

## TV Review: HBO's 'Boardwalk Empire' Returns Better Than Ever

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 25, 2011 - 2:09pm

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CHICAGO – We need more programming as ridiculously ambitious as HBO's "Boardwalk Empire." Not only does this Emmy award-winning program, returning tonight for its highly-anticipated second season, feature dozens of speaking roles and multiple subplots but it's also the most uniquely stylish show on TV. It looks absolutely amazing with production values higher than anything that's on right now and possibly ever. The first season sometimes seemed to linger a bit too long on these production elements and lacked some of the dramatic urgency that propels the best programs. From the first stellar episode of season two, that seems to have changed. The stakes seem higher and the costumes and sets feel more lived in. Yes, one of the best programs on HBO has gotten even better.



Television Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Directed by the legendary Tim Van Patten (and written by Terence Winter), the season premiere features a Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi) fully in control of Atlantic City. A friendly Mayor has been put in office and the season opens with a Nucky who seems to be happy, partying and, of course, drinking. While bottles of alcohol are making their way to their destination in the early morning hours, Nucky and his cronies are celebrating.

Of course, not everyone is so happy. Margaret (Kelly Macdonald) notices that Nucky is gone all night and has started to question her decision to be with him. Nucky's right-hand-man Jimmy (Michael Pitt) has his own concerns about how much power Nucky gives and how much he holds back while his home-life continues to be a bit unusual with an odd dynamic between his wife (Aleksa Palladino), mother (Gretchen Mol), and the disfigured war veteran Richard (Jack Huston, in a much bigger role this year) that has come to be a friend.



Boardwalk Empire  
*Photo credit: HBO*

Federal Agent Nelson Van Alden (Michael Shannon) has one of the most interesting opening-episode arcs as his wife Rose (Enid Graham) comes to visit Atlantic City. A church-going, conservative woman, she clearly feels ill at ease in a city where sin (including that of her husband's) is just beyond the tourist-friendly facade. Every scene between Shannon and his wife is stellar. Then again, every scene with Shannon in most things is stellar.



Boardwalk Empire  
*Photo credit: HBO*

And everything must come to a brutal end. The season opens ominously as the montage concludes with a deadly attack on Chalky White (Michael K. Williams) and his operation by the KKK. Chalky survives and even kills one of the Klansmen during his escape. Believe it or not, the fact that a white man is dead at the hands of a black one is of much greater concern to Nucky, Jimmy, and the rest of the power elite than the attack itself. They don't want a race war. But Chalky is not about to lay down and he threatens to force his people to boycott Nucky's

establishments. The politics of growing racial tension during prohibition will clearly be a major plotline of season two (and will allow the GREAT Williams a larger role this season).

Of course, any weakness, perceived or actual, allows for power to erode (and the writers never let you forget that there are people all over the country looking to take a bit of Nucky's power). And not only does Nucky have to face the racial tension in his city but he has to deal with a much-more-immediate problem when he's arrested for the election fraud that ended last season. The opening of season two of "Boardwalk Empire" seems to be playing with issues of what lies just below the surface. The secrets held by Van Alden, Nucky, Jimmy, and the entirety of Atlantic City. Like Prohibition forced behavior underground, these characters are dealing with hidden problems that will come to the surface before they will merely go away.

The ensemble on "Boardwalk Empire" was easily one of the best of 2010-11 and, if it's possible, they seem even more accomplished this year. Golden Globe-winner Steve Buscemi looks more confident and more comfortable, but he's far from alone. It's not to say that the first season ensemble performance was bad, but it seems better now. Everyone is more comfortable with their characters, having a season of back story to add depth and weight to what they're doing. There's really not a weak link here and I love the fact that Williams and Huston are the actors who will have more screen time this year — I'm fascinated by both of them.

That's a good word for "Boardwalk Empire" — fascinating. I STILL wish there was a bit more thrust to the narrative, a bit more drive to the action of the piece. Too often I feel like there's more "tell" than "show" as characters are forced to explain themselves a bit too regularly just to keep viewers in tune with the many characters and their plotlines. But it's a minor complaint. And, as I said, the start of season two does feel more urgent and more in-the-moment than a lot of season one. It's great to be back on the "Boardwalk."

*'Boardwalk Empire,' which airs on HBO, stars Steve Buscemi, Michael Pitt, Kelly MacDonald, Michael Shannon, Shea Wigham, Michael K. Williams, Gretchen Mol, Aleksa Palladino, Michael Stuhlbarg, and Jack Huston. The show was created and written by Terence Winter and the pilot was directed by Martin Scorsese. It premieres on Sunday, September 19th, 2010 at 8PM CST.*



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