

The Soul of Andy Sipowicz:

Depth of Character and the Depth of Television

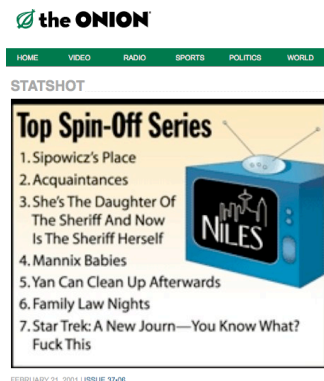
The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is "a vale of tears" from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribed straightened notion! Call the world if you please "The vale of Soul-making." Then you will find out the use of the word (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which struck me concerning it). I say "Soul-making"—Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence—There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls until they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. ... How then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given to them—so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? ... Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!

John Keats, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 1819



Earlier this year, in the always-hilarious *Onion*, the weekly "STATshot" listed the most unlikely television spin-offs. Number one on their inventory was a potential show to be called "Sipowicz's Place."

Although *The Onion* is probably correct that we should not expect *NYPD Blue* to spin off its irascible lead into his own series (as *All in the Family* once engendered *Archie Bunker's Place*), I for one might drop by Sipowicz's Place for a drink or two. After eight seasons, Andy and I would have much to talk about.



The Collected Works of David Lavery 2

An article in *Entertainment Weekly* in the mid-'90s made the argument that television at the end of the century may well be better than the movies. The proposition seems at first glance preposterous—how could a medium that had produced so many masterpieces, so many great auteurs, from Chaplin to Scorsese, be thought inferior to a rival household appliance?

EW's case was, nevertheless, compelling: The very best series TV—the prime examples of what has come to be called Quality TV—it insisted, takes more risks, tackles more relevant issues more provocatively, does more with character, gives women juicier roles, and goes deeper than the movies do, largely because of the generous amount of time available, thanks to 22 episodes a year and multi-year durations. *NYPD Blue*, for example, had accumulated by this season's end approximately 7,040 minutes, or 117 hours of narrative time, in which to become itself—roughly the equivalent of 60 feature films.



But one argument *EW* did not make—and one I am, of course, about to—is that TV may well be the only medium, and that includes literature, capable of showing, in something like real time, the making of a soul. This world, after all, is, as Keats sought to remind (and contemporary archetypal psychologist James Hillman has endeavored to show), a "vale of soul making."

The character of Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz) has anchored Steven Bochco and David Milch's *NYPD Blue* since its inception in 1993. Sipowicz's partners (John Kelly [David Caruso], Bobby Simone [Jimmy Smits—pictured], and Danny Sorenson [Rick Schroeder] have come and gone, mostly for extra-diegetic reasons. But Andy, an alcoholic with a vicious temper and racist tendencies, has returned week after week, struggling to become a decent human being.



"[Andy] Sipowicz is one of the few people you can smell on TV," David Thompson wrote in *Esquire* a few years ago, contemplating the story arc for the *NYPD Blue* detective played by Franz with a continuing brilliance that has now won him four Emmys for Outstanding Acting in a Dramatic Series. "From the outset," Thompson observed, "he was the best portrait of unresolved violence drawn into being a cop and the surest prospect for tragedy."

When we first met Detective Andy Sipowicz in 1993 he was deep into the bottle, the loosest of canons, a simmering racist, hostile not only to his new black

boss, Lieutenant Arthur Fancy (James McDaniel), but to his long-term partner and friend John Kelly and virtually everyone around him. He was completely out of control and about to be almost-fatally wounded in a mob hit, payback for his public humiliation of Alfonse Giardello.² (A drunken Sipowicz, you may remember from the pilot episode, enters a restaurant where mob goon Giardello is dining, drags him outside by gunpoint, pushes him down the steps, and then stuffs his mouth with, first, a sock, then his hairpiece.)

"As *NYPD Blue* began," Thompson wrote, Sipowicz "seemed to be a major concession to the general wisdom that many cops have wrecked home lives and less-than-stable psyches. There was a bigot in Sipowicz, a sexist, a genuine brute, filled with comic pride."

We knew little then of the inner torments that had brought Andy to such a pass, and he knew nothing of the "World of Pains and Troubles" he was about to enter. We did not yet know of his troubled relationship with his father (later the subject of a recurring dream), his estrangement from his wife and son, his service in Vietnam and his tortured re-entry, and the horrible, faith-destroying things he had seen as a New York cop.

And he did not yet know that his no-longer-alienated son would be murdered, that he would be stricken with prostate cancer, that his new wife would be shot to death by errant bullets, fired by a grieving father trying to avenge a daughter's death.

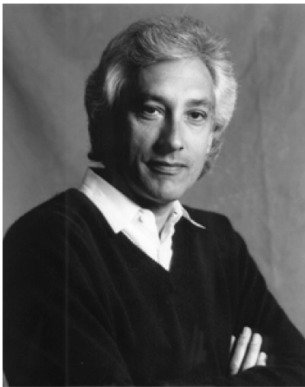
Nor did we know of all the developing traits that would make Andy Sipowicz a truly good man. We did not yet know of his visceral hatred for crime, or his obsession with tropical fish, or of his love for Sylvia (Sharon Lawrence) (In "For Whom the Skell Rolls," Season Two, Andy characteristically talks metaphorically about the things—previously impossible—he will be able to have when he and Sylvia live together in terms of the fish he can now get for his aquarium), or his single-father love for his son Theo.

Because *NYPD Blue* is a long-running television series, it has had the time to show us all this—to show Andy Sipowicz in all his complexity, in all his contradictions, acquiring a soul.



It has long been a commonplace of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory that cultural texts tend to repress contradiction in order to impose, or at least invite, ideologically simplistic readings—to, in the words of John Fiske, author of *Television Culture* (Routledge, 1987), "propose a unitary, final 'truth' of the text work by resolving contradictions and thus deny the force for social change, or at least social interrogation, that is embedded in them." In the terminology of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, cultural texts thus tend toward the monological, not the dialogical. They tend to speak with one voice rather than many.

Considered as a whole, however, television, as Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch show in their account of TV as a cultural forum (from *Television: The Critical View* [Oxford UP, 1987]), is anything but monological. And the same might be said of many of TV's discrete units.



As Trevor Parry-Giles and Paul Traudt once showed, thinking of another Steven Bochco [pictured] drama, *L.A. Law*, it would be misleading to characterize the best television drama—in a medium still largely authorless and with its polyphonic presentation of contradictory views—as either liberal or conservative (from *Television Criticism: Approaches and Applications* [Longman's, 1991]). In the best series TV, a multiplicity of points-of-view is exhibited without subsuming any under the authority of a single voice.

NYPD Blue, a show which, largely because of its strong language and partial nudity, has inspired perhaps more complaints than any other series on television from those convinced the media corrupt our public morals, lends itself to a favorable Bakhtinian reading even more than *L.A. Law*. And the soul-making of Andy Sipowicz is absolutely central to the dialogue the series perpetrates.

Consider race. From the beginning, Andy Sipowicz has clashed with his black boss, Lieutenant Fancy. On the street or in The Precinct, Sipowicz's racism seems always about to explode. In the following dialogue from "Oscar, Meyer, Weiner" (Season One), for example, Sipowicz interrogates a young black Ph.D. student whom the police suspect may be tangentially involved in a vicious murder.

Sipowicz: "Mr. Futrel. Have I been disrespectful to you?"

Futrel: "*This* is disrespectful. Me being here."

Sipowicz: "Hey, pal. I'm trying to find some assholes before they murder another innocent family. It happens these assholes are black. Now how do you want me to put the questions? 'I'm sorry for the injustices the white man has inflicted on your race, but can you provide any information?' 'I'm sorry your people have been downtrodden for three hundred years, but did you discuss the layout of the Sloan house with any of your friends?'"

Futrel: "Yeah. Do it that way."

Sipowicz: "Okay, I know that great African-American George Washington Carver discovered the peanut, but can you provide the names and addresses of these friends?"

Futrel: "You're a racist scumbag."

Sipowicz: "Ouch."

Later, in Season Three's "The Blackboard Jungle," Sipowicz' angry colloquy with a black activist leads to another serious altercation with Lieutenant Fancy and temporary estrangement from his partner, Bobby Simone (Jimmy Smits).

But racism is not innate to Sipowicz's still unfinished character: He battles with it, without the help of AA meetings, just as he battles with his alcoholism. In the series' 70th episode, "Where's Waldo (Season Four), Sipowicz and Simone must solve the murder of Qwasi, the same black activist who earlier had prompted his hatred. Sipowicz feels called upon to apologize to the ex-wife and young daughter of Qwasi—an apology that only the daughter accepts.

In a subsequent scene, a deeply-troubled Andy, brought to a kind of epiphany by his encounter with the little girl, engages in a racism "talking cure" with his partner, explaining, but not explaining away, how he came by it.

In Season Six, however, race again became an issue, with Sipowicz and Fancy literally coming to blows as the result of a disagreement over the latter's treatment of a cop Fancy had already accused (in a Season Four episode) of racism. Racism is part of Andy Sipowicz' fabric, an aspect of his soul; it cannot be cleanly, simply removed. *NYPD Blue* knows that.

A documentary record of Andy's soul-making would be as long as *NYPD Blue* itself, but the highlight film would surely include certain key scenes:

- The scene in Season's Three's "Closing Time," in which a battered, off-the-wagon Andy begs Bobby Simone for help.
- The deeply moving scene, in Season Five's "Lost Israel," where, inspired by a mute, black, homeless man, Andy reads from the Bible in order to comfort a mother whose son has been abused and murdered by his father.
- The scene in Season Six's "Safe Home," when his new partner, Danny Sorenson (Rick Schroeder), comes to seek his help in interrogating Malcolm Cullinan, the evil millionaire whose perversions unleashed the cycle of violence that led to the death of Andy's wife. In a year that saw not only the end of Bobby Simone but the death of Sylvia Costas as well—the sort of traumas, which, in the past, had sent Andy back to the bottle, but not this time—Andy is ready to respond.

From day one, Sipowicz has been a master of the interview, able, when necessary, to break down a perp in interrogation through verbal aggression or physical violence. But now no violence is necessary, for Andy Sipowicz has advanced to a higher plane. As Sorenson and Sipowicz interrogate Cullinan, Andy fixes him with an icy stare but says almost nothing until he asks Cullinan why he continues to do evil. Cullinan, says Andy, is living some kind of "*Groundhogs* [sic] *Day*, except in hell." "Why don't you just cut it out?" asks Andy. Cullinan cracks and confesses.

It is not just Andy's skills as a detective that have become transcendent. In the episode just discussed, he is taken by surprise by a partner's hand on his shoulder, a violation of the personal distance he has fought six years to maintain from all but a few.

But now, seemingly in full possession of "a bliss peculiar to" his own "individual existence," Andy Sipowicz has become a soul not only able to forgive, but able to transgress boundaries, capable even of reaching out to comfort the gay precinct administrative assistant, John Irvin ("Gay John," as Andy calls him) [pictured], who feels responsible for Sylvia's death.



In "Safe Home," Andy passes the grieving Irvin by without a word, only to return to the precinct to forgive him. Calling him a hero for taking a bullet, he then embraces him. "Don't you believe she's [Sylvia] in a better place?" Andy asks the

very religious Irvin, who cries on his shoulder. This season Andy has even allowed Gay John to baby-sit his son, though not without some trepidation and only after Danny admonishes him to remember that John is a “homosexual not a child molester”.

With the departure of Jimmy Smits, many predicted doom for *NYPD Blue*, and though Rick Schroeder was uniformly praised in his first season’s role as Smit’s replacement, there were more than a few dissenters in Season Seven (Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly* being one of the most prominent) who felt that the show had begun an inevitable downhill slide. Though major changes still lie ahead again (old-timers Diane Russell and Lieutenant Fancy have both departed, and Andy is due for yet another partner, as Schroeder just announced his character won’t be returning), it seems to me, however, that the series is now as solid as ever.

We know from the famous Robert Johnson legend evoked in *Brother Where Art Thou?*—“I sold my soul to the devil.” “Why?” “Well I wasn’t using it for nothing”—that a soul without a purpose can still go to hell. Having shown Andy Sipowicz’ acquisition of a soul, Bochco and company now face an unprecedented challenge: giving him something to do with it.

In the year (or years) ahead, what Andy does with his soul will itself be a plumb by which to measure not just his own character but the surprising, not-yet-measurable, depth of television.