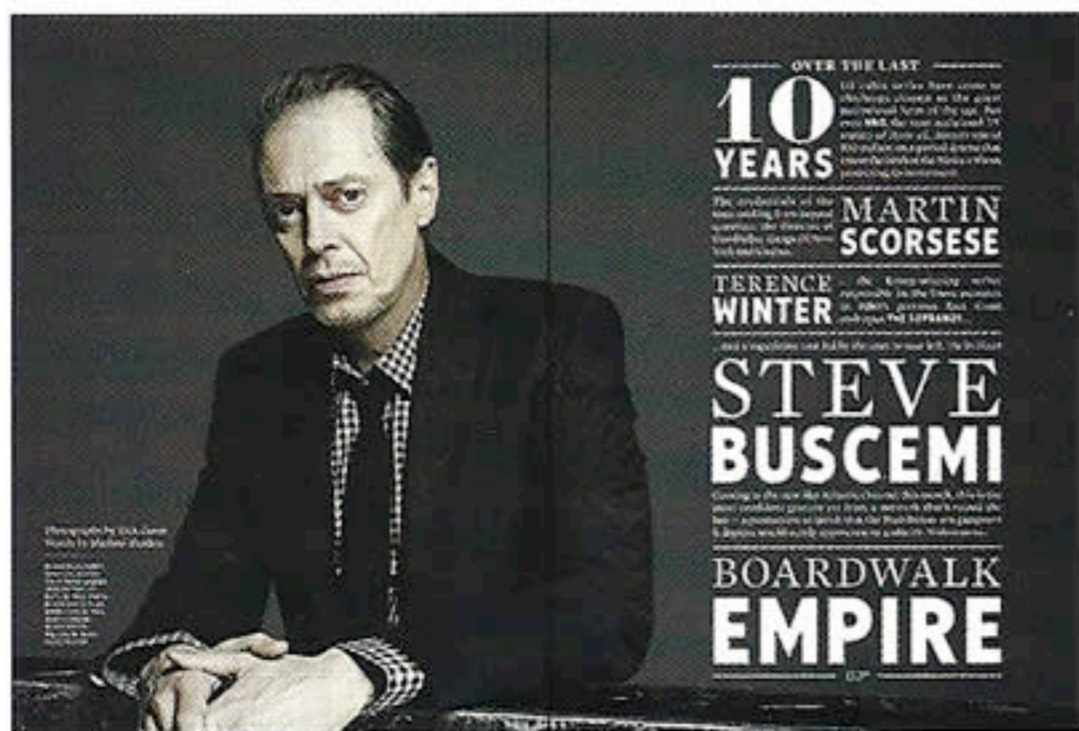
Jimmy’s just come back from the war and doesn’t have a job, and Al Capone has got a wife and kid that he’s supporting — you need some sturdy, working-guy clothing.

The speaking characters: bad things happen to them. So I often have to have multiples on suits. That’s what led me to working with Martin Greenfield and getting them to where they could make me a suit in four days — and in triplicate — so that the unspeakable could happen to some of the characters.

When I do feature films, I generally have the complete arc of the character. I know exactly what’s going to happen to them, I know what happens to them in the middle of the movie, and I know where they are at the end. In the series, I have no information other than the script of the episode that I’m working on. I have hints of maybe what’s going to happen to their character, but it keeps you very focused on where they are in that moment. It’s more like life.”







**TERENCE WINTER**  
Continued from page 99

everything is 'OK' at the end of Boardwalk. I don't think there are a lot of loose ends necessarily, but again, I'm certainly not trying to make anybody feel like it's OK."

While Winter's range as a writer might not exclude him altogether from the world of feel-good dramas, his finesse for working with the darker ambiguities of human nature and black comedic reflexes do make you wonder what he thinks of humankind. "I think we haven't evolved nearly as much as I would have hoped by this point," he says after a considered sigh. "I guess I'm fairly cynical. I find it astounding that in the 21st century we're still murdering each other because of fictional, invisible characters who live in the sky, that my fictional character might be better than yours, and vice versa. I actually find it absolutely astounding that people who have figured out how to send rockets to other planets are also now still murdering each other over mythology, or what I consider to be mythology. So it's kinda bleak these days. In general."

What follows from that, maybe, is that he has become one of a group of writers who have helped us to enjoy and explore the implicit contradictions in human nature by pushing characters beyond the confines of more conventional drama. "Well, when it's fictional it can be really funny," he says. "And again, [there's] the whole cynical idea of hiding behind religion or nationalism and using that as a way to deny someone basic rights or freedoms in the name of

what they think America may or may not be about. Taking something that was, on its face, a good idea and twisting it and using it for other purposes, whether that's religion or the democracy on which this country is founded. It amounts to the same thing."

The notion of what founded America is a clear theme of Boardwalk Empire. When Michael Pitt's character bemoans his lack of progress to Nucky (Buscemi), he answers, "This is America. What's stopping you?" And so the slogans of freedom become the catalyst for crime.

"I think I do explore those ideas," says Winter. "And that cynicism is evident in the show. Later on in the season, Nucky says to someone, 'We all have to decide how much sin we can live with.' We all have to figure out what our rationalisations are, what we're comfortable with, and then comport ourselves accordingly."

For all its period detail, Twenties' New Jersey is rife with modern parallels. For booze think drugs, transplant the Canadian border for the Mexican one, and the dynamics are the same, although the numbers have jumped. "Out of control, just absolutely out of control," says Winter. "Twenty-five bodies at a time popping up [in Mexico]. The St Valentine's Day Massacre was seven people! And people couldn't believe it. That was such an outrage. To see that picture on the cover of the newspapers, people just couldn't get their heads around it. Now that's like a day in Brooklyn. That's nothing."

Perhaps he as a writer, and we as an audience, are more comfortable with criminal violence than ideological conflict? "Well, worse are the people who have the finance who then manipulate the people who have the ideology — an

idea that we also explore in the show. When you see that the whole Tea Party thing is funded, really, by big business because it allows them to obfuscate what is really important. We go back to these ideals and ultimately, follow the money. It'll answer pretty much any question. There's usually money behind it — somebody's making money or wants to prevent somebody else from making money. It's almost always the answer."

The irony here is that the writers exploring that doctrine — "follow the money" being a particular mantra on *The Wire* — are able to do so because by doing it for HBO and similar outfits, they are freed, at least in the short term, from certain commercial considerations. Is there much competition between the writers of the esteemed cable series?

"A little bit, it's like playing tennis with somebody who's better than you are, it helps you bring your better game. I don't watch a lot of TV; on some level I keep thinking I should. I do watch *Mad Men* though, that I never miss. But I think, if it's not broke, don't fix it. I don't wanna cloud my head with a load of other stuff. On the other hand it might be inspiring to watch some really great series. I keep meaning to do it and I keep getting too busy. The opportunity exists for you to do great work here [on television]. You have one shot at this, so why not really try and make this special? And in this situation, you've got an unbelievable cast of actors, a network who's completely supportive, creatively behind you, giving you a ton of money. Let's try and do something really special. I tell my writing staff too, let's try and really push. David Chase used to say this: dismiss your first four ideas, whatever the first couple of things that come to you, just keep going, keep pushing, keep digging, that's not to say you won't come back to the first idea — sometimes that will be great, but don't settle on it, don't think, 'This'll work' — think, 'What else might work?' Keep pushing. It's really good advice. It forces you to keep trying to reinvent things." Amen to that, whatever you might be doing. **E**

I find it astounding that we're still murdering each other for invisible characters in the sky