

Introduction: Deadwood, David Milch, and Television Creativity

David had more miles on him the day I met him than I'll probably have the day I die. He'll wrestle his demons forever, but I've never known anyone else who has learned to put his demons at his service in quite the way he has. I think that's his real genius. And David is a genius in the literal definition of that word. He is truly unique, truly original. *NYPD Blue* allowed him to exorcise some of his demons or, certainly, to turn a light on in the room where they reside. None of this was done from a distance. He took on addiction, alcoholism, racism—things that are just so fundamental to our nature and things that are dangerous in society he found a way to explore cold-bloodedly. In a medium that is utterly fearful, he has been a fiercely brave writer.

Steven Bochco (Singer 197)

In a documentary (“How It All Began”) on the Season One DVDs of *Seinfeld*, co-creator Jerry Seinfeld reminisces about the conception of the tremendously successful NBC sitcom named after him. As is so often the case in the medium, it seems in retrospect highly unlikely that such a phenomenal series ever happened. *Seinfeld* might have been *sui generis*. “The idea that you have two guys [Seinfeld, Larry David] who have never written a show, being run by a network executive that had never had a show, leading to a show that has a unique and unusual feel—this is a model that all the networks subsequently ignored and never did again—except for HBO.” In order to produce its branded “Not TV” television, HBO has developed a new method of engendering shows, one Seinfeld thinks, perhaps grandiosely, he had helped to originate. For HBO “hires people that they like and says that’s the end of their job. We like you; do what you think you should do, and it leads to much more distinctive programming.”

The matchless, “hideously beautiful” (McCabe, see below), astonishing, “filthy joy” (Jacobs, see below) of a television series this book considers came into the world when its creator David Milch (*Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue*) was invited by HBO to propose a project for their consideration. Similar, unrefusable offers to long-time network veteran David Chase (*The Rockford Files*, *I’ll Fly Away*, *Northern Exposure*) and film screenwriter Alan Ball (*American Beauty*) had brought about the stupendously successful *The Sopranos* and the one-of-a-kind *Six Feet Under*

respectively. In collaboration with the influential producer Steven Bochco, Milch had reimagined the ensemble drama with *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987). Working again with Bochco on the tremendously controversial *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005), a series that may have resurrected the hour drama, he expanded the parameters of network television narrative, introducing profane language and posterior nudity and



making an alcoholic, racist cop, modeled after Milch's own father,¹ the series' central character. Along the way, he had won numerous awards for his work, including multiple Emmys and Humanitas Prizes.² Milch seemed a perfect candidate to create a show on the censorship-free premium cable channel.

A former Yale University creative writing professor who had left academe to seek his fortune in Hollywood because an Ivy League salary could not sufficiently support his heroin addictions, alcoholism, and gambling habits, Milch has long felt a certain experiential affinity for the symbiotic relationship of cop and criminal and understandably pitched HBO another police drama,³ this one set not in Los Angeles or New York, but in Rome—at the time of Nero (54-68 A.D.), a series that, Milch

¹ "Except to the extent I reenact certain aspects of my father's nature, I think it's closer to the truth to say Sipowicz's personality is more like my dad's" (Milch 149).

² A complete list of Milch's award nominations can be found here: <http://imdb.com/name/nm0586965/awards>.

³ "Is it strange for you, knowing that you have such a huge following of cops in New York who love [*NYPD Blue*], and you coming from this history of heroin abuse and time spent in jail? Is it kind weird for you?," Laura Schiff asked the "Phi Beta Cop" (Longworth) Milch, who acknowledges "I was a criminal" and answers "No."

A good cop would be a good criminal. And cops understand criminals, and if it weren't for the fact that they're criminals they're probably more comfortable with them than with anybody else. The reason criminals confess to cops is because they trust cops. Because they understand cops better, and cops understand them better. Lawyers are bullshit. A cop knows where the crime began, he knows what was in the guy's mind. I can show you confessions where the criminals, many of whom have been beaten, as they answer the district attorney's questions, before every answer they look to the cop and trust the cop as what *they* should say. And they're not wrong. A criminal can tell a story and wind up doing two years, and he can tell the same story and wind up doing life. (10)

confirms in several interviews, would have begun with the arrest of St. Paul. Already committed to the new series *Rome* which would air in the United States in 2005, an innovative new joint production with the BBC, HBO declined, but Chris Albrecht and Carolyn Strauss invited another proposal from Milch—perhaps one that would explore similar themes in a different setting. *Deadwood* was the result.

Milch is credited as writer of only two of the *Deadwood's* twenty four episodes (The Pilot and Part I of “A Lie Agreed Upon”), while a largely invisible team of a dozen writers, several of whom had worked with Milch on earlier series, authored the other twenty two,⁴ but the official authorship credits do not seem to reflect the unique nature of *Deadwood's* creation as depicted in various news accounts (Wolk, Havrilesky, Singer, D’Alessandro) and in the documentaries (“The New Language of the Old West,” “An Imaginative Reality”) and episode commentaries on the Season One DVDs.



It is not unusual, of course, for a network or cable series with a team of writers to work together with a creator/executive producer/showrunner who gets to do the final draft of virtually every script: Chris Carter on *The X-Files*, Chase on *The Sopranos*, Joss Whedon on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—all exemplify such a process, each seeking to maintain, given this singular opportunity for quality control in a

⁴ John Belluso, Regina Corrado, Sara Hess, Ricky Jay, Victoria Morrow, George Putnam, Steve Shill authored one episode each; Malcolm MacRury Bryan McDonald have written two), Ted Mann did three), and Elizabeth Sarnoff and Jody Worth are credited with four episodes each.

medium usually considered more conducive to the writer's craft than the movies, his creation's signature voice.

Unlike most creators, Milch has never directed a single episode of *Deadwood* (or of any of his earlier series for that matter), but his influence is not limited to the script. We know that he prepares his actors at rehearsal in a manner comparable to that of the great directors—as Molly Parker and Keith Carradine acknowledge in their commentary on “Here Was a Man.” In *Entertainment Weekly's* insightful report on “How the West is Run,” we catch a glimpse of Milch carefully modulating—directing?—Mr. Wu's “cocksuckers,” asking for the expletive to be “more plaintive than angry” (Wolk 68).

Wolk reports, too, that *Deadwood's* actors listen to “long preparatory lectures about context and subtext, dappled with historical metaphors to explain the many levels he's aiming for” (70). Singer speaks of the “typical Milchian riff, a garrulous but lucid stream of subtextual information—intellectually daunting, digressive, arcane, wittily profane . . .” (192). According to Ian McShane (Al Swearengen), the subject of the “polymathic” (Wolk 70) former college professor's impromptu orations is more likely to concern “19th-century Germany economics” than the upcoming scene.

Wolk describes “Milch's “blitzkrieg form of creativity” in which “scenes are written the day before shooting, leaving his cast and crew as dizzily uncertain about their futures as a frontiersman in an untamed land” (68-69). As validation of his own creative method he quotes fondly, on several occasions, his father's admonition that “If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans”; Milch prefers to work without them.

Script outlines, preplanned story arcs: It's all anathema to Milch, whose last-minute, improvisatory writing style is a conscious decision to write unconsciously. . . . When he dictates a scene,⁵ he has no endgame in mind—he simply begins with a situation, then channels the characters, letting them speak through him. . . . But once he's finally imagined a scene, he'll never start over, as this would be an untenable slight against his imagination. (Wolk 69)

In his insightful conversations with Carradine on the Season One DVDs, Milch speaks fervently, with a tone that might be deemed pious, about the sense of

⁵ As Milch himself (as well as several set visitors and actors) note Milch “doesn't write scenes; he dictates them,, the lines subsequently appearing on a large computer monitor in front of him. He'll often repeat sentences sometimes shuffling and rejiggering the words in the show's early American, profane patois until he gets the rhythm right” (Wolk 69)

privilege he feels in taking “part in a sacrament” (“New Language”), insisting that “the muse knows where to find me every morning.”⁶

And yet Milch does not operate under any Romantic notion that if “Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (Keats 318). With characteristic erudition, he cites (“An Imaginative Reality”) the famous example of the German chemist Kekule who, after years of study and research, came by a solution to the long-standing question of the structure of the benzene molecule in a dream (Koestler 169-71) and insists that “visions come to prepared spirits.”⁷ His immediate preparation for *Deadwood* included reading virtually every issue of *The Black Hills Pioneer*, steeping himself in the history of the American West, the gold rush, and *Deadwood* itself, and revisiting the Western genre, with which he had only a passing familiarity prior to creating *Deadwood*.

In his conversation with Heather Havrilesky, Milch admits his relative ignorance of the genre. Having grown up, uninterested in the Western, in the days of Hopalong Cassidy and the Cisco Kid, he managed to “remain innocent of the classical westerns” that followed. His latter-day research into the form in his preparation for *Deadwood* led him to a typically Milchian complex understanding of the cultural forces at work in the genre. The western film “had everything to do with what Hollywood was about at that time, and nothing to do with what the West was about.” The Western as we know it was “really an artifact of the Hays Production Code of the '20s and '30s” and not about the West. Heavily influenced by “middle-European Jews who had come out to Hollywood to present to America a sanitized heroic idea of what America was. . . . an America disinfected and pure.”

“Working in network television,” Milch tells Havrilesky, was very like working under the Hays Code. “You can spend your time pissing and moaning about the strictures within which you're forced to work, or you can try and find ways to neutralize the distorting effect of those strictures, which is to develop personalities [or] characters whose own internal process winds up at the same place as the external strictures, but for internal reasons.” Milch’s extraordinary creation *NYPD Blue*’s Andy Sipowicz, an alcoholic, racist detective, who, in the series’ twelve years on the air struggles to become a worthwhile human being and acquire a soul

⁶ Milch is alluding to lines attributed to director Billy Wilder (Singer 195).

⁷ Milch attributes these words to Kekule, but he would appear to be alluding to the oft-quoted observation of another 19th Century scientist, Louis Pasteur, who said that “Where observation is concerned, chance favours only the prepared mind” (Knowles).

(Lavery), exemplifies such a narrative strategy. Because “[e]very storyteller works within the conventions of his time,” however, the Hays Code produced a different result: “stoic characters who lived by a code and then a kind of justifying dramatic structure which validated that.”

Milch’s preparations to make “reality come alive” in his imagination so he might make *Deadwood* didn’t just include his very professorial research into history and context. “I’ve spent decades learning my craft,” he tells Carradine. The influence of Robert Penn Warren (beautifully articulated in Joe Millichap’s contribution to this book), his wide reading (in interviews Milch routinely makes reference to a wide variety of writers and books, from the Bible to Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Santayana, William and Henry James, Nathanael West), his work on *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue*, even his numerous failed series (*Capital News*, *Big Apple*, *Brooklyn South*)—all made *Deadwood* possible.

Milch’s creation is rich in character-based humor (the oleaginous E. B. Farnum might be funnier than any sitcom character now on TV); scatological (what other show has depicted the passing of kidney stones, the suppression of a “digestive crisis,” the “situating” of phlegm?); macabre (Woo’s Pigs are extremely well fed); articulately profane (see John Allan Bridge’s consideration of *Deadwood*’s language on the book’s website)⁸; unpredictably observant (receiving a blowjob from Dolly, Al exclaims, looking down, “Do you dye your hair?”); wonderfully Shakespearean (the series is full of monologues and soliloquies: Al’s to Dolly, The Chief; E. B.’s to the imbecilic Richardson and a blood-stained floor; Charley’s and Jane’s to the grave of Wild Bill); graced by minor and mid-major characters (Ellsworth, Dan Dority, Jewell, Johnny Burns, Mr. Wu, Tom Nuttal, Con Stapleton, Silas Adams, Blazanov, Andy Cramed) beautifully realized and three dimensional; rudely, crudely, and perfectly in keeping with the both the era and Milch’s world view,⁹ not-politically correct (racism, Indian-hating, anti-semitism, sexism, in word and brutal deed, are all *Deadwood* realities, part of its “reckless verisimilitude” (see the Ellroy epigraph to Wright and Hailin Zhou’s essay in this volume). In its elaborate, intricate, “cold-blooded” reconnoitering of a place and a time, *Deadwood* reminds this viewer at

⁸ Perfectly capturing *Deadwood*’s water cooler public fame, a *New Yorker* cartoon shows a road sign on which we read “DEADWOOD 25—MILES.”

⁹ “For me,” Milch has insisted, “democracy is a patent delusion. It’s an ideal, but this society is far from democratic, nor can it be. The idea in America, even as the Declaration of Independence was put forward—‘We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal’—that was bullshit” (Schiff 6).

least of the work of William Faulkner, who once scrawled on a map (included in *Absalom, Absalom* [1936]) of his brainchild, the “fictional” Yoknapatawpha County, “William Faulkner, Sole Owner & Proprietor.” Given the collaborative nature of television creativity, the world of a series can never be solely owned, but make no mistake: David Milch is *Deadwood*’s proprietor.

“It’s not by any virtue that I have received a gift,” Milch insists. “It’s an accident. But the crime would be not to be respectful of it” (“An Imaginative Reality”). Cast and crew on the films of the late Federico Fellini spoke of “the daily miracle” (*Fellini: I’m a Born Liar*) of working with the constantly improvising “Maestro.” By all reports, the creation of *Deadwood*, Milch’s masterpiece, decades in the making, has been similarly miraculous.