

THE ROARING TWENTIES

An inside look at one of HBO's hit shows



Nucky Thompson, the undisputed ruler of Atlantic City, is played by Steve Buscemi.

Behind the Scenes of

BOARDWALK EMPIRE

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH PRODUCER, TERENCE WINTER

by BRIANNA GUNTER

IT ALL BEGAN AFTER THE conclusion of the HBO hit series, *The Sopranos* in 2007. With the mysterious finale wrapping one of the most successful shows of all time, the network was left looking for a replacement and wasn't quite sure what it was going to be. Upon suggestion, *Sopranos* writer and executive producer, Terence Winter read the historical novel, *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times, and Corruption of Atlantic City*, written by Atlantic County native, Nelson Johnson. Though the book covers decades of history, it was the chapter about Prohibition that stuck out, and it was then that a hit series to fill the void left by *The Sopranos* was born.

"It was such a gift to come off of *The Sopranos*, which really explored organized

crime at its end," Winter said in a recent interview with *Southern Gaming*. "And the most pivotal moment in organized crime history was the enactment of Prohibition, because it really made millionaires out of criminals."

After learning that Martin Scorsese was already attached to the project, Winter knew he wanted to be involved. As it turned out, the Prohibition chapter in Johnson's book would also provide the basis for the show's main character. Nucky Johnson (no relation to the author) was already a corrupt Atlantic City official by the time Prohibition began, so Winter worked off that knowledge to write and produce his next big hit, *Boardwalk Empire*.

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"I pretty much just took the basic character of Nucky and then created a fictional world around him," Winter explained. The character of Margaret, he said, is based off of a real woman who asked Nucky Johnson to help her find a job for her husband. Due to various details being altered and added, Nucky's last name was changed to "Thompson."

"I didn't want to start attributing bad things to the real Nucky that we're really not sure he did," Winter said. "I know that he was a corrupt politician and certainly dealt in bootlegging, but I wanted to license this creatively and also psychologically take that fictional Nucky anywhere we wanted to go." The casting of Steve Buscemi as Enoch Malachi "Nucky" Thompson was not a difficult decision. Having previously worked with both Winter and Scorsese, he was easily favored to play Nucky.

Before anything was written, the time period needed to be mastered and Winter spent months researching Atlantic City's history from the 1920s. For help, he hired Atlantic City native Ed McGinty, whose grandfather worked as head bellman at the Ritz Carlton during the time that the real Nucky Johnson lived there. Historian Vicki Gold Levi, whose father was the official photographer for Atlantic City for decades, was also hired as a consultant.

While the series definitely emulates what a 1920's boardwalk might have looked like, no filming actually takes place in Atlantic City due to its lack of authentic 1920s architecture. Instead, the show is filmed on a giant set in a Brooklyn parking lot. Thanks to modern digital technology, the set comes together very convincingly as Atlantic City in its roaring 20s (the show's producers hired the same company that worked on HBO's John Adams mini-series to ensure the illusion of authenticity). Meanwhile, modern-day Atlantic City is trying to re-market itself and *Boardwalk Empire* has helped boost these efforts. "Obviously it's a vastly different place than it was a hundred years ago, but it's still really cool, and basically this is where it all happened," Winter said. "I love Atlantic City. I always have, and always will."

Boardwalk Empire is in its fourth season and continues to receive praise from critics and audiences alike. For those who have yet to see the show, here's a summary of what you've missed:

SEASON ONE

Boardwalk Empire hit the ground running and at \$18 million, it was the most expensive TV pilot ever produced. Premiering September 19, 2010, the show opens in January 1920, the day before Prohibition would take effect in the



A behind the scenes look at the on-set production of the HBO hit series, *Boardwalk Empire*.

United States. Atlantic City treasurer, Nucky Thompson, publicly supports the new law, but secretly conspires to go into bootlegging with local associates and New York gangsters, Arnold Rothstein, Charles "Lucky" Luciano and Chicago's Johnny Torrio. Nucky's driver, Jimmy Darmody and a young Al Capone are also interested in entering the business, and the pair hijacks Nucky's shipment to Rothstein, resulting in conflict between Nucky and Rothstein.

After speaking at a Women's Temperance League event, Nucky meets Margaret Schroeder, an Irish immigrant who asks him for help finding employment for her husband, a man who Nucky and his sheriff brother Eli kidnap and beat to death after they discover he abuses Margaret. As the season progresses, Margaret and Nucky grow closer. Eventually she discovers his corruption and decides to end their relationship, but only after realizing he is using her for political gains.

By the end of the season, the two reconcile. Meanwhile, Nucky expands his shady business and starts working with local black community leader and racketeer, Albert "Chalky" White. Nucky also survives an attempted assassination and is forced to fire Eli in the aftermath. The season concludes with Commodore Kaestner, Nucky's supposed mentor and former associate, and Jimmy's newly revealed father, recruiting Jimmy and Eli to bring down Nucky.

Critics' responses to the first season

were largely positive. The American Film Institute named *Boardwalk Empire* one of the "Top 10 Most Outstanding Television Programs of the Year" for 2010, and the first season was nominated for 18 Primetime Emmy Awards, including *Outstanding Drama Series*, *Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series* (Steve Buscemi) and *Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Drama Series* (Kelly Macdonald). The show won eight Emmys including, *Outstanding Casting for a Drama Series*. Scorsese also took home the Emmy for *Outstanding Directing for a Drama Series*. To top it off, the first season also won Golden Globes for *Best Television Series-Drama* and *Best Performance by an Actor in a Television Series-Drama*.

SEASON TWO

The second season premiered September 25, 2011, with Gretchen Mol and Jack Huston promoted to series regulars after appearing several times in the first season as Gillian Darmody and war veteran, Richard Harrow. The second season begins in January 1921. Jimmy, Eli and the Commodore get the KKK to attack Chalky White's bootlegging storeroom and frame Nucky for election fraud. Agent Nelson Van Alden agrees to supply incriminating evidence, but only out of financial desperation. Jimmy attempts to become allies with Rothstein and crime boss Manny Horvitz, and while Rothstein doesn't bite, Horvitz is impressed by Jimmy's manners. However, he isn't in Horvitz' good graces for long. Influenced by Eli, Jimmy puts a hit out on Nucky,



Left: The Capone brothers played by (left to right) Domenick Lombardozzi, Stephen Graham, Morgan Spector.
Right: Boardwalk Empire producer Terry Winter on set.



which causes him to resign (although his pending court case is also a factor). Jimmy takes Nucky's place, and Horvitz murders his wife in revenge.

Meanwhile, Margaret and her two children are living with Nucky. She is conflicted over her feelings about him and is also attracted to Owen Sleater, Nucky's driver and bodyguard. Though she feels guilty, Margaret marries Nucky by the end of the season, which also means she cannot testify against him in his trial. The charges are dropped, and Nucky forgives Eli but kills Jimmy. Margaret then takes a land grant Nucky had intended to use to pave roads to Atlantic City and donates it to the church.

This season of *Boardwalk Empire* was also well received critically. It was nominated for 12 Emmys, with another nod for Buscemi as Lead Actor and a win for Timothy Van Patten in directing. It was also nominated for the same three Golden Globe awards the inaugural season was recognized for.

SEASON THREE

Despite the loss of one of its most dynamic characters, Jimmy Darmody, writers turned up the excitement in the third season with the addition of Bobby Cannavale as Giuseppe Colombano "Gyp" Rosetti, and the expanded role of Chalky White. The season opens on New Year's Eve 1922 with Rosetti, a short-tempered New York gangster, who is displeased with Nucky's now exclusive distribution contract with Rothstein. Meanwhile

Richard Harrow is taking care of Jimmy's orphaned son under Gillian's watchful eye, and Margaret is striving for better women's health care. Because she donated Nucky's grant to the Catholic Church, he receives an award for his "charity," and Margaret uses this to gain support for a women's clinic. But that's the least of Nucky's problems. Rosetti starts blocking his shipments and eventually makes his move to oust Nucky for good. Nucky manages to escape and hides with Chalky. In exchange for helping him, Nucky agrees to give Chalky a spot on the boardwalk for a new club. A full-on turf war finally breaks out between Rosetti's and Nucky's men, with Nucky receiving support from Purnsley, Eli and Capone.

After Rosetti's alliances crumble and he survives an attempt on his life by Gillian, his fed-up lieutenant, Tonino Sandrelli kills him. Nucky wins the war, but his problems aren't over. Margaret appears to terminate a pregnancy resulting from a tryst with Owen, but she no longer wants any part of Nucky. The public also appears to be more than well-aware of his criminal activity by this point, meaning his life will never be the same moving forward.

The third season garnered positive reviews, with Cannavale's performance being particularly praised. This season was nominated for nine Emmys and two Golden Globes, including *Best Performance by an Actor in a Television Series-Drama* and *Best Television Series-Drama*.

SEASON FOUR

The fourth season premiered this fall on Sunday, September 8. It is now February 1924 and Nucky's life is still reeling from last season's events. In an attempt to ensure peace exists between all the mob bosses, he holds a meeting at Chalky's thriving new club. Unfortunately, things don't go as smoothly as planned, and it looks as though things are only going to get more complicated. Joining the show this season are Patricia Arquette, Brian Geraghty, Ron Livingston and Jeffrey Wright.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR HBO

Also airing on HBO this season is the award-winning series *The Newsroom*, as well as *Eastbound and Down*, *Treme* and new series, *Getting On*. Fan favorites *Game of Thrones* and *True Blood* will also be back again next year – the only two HBO shows currently outranking *Boardwalk Empire* in terms of audience numbers.

Though it ended almost seven years ago, nothing has been able to top *The Sopranos*, which really put the premium cable network on the map when the series launched in the late 1990s. At that point, HBO had been around for over 20 years and had only just begun to gain popularity with programs like *Dream On*, *Tales from the Crypt*, *Mr. Show* and later, *Oz*. However, *The Sopranos* was the first HBO show to enjoy cult status and widespread critical acclaim, as well as a multitude of major awards and nominations. And it doesn't sound like Winter is slowing down anytime soon. Winter and Scorsese are already hard at work on their next major project.