



PRINTER FRIENDLY

[\[Print\]](#) [\[Close\]](#)

'Sopranos' spread influence throughout TV

By ***Gail Pennington***

POST-DISPATCH TELEVISION CRITIC

Sunday, Jun. 10 2007

When Steve and Mary Scroggins of Wood River became the parents of a daughter on May 2, they named their bundle of joy Carmela, a little homage to "The Sopranos," the HBO drama that is more obsession than mere TV show for millions of fans.

From its debut on Jan. 10, 1999, to its dreaded and anticipated finale on Sunday night, "The Sopranos" has won fans from St. Louis to Slovenia. But beyond public adoration, the drama about a New Jersey mob boss and family man has drawn acclaim from unlikely corners.

New York's Museum of Modern Art, which had never honored a TV series, rolled out the red carpet in 2001 to screen every episode from the first two seasons. Two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner Norman Mailer favorably likened the series to the Great American Novel. National Public Radio declared that, "If Shakespeare were alive, he'd probably be writing for 'The Sopranos.'"

David Edelstein, film critic for New York Magazine and "CBS News Sunday Morning," sees "The Sopranos" as "far more significant than anything in the movies at the moment as a cultural phenomenon." He singles out creator David Chase for "an achievement comparable, in its scope, to 'The Godfather' parts I and II, and that's the highest praise I can offer."

A film critic wouldn't always have been eager to be quoted as praising a TV show. But "The Sopranos" struck a blow that eventually helped to topple the wall between movies and television, creating a climate in which movie greats like Glenn Close, James Woods and Steven Spielberg now routinely do TV.

"The Sopranos" taught Hollywood "that you can do things in television that you can't do in movies," Edelstein says. "It's an amazing medium."

Elayne Rapping, who teaches American studies and keeps an eye on popular culture at University at Buffalo, the State University of New York, cites "The Sopranos" not only as one of the greatest TV series to date but also as "probably the most influential ever."

A "Godfather" buff, Rapping appreciates the way "The Sopranos" took the classic formula — a mob boss balancing two families — and translated it to television in previously unseen ways.

"Every show before, from the beginning of television, had made the criminals the bad guys," Rapping says. "Nobody thought TV viewers would sympathize with a criminal over the long arc of a series, but this show made you sympathetic to Tony Soprano even while you were appalled by what he did."

Dr. Glen O. Gabbard, director of the Baylor University Psychiatric Clinic and author of "The Psychology of the Sopranos," likens Tony Soprano, as played by three-time Emmy-winner James Gandolfini, to "the classic tragic hero of ancient Greek literature," depicted with "a psychological complexity we rarely see."

Gabbard, who grew up in Charleston, Ill., is impressed that Chase hasn't backed off from Tony's "dark spiral toward self-destruction." The fact that audiences continue to embrace him is both a credit to the show's "superb writing" and evidence that, contrary to conventional wisdom, TV characters needn't all be lovable. Post-"Sopranos," "The Shield," "Nip/Tuck," "Rescue Me," "Dexter" and even "House" now flourish with deeply flawed heroes.

In the TV universe, "The Sopranos" made its influence felt as the first cable series to beat the broadcast networks in viewership and as the show that put HBO on the map, making original programming a necessity for cable channels that previously had aired mostly theatrical movies and network repeats.

"The Sopranos" also gave a big boost to alternative methods of watching TV, including the sale and rental of full-season DVD boxed sets and on-demand services.

Steve Scroggins, the father of baby Carmela, owns the first six seasons on DVD, at a cost of "something like \$500." But the DVDs converted his wife, Mary, into a big enough "Sopranos" fan that she went along with giving their daughter the same name as Mrs. Tony Soprano, played by Edie Falco.

"My wife is Sicilian, and we already had a son named Dominic, so it just made sense," Scroggins adds as a disclaimer.

As for why he fell so hard for the series, he mentions "the characters and the way the writers developed them right before our eyes."

"That's why I think 'The Sopranos' was so good," Scroggins says. He adds, "See, I already think of it as gone. It was a great ride."

If you enjoy reading about interesting news, you might like the 3 O'Clock Stir from STLtoday.com. Sign up and you'll receive an email with unique stories of the day, every Monday-Friday, at no charge.
Sign up at <http://newsletters.stltoday.com>
