

TV Review: Showtime's 'Ray Donovan' is Next Great Drama

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CHICAGO – “*I like you. You say what you mean.*” Showtime’s brilliant new show, “Ray Donovan,” is titled after a straightshooter in a town where no one is honest; a problem solver in a place built on mountains of problems. Ann Biderman’s stunning drama (directed and produced by “Sopranos” vet Allen Coulter) is the kind of dense patchwork quilt of character and theme that separate great shows from merely good ones. Think “Deadwood,” “The Wire,” or “The Sopranos” — shows to which this could eventually merit comparison. As Biderman proved with “Southland,” she has incredible skill at developing ensemble and this is one of the best on TV, toplined by a surprisingly subtle turn from Liev Schreiber in the lead but filled out by great actors throughout.



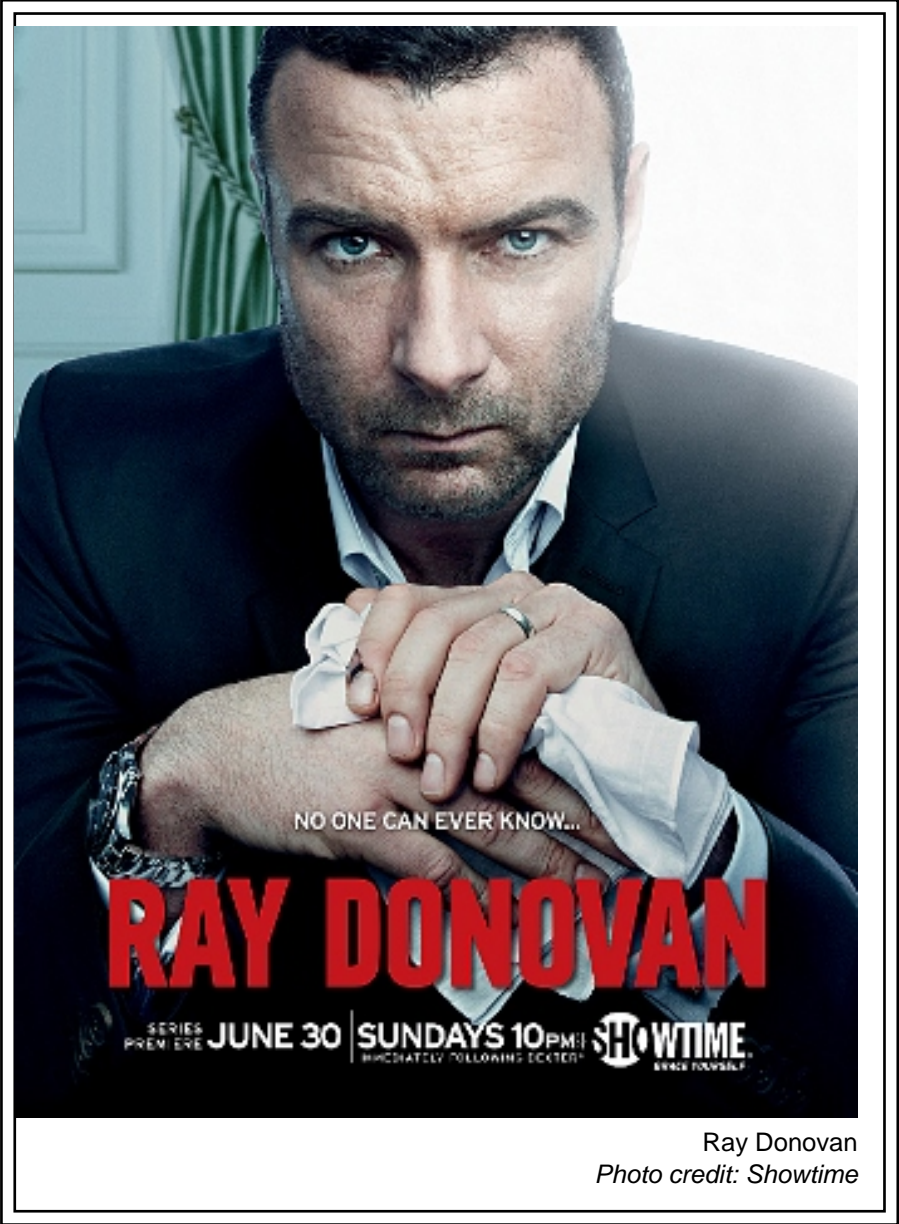
Television Rating: **4.5/5.0**

Ray Donovan (Liev Schreiber) gets shit done. He is a fixer, not unlike The Wolf from “Pulp Fiction” if Harvey Keitel’s iconic character worked only in the Hollywood Hills. If a celebrity ends up with an overdosed girl next to him, Donovan cleans it up. If your \$200 million action movie star has a tape sent to him in which he’s fellingating a transsexual, Ray makes the problem go away. And he does so with more than mere bribes and threats. He uses a baseball bat. He’s a mob enforcer in tinseltown. He’s Tony Soprano for the studio system.



Ray Donovan
Photo credit: Showtime

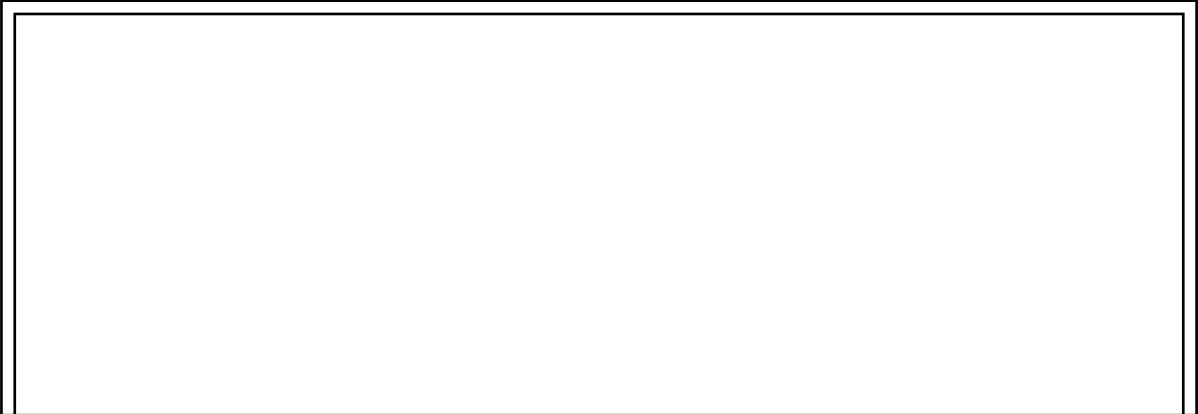
There's one problem Ray can't solve — his dad. The premiere opens with Mickey Donovan (Jon Voight) getting out of Walpole, where he's been serving time for a crime he didn't commit, which is not to say he's a typical innocent guy. His first action after he gets out? Shoving a gun in the mouth of a Priest and pulling the trigger. He thinks the Priest is the one who molested his son Bunchy (Dash Mihok). He's one of those guys, one for whom there are no boundaries when something needs to get done. Not unlike his son. Although Ray has figured out how to live in the world more than Mickey, who still wears the attitude of an inmate in his alpha male bravado.



Mickey is the kind of guy who thinks it's charming to say "*black don't crack*" when he sees his baby mama for the first time in years. His intention — to compliment her — isn't malicious and yet there's a tone of slime beneath nearly everything he says. He tells jokes about pedophile priests at a support group for people abused by the clergy just to lighten the mood. He's the kind of guy who makes you uncomfortable in any conversation as his boundaries and sense of decency are clearly not the same as yours. And Ray knows he's dangerous. So dangerous that he may have to kill him to protect his family. He's the ultimate problem that needs fixing in the world of the ultimate fixer.

Much like if the first season of "The Sopranos" were just about Tony and his mother Livia, "Ray Donovan" would be effective as a study of a leader rattled by his parent but there are equally fascinating characters to complement this father-son Shakespearean power struggle. There's Ray's wife Abby (the great Paula Malcomson, Trixie from "Deadwood"), someone to whom Ray was clearly attracted to for her strength. She doesn't put up with his shit. She's the Carmela to his Tony. There's Ray's other brothers — Terry (the awesome Eddie Marsan), a former boxer with Parkinson's and a seemingly gentle soul, and the newly-discovered Daryll (Pooch Hall), a product of an affair by Mickey. There's Ray's co-workers, Avi (Steven Bauer) and Lena (Katherine Moennig), the two people he seems to trust above all else. There's the law firm partners at Goldman/Drexler (Elliott Gould & Peter Jacobson), for whom Ray does most of his work. And there's, of course, the AJ & Meadow of the piece, Conor (Devon Bagby) and Bridget (Kerris Dorsey). With limited screen time in the first four episodes, I'm already fascinated by Ray's kids. How does growing up in a house like Donovan's change a child?

There are deep thematic issues in Showtime's new show. "Ray Donovan" is a show about a guy who helps people cover up their shit painted against the backdrop of one of the ultimate cover ups in history — pedophile priests — and the world of the criminal underground in general. Mob activity and the church's behavior in the face of their controversies — that kind of action infected lives and families for decades to come. What will Ray's cover-ups reap? As great fiction has taught us for decades, burying the bodies only poisons the drinking water. Covering up past sins and secrets only makes their eventual unveiling more painful.





Ray Donovan
Photo credit: Showtime

Don't think that these deep themes that I'm reading into "Ray Donovan" make for a program that's like homework. This is wildly entertaining stuff. "Ray Donovan" is very smart, clever, and sometimes very funny. Voight's beyond over-the-top, whether he's telling his grandson about his prison sex rules in graphic terms or watching explicit rap videos at the library, Mickey Donovan is instantly one of the most memorable characters on TV. Voight plays him perfectly as one of those guys who can be truly evil without even knowing it. It's just who he is. Real assholes don't often have the intent to be so — they just are that way. Mickey Donovan is an asshole. And Voight will get Golden Globe and Emmy nominations, maybe even wins, for playing him perfectly.

It's not just Voight's show, even though he'll get most of the buzz. Schreiber, Marsan, Dorsey, Malcomson — they're all fantastic. I've long been attracted to shows with deep ensembles and this one is one of the deepest (and I haven't even mentioned great small turns like those from Ambyr Childers, Brooke Smith, Denise Crosby, and Frank Whaley). And I love the variety within the cast. Marsan finds very subtle beats as a clearly broken man while Voight goes much broader. Malcomson reminds one instantly how great she was on "Deadwood" while Schreiber takes a role that could have been all bombast and actually goes subtle with it. Ray Donovan doesn't need to yell. Schreiber plays him as coiled intensity. He walks in, gets the job done, and goes back to his family. There's no time for anything else.

"Ray Donovan" is very plot driven and arguably too much so in the first couple episodes. I could see someone walking away from the premiere, an episode that has to introduce all of those many characters listed above, and think it cluttered. But the character beats by episodes three and four bear the confidence of a show years into its run. The way Terry asks a girl out by blurting out, "*Do you like spaghetti?*" The way that Bridget corrects her mother's grammar (and how that makes her father smile knowingly). Every single gross thing that Jon Voight does. It all feels of a piece built on character, not designed for a demo or to fit a certain audience need. The best programs have that in common — confidence of character. You won't find many people or more shows that are more confident than "Ray Donovan."

"Ray Donovan" stars Liev Schreiber, Jon Voight, Paula Malcomson, Eddie Marsan, Dash Mihok, Steven Bauer, Katherine Moennig, Kerris Dorsey, Peter Jacobson, Devon Bagby, and Elliot Gould. It premieres on Sunday, June 30, 2013 at 9pm CST on Showtime.



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