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- Episode Name:
New York Sour

- Air date:

9/8/2013

- Summary:

Following his battle with Gyp Rosetti, Nucky makes a peace offering to Joe Masseria while working the odds with Arnold Rothstein. While Chalky is busy running the Onyx Club on the Boardwalk, the impulsive Dunn Purnsley clashes with a booking agent. Fresh-faced Federal Agent Warren Knox arrives in Atlantic City to learn the ropes from Agent Sawicki. Gillian seeks custody of her grandson, Tommy, while trying to find a “good” man to keep the Artemis Club afloat. Eli’s college-age son, Willie, turns to Nucky for career advice. Al Capone enlists his brothers, Frank and Ralph, to help him expand his business in the Chicago suburb of Cicero. Richard Harrow returns to his violent ways.

Don’t get me wrong. “Boardwalk” is never going to be as thematically or sociologically rich as “The Wire,” nor is it as likely to have the kind of visceral impact on its audience. It’s a Hall of the Very Good drama living in the shadow of its Hall of Fame predecessors, and though the start of the fourth season (I’ve seen five episodes) is perhaps the show’s strongest opening to date, it hasn’t suddenly found a higher gear. It is what it is: a handsome, marvelously acted pulp gangster drama, with occasional moments that aspire to (and achieve) something more complex.

But more than any series since “The Wire” — other than perhaps “Wire” creator David Simon’s own “Tremé,” which will conclude its run this December — “Boardwalk Empire” evokes Simon’s vision of a novel for television. It’s a less literary work — it’d be shelved in the crime/mystery section rather than with general fiction — but one that becomes far more satisfying at the conclusion of each season than it is from chapter to chapter.

The show’s second season retroactively took on much more power at the end, after Buscemi’s Atlantic City fixer Nucky Thompson murdered his protégé Jimmy Darmody after Jimmy’s failed coup attempt. What had seemed to be a familiar war of equals that would end with both men resolving their differences for the sake of a TV show that didn’t want to do without either one of them instead revealed itself to be the final story of the tragic, too-brief life of WWI veteran Jimmy.

Last season, meanwhile, seemed to be stumbling around for large chunks, trying to service various supporting characters — Michael Kenneth Williams as Nucky’s African-American counterpart Chalky White, Jack Huston as Jimmy’s scarred buddy Richard Harrow, Kelly Macdonald as Nucky’s wife and sometime-consigliere Margaret, Michael Shannon as fugitive ex-Treasury agent Nelson Van Alden — in what felt more like a desire to keep the actors busy

than anything that fit the larger story. By the end of the season, nearly all their stories wound up tying in neatly to the main arc about Nucky's war with the New York mob, giving the final plot movements much greater emotional weight than if the series hadn't taken what seemed like unnecessary detours away from Nucky.

That third season earned a lot of patience for me with the series going forward, which came in handy as I watched the start of the fourth. A lot of time is devoted, for instance, to Nucky's nephew Willie (Ben Rosenfield) as he struggles to fit in at a fancy Philadelphia university. It's far from the most gripping of the season's storylines, but I've learned by now not to start demanding for a shift away to a more dynamic character like Chalky or Richard, because Winter, Howard Korder and the rest of the "Boardwalk" writers presumably have a plan to wrap everything up with a neat little bow by the end of the year. Similarly, I'm not worried that Margaret's presence is all but non-existent in the first part of the year (though Macdonald remains part of the regular cast), because it feels like a more honest way to deal with her decision to end her marriage of convenience to Nucky. If she wound up back in Brooklyn by episode 2, it would feel every bit as false as if Nucky had let Jimmy live a couple of years ago