

EDGE

interview

Boardwalk Empire's **Terence Winter**



Photo courtesy of HBO

New Jersey has been good to **Terence Winter**. The Garden State furnished him with the inspiration and settings for two of the most iconic series in television history. Winter was a writer and executive producer for *The Sopranos*, and the creator of *Boardwalk Empire*. The Brooklyn-born ex-lawyer sat down with EDGE Editor at Large **Tracey Smith** to talk about the two shows and their protagonists, reveal a nugget or two about the upcoming *Boardwalk Empire* season, and his upcoming film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*. What's the key to writing a great series about crooks? *Honesty...what else?*

EDGE: Explain how you were able to transition so easily from *The Sopranos* to *Boardwalk Empire*?

TW: It might have looked easy but it wasn't. There was a *lot* of research involved for *Boardwalk* that I didn't need to do on *The Sopranos*. For example, on *The Sopranos*, because it was contemporary, I didn't need to look up pop culture references, I knew the way people spoke, acted, and dressed. For the 1920s, it's a whole different ball game. I needed to learn about World War I, I needed

to learn about the Temperance Movement, I needed to learn about the year women got the right to vote—I needed to put myself in the mindset of characters who were born in the 19th century. So colloquialisms, what books did they read, what movies were out then required months and months of research before I was even able to begin to write the pilot. So even though they are a similar genre, and the characters cover some of the same territory psychologically, it's almost a hundred years earlier, so the prep work was massive.

EDGE: One of the first things Tony said on *The Sopranos* was that he felt like he was coming in on the end of something. Steve Buscemi's character in *Boardwalk Empire*, Nucky Thompson, is right there at the start of something.

TW: Right. Prohibition was the single event that made organized crime possible. That, more than anything else, was the impetus for criminals to start working together to make money. The interstate trafficking of alcohol made

millionaires of criminals overnight, and enabled them to then infiltrate other businesses, and ultimately become organized throughout the country.

EDGE: How do Nucky and Tony compare as protagonists?

TW: In terms of their psychology, they both at their heart are depressed people, sort of searching for something that will make them happy. They are both very smart, both natural leaders, and both are ruthless. Tony's fatal flaw is that he has a conscience. If he were more of a true sociopath, he wouldn't pass out, wouldn't have panic attacks, and wouldn't care. Nucky, I think, is the same way. We've explored a little bit of the psychology of Nucky. We learn by the end of the first season that his wife lost a child very early on, and he is still haunted by that, and that he had a difficult relationship with his father. He's trying to repair a broken childhood and to recreate a happy family life that he can't quite seem to replicate.

*If your business wants an EDGE,
then you
should be in*

EDGE[®]

M a g a z i n e



Advertise in EDGE and reach over 70,000 families,
over 3,000 physicians and 100's of Hair and Nail Salons
in CENTRAL New Jersey!

Start reaching the right people —
Call our knowledgeable marketing team today and find out
how you can mail your message FOR JUST PENNIES.

Call **908-994-5138**

*Like many of our readers, visit our web site
www.EdgeMagOnline.com*



Photo courtesy of HBO

EDGE: How did Steve become your Nucky?

TW: I've been a fan of Steve's since a movie he did in the 90s called *In the Soup*. The moment I saw him I was just fascinated with this guy. I was lucky enough to get to know him when he directed a few episodes of *The Sopranos* that I wrote, and we became friends. Then, of course I got to work with him as an actor when he portrayed Tony's cousin. I've seen everything that Steve's ever done as an actor. I've seen him portray every possible color of human emotion, back and forth, every which way. So for me there was never a question of whether or not he could be convincing as Nucky. When we started to cast for the show, Martin Scorsese and I were talking about who is going to play the lead role. Our Nucky is based on a real person, Nucky Johnson. We fictionalized him as Nucky Thompson, so he's a version of that person. But we realized since nobody really knew what the real Nucky looked like anyway, it didn't really matter who we cast in terms of whether or not they looked similar. So Marty said, "Well, let's just pick an actor that we both like. Who are people you want to work

with?" I'm pretty sure it was me that said, "What about Steve Buscemi?" He jumped on it and said, "Oh my God, I love him." About a week later, Marty called me up and said, "I can't stop thinking about Steve Buscemi." I told him I couldn't either, and he said, "Let's do it." HBO was on board—their feeling was Wow, what an interesting choice. That was it. We were off to the races.

EDGE: Why didn't you use Nucky's real surname?

TW: I wanted the opportunity to take my Nucky into places where the real Nucky might not have gone. For example, I'm pretty certain the real Nucky didn't kill anybody. I'm pretty certain he didn't embrace gangsterism the way our Nucky does. Fictionalizing him gave me artistic latitude and allowed me to sleep at night.

EDGE: How difficult is it to develop so many characters simultaneously?

TW: It's a massive juggling act. There's a lot of plotting out, there's a lot of characters on the show, we've got action taking place in several different cities—it's a big,

Nadine Raphael Photographer



Business & Healthcare Head Shots

Web, Publications & Promotion

917-841-7353

www.whitehallmediapro.com

nraphael@whitehallmediapro.com

102 Elm St. • Penthouse • Westfield, NJ 07090

big, chessboard of characters. That's the work that goes on in the Writer's Room. It all starts with "What if?" *If such-and-such happened, what would the result of that be? What's the fallout from that? Where do we want to end up?* I'll come into the season and have a pretty good idea of where I want things to end by episode twelve, sort of like a roadmap. We're gonna drive from New York to California—alright, well, how do we get there? Those are the story beats that bring us to various places, and it takes a lot of sitting around the table and talking and banging your head against the wall, and plotting, and figuring it out. Eventually, it all works, but it's a big, big, juggling act.

EDGE: And now you have two new characters to blend in.

TW: Yes. Jeffrey Wright plays a character this season called Valentin Narcisse. He is a Doctor of Divinity who also happens to be the most powerful gangster in Harlem. He crosses paths with Nucky and Chalky in Atlantic City, and that is about as much as I can tell you at this point. If you know anything about Jeffrey and his work, he's a phenomenal actor, just incredible. We were so thrilled to be able to work with him and have him on the show. The same with Ron Livingston. I've been a fan of Ron's for years and years. He's so versatile. His work on *Band of Brothers*, *Office Space*—I mean, he's one of these actors that can do comedy, drama, anything in between. He becomes an acquaintance of Jillian Darmody's, and has a really interesting storyline as well. I'm really excited about both of those guys.

EDGE: A lot of people were shocked when you killed off Jimmy Darmody at the end of season two, just as they were when Tony killed Christopher in *The Sopranos*. What's involved in the decision that a major character has to go, especially a protégé?

TW: First and foremost, I try to write the show truthfully. I try to avoid making decisions based on what would be the popular choice, what the audience would want me to do, what the conventions of television would be, which

continued on page 34

Anthony Laciura *aka* Eddie Kessler

You originally were asked to audition for the role of Big Jim Colosimo, the ill-fated Chicago mobster.

Yes, but my manager described what I look like and [laughs] they said, “He’s not really Big Jim...but we do have another role we can’t seem to cast. It’s the role of Nucky’s chauffeur, butler, secretary, whipping boy—he does everything. Can Anthony do a German accent?” My manager said, “He can do any accent you want.” I went in to read for Ellen Lewis Casting, who did all the casting for *Boardwalk Empire*, walked to Ellen, kissed her and her assistant on the hand and said [in a German accent], “I am nervous because this is a very important screen test for Mr. Martin Scorsese, who is the greatest film director. In Germany, we believe that he is so fantastic you know, and I... *whew*...I get a little nervous and have to take a deep breath because, you understand, I want to convey my thoughts to you. However, I have to translate from the German to the English.” She laughed and asked, “Mr. Laciura, what part of Germany are you from?”

And you said...

I’m from the South Bronx!

A few weeks later you’re meeting with Scorsese and Terence Winter. What do you recall from that day?

There was a lot of laughing. We were talking for about 25 minutes or so, discussing people that we knew in common. I had first met him at the Metropolitan Opera when he came to see *The Makropulos Case* by Janacek, and I was singing in Czechoslovakian. He remembered immediately. Here’s a man who’s a walking library, Martin Scorsese, a mind that is so fantastic. We started talking about different directors—we went from film then to opera, we talked about Joseph Volpe, who at that time was the General Director of the Metropolitan Opera, and we continued, going back and forth and kibitzing. That’s how it began.

Eddie and Nucky seem to share a special timing and intimacy in their scenes.

You can’t beat working with Steve Buscemi. He’s a mensch. This man is the real thing. From the very first



Photo courtesy of Macall B. Polay / HBO

reading there was an immediate energy between Steve Buscemi and Anthony Laciura, between Nucky and Eddie. It just happened. And all of a sudden you start to sense *I bet he’s going to move to this side, I bet he’s going to say the line this way*. So you know what’s coming, you learn the person’s personality.

Prior to being cast in *Boardwalk Empire*, you had been a performer in the Metropolitan Opera for 27 years, someone known for playing some really complex characters. In what ways did you prepare for the complex role of Eddie Kessler?

I became very good friends with the original person’s granddaughter. His name was Lou Kessel. I have pictures of Lou Kessel, I went to Lou Kessel’s grave. He had already passed on before the grandchildren knew him, so I delved into their cousins. I did all of these things and became aware of what kind of person he was, to the best of their knowledge. Nucky Johnson wrote that Lou was the finest man he ever knew, that there was no one he had a deeper affection for and trusted more than Lou Kessel, in his whole life.

So what’s it like transitioning from the stage at The Met to the small screen?

It’s exciting. But so was opera. And so was singing and performing. I’m an entertainer and that’s what I do. I get to entertain people. I had entertained 4,000 people a night live, singing opera, and now I get to entertain 4,000 people a minute. It’s wonderful having these absolutely spectacular directors and realizing all of this is made possible by the genius of writing—writing dialogue, writing text—and that it’s not all explosions, sound effects, special effects. It’s real people speaking wonderful, easily memorized dialogue. This was an eye-opener for me. My God, this is just like opera...except you just don’t have the music.

A name you can trust
for **rehabilitation**
and **health care**.

Post-Surgical, Short-Term Rehab



ManorCare Health Services – Mountainside

1180 Route 22 West
Mountainside, NJ 07092

908.654.0020

A PROVEN LEADER®

ManorCare 
Health Services

is: You don't kill your second lead on the show, a beloved character. As season two was playing out, it became really clear to me that if we were going to tell this story honestly, Nucky would kill this guy...and he would kill him immediately. If I were watching this and he at the last minute changed his mind and Jimmy got off with a stern reprimand, I'd say, "This is not true, this is a TV show!"

EDGE: It is a TV show.

TW: But I want it to feel real. I think over 60 or 70 years of TV history, we've sort of lulled our audience into a sense of complacency. People say, "Oh, well, they're obviously not gonna kill this guy, I know it looks like they are, but they won't, because he's one of the stars of the show. So, of course, people couldn't believe when we did it, which made me even more certain I'd made the right decision. The louder the uproar, the louder the outcry, the more I was convinced we did the right thing.

EDGE: You have some interesting projects coming up with Leonardo di Caprio, Martin Scorsese and Bobby Cannavale.

TW: In November, *Wolf of Wall Street* opens. That's, as you said, directed by Martin Scorsese and stars Leonardo di Caprio. It's the true story of a stockbroker named Jordan Belfort who, in the 90's, made tens of millions of dollars a year as the head of his own stockbrokerage firm. He found a way to sell very inexpensive stocks to rich people. He sort of cracked the code, and he and hundreds of young brokers working for him made a fortune. It was just an incredible roller coaster, a wild ride with incredible amounts of money and drugs. Leo is terrific in it and, of course, we've got the master, Martin Scorsese, directing. I'm also working on another series with Martin Scorsese for HBO, this one involving Mick Jagger. It's set in the world of rock music in 1973 New York City, starring Bobby Cannavale as a cocaine-fueled, A&R executive for a record company. That was the year that punk, disco and hip hop were all invented in and around New York City, a time of great change, of great upheaval in the city. I'm really, really excited about that project. Hopefully, the pilot will be directed in the early part of next year, and we'll go into series right after that.

EDGE: Cannavale was like a bull in a china shop on *Boardwalk Empire*.

TW: Oh yeah! There was nobody better to play the Gyp Rossetti role than Bobby. He was great. I think we had one conversation about who that character is and what motivated him, and Bobby got it immediately and ran with it and became Gyp Rossetti. It's so funny, because nothing could be further from the real guy. Bobby is just the sweetest, funniest, most gentle person in real life, and as an actor he can sort of give you anything. He can turn into Gyp Rossetti on a dime and then go back to being himself again—it was pretty amazing to watch.

EDGE: How many more seasons?

TW: I would love to do seven seasons all together. We're starting down the homestretch in season four; whether or not we're fortunate enough to get to do them remains to be seen. It all really is going to depend on what the public's appetite is for this show, and HBO's, of course. I would love to do three more years, I think that could take

us to the point in Nucky's story, and the point in history that I'd like to get us to. Hopefully, we'll get the chance to do that.

EDGE: Are you a nostalgic person?

TW: Very much so. I love history. I am the family's historian. I'm the one who archived all of the family photos and films, the genealogy and all that stuff. I love the idea of leaving that behind for my children, and grandchildren, and their children. I'd give my left arm just to read about what my great-great-grandfather's day was like. "What did you do, where did you go, who did you talk to?" That stuff is fascinating to me. **EDGE**

Editor's Note: There are no short conversations once Tracey Smith gets you talking. For (a lot) more on Nucky, Chalky, Margaret, Richard and Van Alden—and the inside story on the brilliant "Pine Barrens" episode of *The Sopranos*—visit edgemagonline.com and read the rest of our Q&A with Terence Winter.

THERE'S MORE TO THE JERSEY SHORE!

Discover New Jersey's Most Exciting Antiques Outlet

SHORE ANTIQUE CENTER

"Where the Dealers Shop"

Antique Furniture, Lighting,
Fine Art, Collectibles

"Best of the Best" Antique Shopping
Award in 2010 & 2011

— Asbury Park Press Reader's Choice Poll

Beautifully Displayed in our
14,000 Square Foot Showroom
10 minutes from Exit 100/Garden State Parkway

732-531-4466 • open 11-5 daily
413 Allen Ave. • Allenhurst, NJ

www.shoreantiquecenter.com

