

THE WIRE: THE COMPLETE FOURTH SEASON

J. M. TYREE SALUTES THE LATEST DVD RELEASE OF AN EPIC TV DRAMA

In hindsight it may not seem entirely overblown to call *The Wire* part of a television renaissance that flourished in the original HBO adult dramas at the turn of the twenty-first century. Credit the Medici-like largesse of HBO; there was something decidedly Florentine about how the funding kept coming through for such a ratings dog. It continued broadcasting *The Wire* through its fourth season—and now its fifth and final season—despite an unmistakable lack of broad commercial appeal. Perhaps HBO views *The Wire* as the kind of critically acclaimed “loss leader” that generates respect for the entire brand.

David Simon, producer of *The Wire* along with Ed Burns, suggests that it was lucky the show was broadcast several times a day. Rather than forcing viewers to tune in to a particular show at a particular moment, HBO’s subscription-based menu also eased away from the network revenue model based upon sponsorship dollars for a specific number of eyeballs—especially true in the age of on-demand cable. Because people subscribed to the whole channel rather than individual shows, HBO could afford to take more risks without losing much revenue. The result is some of the best American television drama since *The Twilight Zone*, *Twin Peaks*, and *Homicide*, the 1990s NBC series that was based upon Simon’s non-fiction book about the Baltimore Police Department, and which in turn launched several characters into the endless *Law and Order* franchise. Along with *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, the bizarre supernatural spectacular *Carnivale* and the profane Wild West soap opera *Deadwood* contributed to what in television terms would have to be classed as an art movement. (There is even an inside joke at the expense of HBO in the fourth season of *The Wire*; an ex-gangster hospitalized with a gunshot wound in a city hospital watches *Benson* on network TV from his bed, while the patient next to him, who has private insurance, has *Deadwood* piped in.)

“It seems to be a cop show, blue lights flashing,” Simon says in his audio commentary on the very first episode of the very first season. But, he adds, “This show’s really about the American city and about how we try to live together.” *The Wire* has cops-and-robbers trappings—wiretap cases against drug gangs conducted by the Baltimore Police Department. It shares *Homicide*’s wonderfully offbeat crime-scene banter, although not its rapid-fire docudrama editing style. *Homicide* was a recognizable take on the network cop show. *The Wire* is many more things: an ongoing investigation into police corruption, brutality, and incompetence; an unflinching portrait of politics and race relations in an ex-great American city; an exhaustive refutation of the futile War on Drugs; and, above all, an extraordinarily honest depiction of the gravitational pull of the streets and drug “corners” for a generation of African American inner-city youth with few other prospects or opportunities.

Another running sideline is a gallows-humor analysis of the shift of police resources from the War on Drugs to the War on Terror. In both battles, procedures and institutions snuff out any hope for realistic strategy. Over the course of season 4 we witness the destruction of several lives simply because a hapless cop, Thomas “Herc” Hauk (Domenick Lombardozzi), loses a police video camera and tries to cover it up. *The Wire*’s emphasis on surveillance—particularly its repeated theme of the value of human informants versus technological eavesdropping—is a timely critique of the law-enforcement approach to both Baltimore crime and international terrorism. “If terrorists fucked up the west side, would anyone even notice?” one jaded cop asks during a fatuous homeland-security briefing on biochemical attacks. The cop refers to one of Baltimore’s worst neighborhoods, one called a “fucking Falluja” filled with “tank traps” by mayoral candidate Tommy Carcetti (played by Irish actor Aiden Gillen). Later in the series, a police officer suggests that airstrikes are the answer to the city’s problem districts. If America can’t fix Baltimore, why does it dream of fixing places like Baghdad?

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The Wire: Namond (Julito McCullum), Michael (Tristan Wilds), Randy (Maestro Harrell) in the front row. Photo: HBO / Paul Schrader

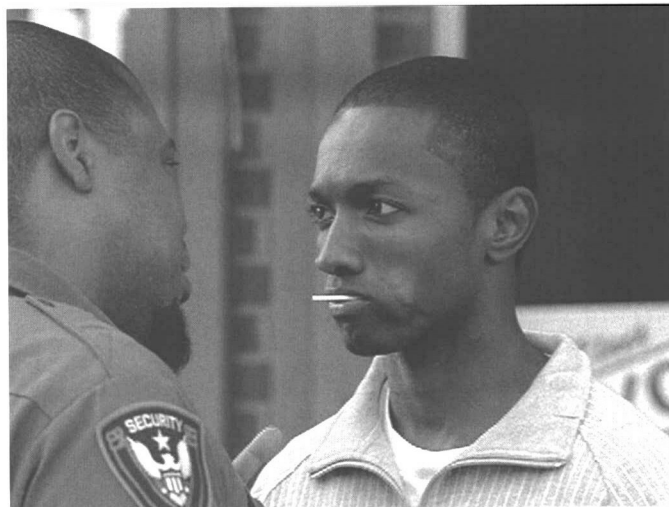
Why has the Federal government's obsession with shadowy external threats replaced any concern with crumbling domestic infrastructure? Why are we building border walls and installing surveillance cameras instead of levees, clinics, and schools? The questions posed here to Imperial America are unanswerable.

The end of season 3 saw the last days of a more intimate empire, the Barksdale drug gang, whose triggermen and kingpin have been jailed, and whose mastermind, Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), has died in a hail of bullets. Hackney-born Elba—some of *The Wire's* most memorable characters are not played by Americans—wrought a fully human and tragic figure of Bell, at times using only a steeping cup of tea or a pair of reading glasses to express a full range of emotions. The demise of the Barksdale crew has not led to a new era in Baltimore without drugs or crime, but simply to the rise of a younger and harder player, Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector). Marlo isn't without a soft spot (for pigeons), and Hector plays the new kingpin with a strangely restrained empathy using little more than his intense eyes. But the character is no Bell, with secret aspirations to be a legitimate businessman. Marlo

is not even interested in the sentimental gangster values of "family" peddled by Old School types like the Barksdales.

After *The Wire*, Simon, Burns, and HBO plan to broadcast *Generation Kill*, an account of U.S. Marines in Iraq, and Marlo seems a homegrown version of that same *Grand Theft Auto* youth culture. At one point he has a security guard at a corner store executed for "talking back" after witnessing him steal two lollipops. "You want it be to one way," Marlo tells the guard during their confrontation, explaining his impending death as if from a deep moral sleep, "but it's the other way." In business, however, Marlo orders killings not for fun but to be on the safe side, eventually breaking the long-established code of the streets in the process.

Marlo's enforcers, Chris Partlow (Gbenga Akinnagbe) and Felicia "Snoop" Pearson (played by Felicia Pearson in a real-life nod to her own criminal past), are singularly eerie screen assassins, mainly because their job brings them neither pleasure nor guilt. Chris soothes his victims before dispatching them ("Got you covered"), while Snoop's broken but sonorous voice, along with her buckets of quicklime and her gravedigger's lantern, broaches the territory of the



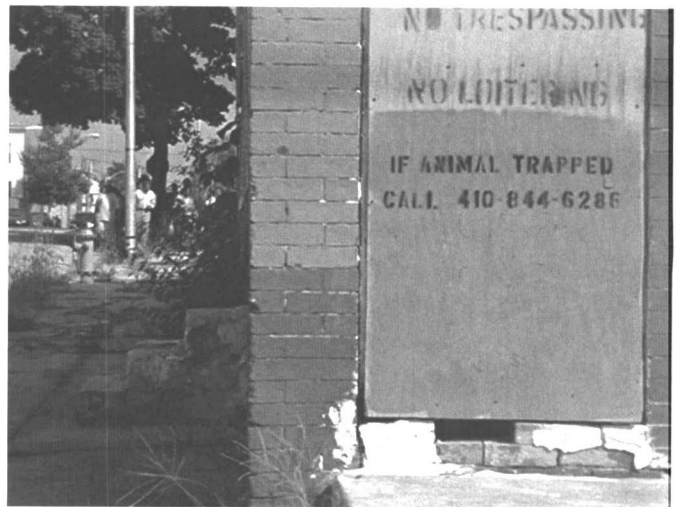
"It's another way": Jamie Hector as Marlo; Chris (Gbenga Akinnagbe) and Snoop (Felicity Pearson). © 2007 Home Box Office

uncanny. The season opens with Snoop purchasing a high-end nail gun, which she and Chris use to entomb their victims in abandoned row houses boarded up with "IF ANIMAL TRAPPED" signs replacing their windows. Ravaged by guns, drugs, neglect, and policing strategies based on gaming statistics, the inner city has literally become a graveyard for its lucklessly non-white inhabitants.

Each of *The Wire*'s Seasons has had a theme—the mirrored institutions of gangs and police hierarchies in season 1, the fate of Baltimore's troubled port and waterfront district in season 2, and the real-estate scams, urban-renewal boondoggles, and politically dubious redevelopment projects of season 3. In season 4, *The Wire* moves into the city's school system: the subtitle mocks George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" educational policy by offering "No Corner Left Behind" instead. The schools are, like the police force, another "system," one based on playing the numbers by rounding up phantom students twice per year for funding purposes and by abandoning even the semblance of education in order

to prepare for bogus achievement tests required by the government. Focusing as it does on children, the show's theme song is redone by a Baltimore youth ensemble of amateur singers, DoMaJe.

One of season 4's unlikely heroes is Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski (Jim True Frost), known now as "Mr. Prezbo," a failed cop who has decided to retool as a math teacher. His bewildering experiences during the first few days of class stand in for the viewer's education in the reality of an inner-city school: Prez gets "good news" that a student stabbed in his class wasn't HIV+. Picking up threads from previous seasons, Prez's class includes Namond (Julito McCullum), the son of Wee-Bey Brice (Hassan Johnson), one of the key members of the Barksdale crew from season 1, currently serving time for murder. Namond is picked from Prez's class for a special program focused on at-risk youth, run by a University of Maryland researcher with the streetwise help of ex-cop Howard "Bunny" Colvin (Robert Wisdom), who in season 3 had tried to reduce crime in his command district by unoffi-



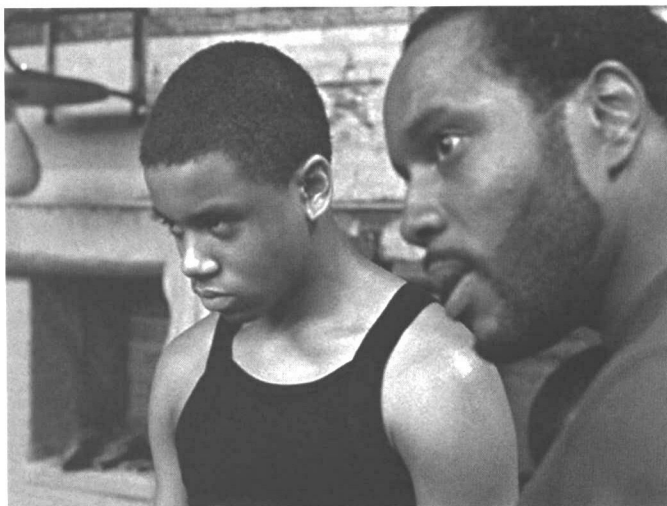
The city as character and cage. © 2007 Home Box Office

cially legalizing drugs and setting up a “Hamsterdam” (or mini-Amsterdam) in West Baltimore. Colvin’s fostering of Namond—which counterpoints a number of disastrous mentoring experiences in the season—is an unexpected bright spot in a sea of tragedies, and typical of the show’s care to depict real gestures of humanity amid the worst of situations. Prez’s class also includes Namond’s best friends: Michael Lee (Tristan Wilds), the victim of a sexually predatory stepfather; Randy Wagstaff (Maestro Harrell), a business-savvy refugee from a group home; and Duquan “Dukie” Weems (Jermaine Crawford), the bullied runt, whose addict family has been known to sell his clothes for drugs. The interlinked stories of these four troubled teens from the streets form the backbone of season 4.

In combination, Crawford, Harrell, McCullum, and Wilds, who were roughly the same 14–15 age range as the characters they portrayed during shooting, put together one of the most astonishing youth ensemble performances in television history. At *The Wire*, they operated under the

mentorship of Robert F. Chew, who plays Proposition Joe Stuart in the series, but who also is an extraordinary acting coach. In his audio commentary on episode 1, Simon discusses the risk of putting the entire season on the shoulders of four teenagers, and the actors themselves put together a rambunctious commentary on episode 11 along with Chew. Like the show, the quartet went Emmy-less, and their discussion of the difficulties in getting quality parts as young African American actors (cameos in *ER* and *Law and Order* are mentioned) reminds the viewer that, among its other virtues, *The Wire* is a minority-dominated masterpiece. Characters in *The Wire* are not made black or white, gay or straight, cops or robbers, old or young to score points or create a message, they’re those television rarities, fully-fledged human beings.

The group of young men is often shot together in breathtakingly shattered cityscapes, a cinematographic analog to a repeated quest on the part of several characters in the season to develop “soft eyes,” a condition that allows one to see the big picture. These locations themselves—an overgrown play-



Michael and Cutty (Chad L. Coleman), Chris and Proposition Joe (Robert F. Chew). © 2007 Home Box Office

ground near a row of vacant houses, an abandoned industrial loading dock where kids gather, the drug corners, various Baltimore food joints, or just the streets themselves—are more than sets, they're characters in the series. An unusual emphasis on wide shots, in which groups of human figures merge with their environment, forms a key element of *The Wire*'s philosophy, and makes an extra character of the city itself. The late Robert F. Colesberry, executive producer of *The Wire* and the Simon/Burns 2000 miniseries *The Corner*, spoke to Simon of a philosophy of “staying wide” and “showing the world.”

Simon is unabashedly literary in his assertion that *The Wire* is essentially structured like “a novel.” He also suggests that the moral universe of *The Wire* is most closely akin to Greek tragedy, but the series has a more epic quality, a contemporary version of *Crime and Punishment* without the inevitability of redemption. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and the school of American Naturalism, especially its pulp version in film noir, seem apropos. Characters spring traps on themselves because their environment offers them no real choices, and the unfolding of the plot entails the slow sealing of fates.

The truth is that re-watching the series on DVD entails an agonizing feeling of helplessness to alter the fates of these characters as they change from boys to men. Although he has a positive mentor in boxing coach and former Barksdale enforcer Dennis “Cutty” Wise (marvelously played by Chad L. Coleman, another *Wire* regular with “soft eyes”), Michael ultimately turns to Marlo, Chris, and Snoop to rid his family of its tormentor, entering a Faustian pact to become a drug dealer and killer himself in the process. Dukie, who had always relied on Michael as his protector, joins his friend on the corner, despite the best efforts of Mr. Prezbo to help him with his problems at school.

By far the most awful fate, however, is reserved for Randy, whose seemingly irrepressible smile, a flashing beacon of hope throughout the series, finally dies when his role as a school informant is revealed through a policeman's error, his foster mother's home is firebombed, and the system bounces him back into a group home. Namond's rescue by Colvin is made all the more surprising by his status as “least likely to succeed” and the son of a notorious gangster, but his safety remains provisional and the losses his friends suffer are staggering by comparison. Michael's step-by-step journey into the abyss and Namond's gradual reclamation feel utterly authentic and plausible, a streetwise version of an hourglass plot by Henry James.

Along with the deep immersion experience in the foreign language of inner-city schools, season 4 of *The Wire* dwells on all manner of fostering, learning, and education, from the hazing of rookie Homicide detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs (Sonja Sohn) to the desperate attempts of the young men to find safety in their fractured lives. Sometimes, as for Michael and Dukie, the mean streets are safer than their own homes. All four are homeless at one point or another in the season, finding real or figurative foster homes under the aegis of Marlo's gangsters, Mr. Prezbo's classroom, or Cutty's boxing gym. Even the local police station becomes a refuge: both Namond and Randy spend nights sleeping on a bench in the office of Ellis Carver (Seth Gilliam) because they have nowhere else to go. The group has a younger friend, Donut (Nathan Corbett), who gets his kicks stealing cars, and the ubiquitous black SUVs of the neighborhood gangsters begin to seem like dream homes, mobile operation centers of relative comfort, freedom, and power.

Season 4 continues a number of plot strands from previous seasons as well as encompassing another major storyline,



Growing up in Baltimore. © 2007 Home Box Office

the unfolding of the three-way Baltimore Democratic Party mayoral primary race between African American Mayor Clarence V. Royce (Glynn Turman), the white Carcetti, and African American Catholic candidate Tony Gray (Christopher Mann), whom Carcetti manipulated into launching a campaign so that the black vote would be divided. The season's early episodes count down, week by week, to the primary vote—Baltimore's drug dealers, meanwhile, offer an "election special" on their product. (An unseen voice calls out the shifting names of the drugs season after season; one term used in season 4, Plymouth Rock, recalls Malcolm X's comment that African Americans "didn't land on Plymouth Rock, Plymouth Rock landed on us.") The action then jumps ahead from Carcetti's primary victory to his mayoral tenure, the joke being that the actual election, in which Republican candidates have no chance, is a foregone conclusion. Carcetti is a conflicted operator who oozes in public, deeply and sincerely loves his family, and has managed to convince the Baltimore Police Department and the leaders of the African

American community that he actually cares about change. Season 4 ends, like previous seasons, without definitive resolutions. Mayor Carcetti has demonstrated a distressing but inevitable concern for his own political future that may outweigh his goodwill. The Major Crimes Unit that has featured in every season has been reconstituted once again by Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) and Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters), this time to tackle Marlo.

The biggest running joke for the producers, actors, writers, and crew of *The Wire*, emphasized so often that it obviously forms a point of pride, is the show's own "failure." Through four seasons it has garnered not a single Emmy, although it has gathered a mountain of accolades from the AFI, the Edgar Awards, ASCAP, the NAACP, and the American Television Critics Association. The relentless superlatives critics throw into print every year—*The Wire* is the best crime drama currently on television, and possibly the best thing that has ever been broadcast in television history, etc.—as yet have not stuck. In fact, the critical blurbs almost

appear to exist in an inverse relationship to the show's popularity. There is a growing cult around *The Wire*, although many of its members do not subscribe to HBO, appearing instead like junkies at their local video rental stores months after the original broadcasts, and helping the show continue its extraordinary afterlife.

The series is a serious work of fiction, nearly fifty hours and counting of pitch-perfect high pulp in the great American tradition of the literary detective genre and its masters: James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Patricia Highsmith, and Jim Thompson. In fact, for all its praiseworthy emphasis on authenticity and gritty realism, *The Wire* is actually based upon an ingenious and carefully orchestrated plot structure. Its regular episode writers include contemporary detective novelists like George Pelecanos, Dennis Lehane, and Richard Price, and the writers, even Burns and Simon, have filled the series with the witty and the convincingly implausible (notably a crime-scene investigation using only the word "fuck" and its variants) as much as sponge-like reportage and muckraking. The directors used in the series have included the Polish New Wave director Agnieszka Holland. Spike Lee's superb 1995 film adaptation of Price's novel *Clockers*, along with happenings and themes of *Homicide*, may be the most obvious cinematic precursors to *The Wire*. Like *Clockers*, the series is also a contemporary adaptation of the classic conventions of the gangster genre to the grim realities of the African American experience in the inner cities of America after the collapse of the Welfare State and the failure of the War on Drugs.

Ultimately, the much-touted failure of *The Wire*—the sort of failure one hopes to see repeated—has something to do with its politics. As Crawford, McCullum, Harrell, Wilds, and Chew discuss in their commentary on episode 11, the series deals in "things nobody wants to deal with." Simon is up-front about his disappointment and anger with the priorities of his culture. *The Wire* is in the business of telling America truths about itself that would be unbearable even if it were interested in bearing them. These truths have to do with what Michael Harrington, in his heartbreaking 1962 study of poverty in the United States, called "The Other America." There, Harrington had written of the ruinous post-WWII policies of "urban renewal" that stripped the centers of cities like Baltimore, subsidized white flight to the suburbs, and created free-fire zones of the remaining slums. Confronting this other America in the style of *The Wire* involves recording facts on the ground and making the fiction fit reality with the greatest authenticity: real morgues, Baltimore casting, ingenious ex-cop and ex-con actors, and locations scouted up to the point of their demolition. In cities like

Baltimore, reportage, description, or documentation of what Harrington called America's "lost" people—its invisible, ignored, or internally displaced non-white urban populations—becomes a mode of social critique. The show's implicit argument condemns a criminally negligent and culturally pervasive *failure to notice*. (Given all this, and Simon's former job as a crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, it comes as little surprise that the theme of *The Wire*'s fifth and final season, which began its run on HBO in January, is the media, and specifically Simon's alma mater.)

Hollywood's usual liberal social critique of racial injustice—for example, the Academy Awards selection of Best Picture for 2006, *Crash*—typically offers its characters paths to redemption and parables of personal choice that rarely exist in reality. The main point is to help its audience digest its dinner. *The Wire* is far more radical in the sense that it finds these lies themselves—about individuals who overcome the odds—pernicious and unacceptable. (In Hollywood, we would only see Namond's reclamation story; in *The Wire*, Namond is seen as a brilliant and unlikely exception to the rules of the game, in which institutions crush individuals.) *The Wire* is, at its core, a critique of America itself and of American ideals, of the notion that things are always improving, of the inevitability of progress through can-do attitudes, self-help slogans, and elbow grease, of the concept of better living through statistics, of the national self-hypnotizing salesmanship philosophy that "things are getting better every day in every way." The series finale in 2008 is set up by season 4 to investigate whether large-scale change is even possible in Baltimore under a more well-meaning regime. In theory, a buyer could purchase and enjoy this no-frills DVD boxed set by itself—the enclosed extras like the commentaries and two half-hour-long promotional films are for diehards only—there's enough exposition to catch up with the plot, although many nuances from earlier seasons would be missed. In practice, the thing to do is clear a month off your schedule, watch or re-watch the whole series front to back from the beginning, and get uncomfortable.

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ABSTRACT An essay on the fourth season DVD boxed set of the politically uncompromising HBO series, *The Wire* (created by Ed Burns and David Simon), an urban crime drama of unprecedented complexity that is unusual in featuring a cast largely composed of African Americans.

KEYWORDS David Simon, Ed Burns, Baltimore, African Americans, television drama, HBO

DVD DATA *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season*. Various directors. © 2007 Home Box Office, Inc. Publisher: HBO Video, 2007. \$59.99, 4 discs.

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