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# Bada-bing! America's favorite television 'family' is back

by David Bianculli  
New York Daily News

Sixteen months between original episodes of HBO's mob drama "The Sopranos" is a criminally long time to wait.

But the series, which returned Sunday night at 9 EDT, is worth it.

The drama inhabits such a rich and fully realized universe that I'd gladly wait for the privilege of spending time with these unpredictable and unforgettable characters.

The first four episodes of the fourth season were provided for preview, and I enjoyed them all immensely. Fickle viewers may feel a lot of scenes meander aimlessly or have no point, but "Sopranos" loyalists will look at the same scenes and be rewarded with subtle references to past incidents or richly textured moments spent with favorite supporting characters.

In Sunday's season opener, for example,

James Gandolfini's Tony hears a rustling in the bushes by his pool. He looks up, smiling in childlike anticipation, but is disappointed to see it's only a squirrel.

That's all that happens in that scene - but it echoes the very first episode of "The Sopranos," when Tony was shown feeding a family of ducks that had descended on his back yard - and to a subsequent analysis with Lorraine Bracco's Dr. Melfi of the ducks' symbolism in Tony's dreams.

It's just a moment, and a little one at that. Yet it resonates deeply for viewers able to put it in context - and, on Sunday night, many millions will.

Many of the little moments this season turn out to have greater impact with each new episode. A toss-away joke in one show becomes a motive for violence in another; a flirtatious hand on a leg, or an innocent turn on the dance floor, leads to a lot more as time goes by.

Fear not: I refuse to spoil any major, or

even minor, surprises in this year's "Sopranos" installments. The novelistic way these stories unfold, and the superb way they're enacted by this stupendous cast, demand the respect to allow viewers to savor each treat for themselves.

I will say, though, that the second episode contains two scenes that made me gasp in shock - one involving a police interrogation, and one involving a Soprano family member who dares confront Tony directly.

And it's not ruining anything to note that the new season, after such a long period between installments, reflects not only the passage of time, but the events of Sept. 11. The shot of the World Trade Center has been removed from the opening credits (the Twin Towers used to be visible during Tony's drive on the New Jersey Turnpike), and Bobby (Steven

R. Schirripa) talks to Tony about the terrorist attacks, trying to pass on an urban legend but botching it hilariously.

"Quasimodo predicted all this," he tells Tony insistently.

David Chase, creator of "The Sopranos" and the writer of the season's opener (directed by Allen Coulter), made me laugh out loud - and I never thought I would ever find anything humorous about 9/11.

The violence in "The Sopranos" is as unexpected, and effective, as the comedy. Things happen in these first four shows that are brutal and remind you of the despicably dark sides of these otherwise likable rogues.

There's also an evil symmetry at work in the tapestry that Chase and company are weaving this season: Tony is not only being challenged at work and at home, but just as he tests

an underling by approving and ordering a mob hit, he is tested by someone putting him in the same position.

Finally, so many of the performances in this series are wonderful - among TV's very best right now - that anyone winning a dramatic Emmy Award later this month should consider himself fortunate that the "Sopranos" cast was not eligible because of the show's year-long hiatus.

They're all at the top of their game, playing off one another like pro athletes: Gandolfini as Tony, Edie Falco as Carmela, Joe Pantoliano as Ralph, Aida Turturro as Janice, Lorraine Bracco as Dr. Melfi, Michael Imperioli as Christopher, Tony Sirico as Paulie and Steven Van Zandt as Silvio.

And that's just for starters. The list of other terrific performances could go on at twice the length - and singing the praises of "The Sopranos," so could I.

## "My Big Fat Greek Wedding"

by Daniel J. Stasiewski  
staff writer

Upon entering this world everyone is given the gift of a family and a culture. Unfortunately, an inherited life doesn't offer a return policy. Short of a name change and enrollment in the witness protection program, you're forever stapled to a particular family unit and its traditions.

With this reality comes "My Big Fat Greek Wedding", a romantic comedy of grand proportions. This hysterical sleeper hit takes cheap shots at not just Greek families, but family life in general. While the fluttery romance goes right to the heart, it also provides breathing room for the uncontrollable laughter that makes "My Big Fat Greek Wedding", a big fat hit.

Toula (Nia Vardalos) is 30 and single, which is hard enough without having a huge Greek family anxiously awaiting the emergence of Greek boyfriend, a Greek wedding, and little Greek children. Her life as a waitress in the family restaurant is obviously going nowhere, so Toula ventures into black-sheep territory and enrolls in college. If this search for independence wasn't enough, Toula ends up finding Ian.

Ian (John Corbett) is handsome, charming, and even works with kids as a high school teacher. He would be perfect...if he were Greek.

Toula tries to hide her romance from

The incessant hysterics are in part due to the undeniable resemblance this family has to all families. Though writer (and star) Nia Vardalos doesn't hesitate to lampoon

Greek traditions, the jokes provide a cross-cultural humor everyone can appreciate.

What makes Toula's off-the-wall family even more hilarious is its wacky lovability. From the loud, flamboyant gatherings to subtle quirks like plastic sofa covers, mom and dad, aunts and uncles, and each of the many cousins are the most inviting part of this film. This is a family you secretly want. Let's face it; this rampant intimacy in some way hits home for each and every audience member.

Now, there are some silly, downright slapstick moments. Are they funny? Without a doubt. The only problem is the borderline-sitcom humor makes a network television pick-up for an actual half-hour primetime sitcom inevitable. When



John Corbett and Nia Vardalos star in 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding'.

the family, but their network of eyes can see beyond the walls of the little Greek diner. Once word of Ian makes it to daddy, Toula gets fed up with the Greek traditions and prepares to leave her family for the man she loves. Ian, recognizing the importance of her strong family bond, won't let her just disappear. Instead, he goes to every extreme in order to become a member of her Greek family.

It may sound a tad bit cliché, but "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" is laugh-out-loud funny. As a matter of fact, once I started laughing, I had trouble stopping.

## "Barbershop"

by Steven Rea  
Knight Ridder Newspapers

A movie about giving and getting respect - and giving and getting a good haircut - "Barbershop" is a stage-y but likeable ensemble piece set on Chicago's south side, in a clip-and-shave storefront that's long been the cornerstone of the predominantly black neighborhood.

Directed by Tim Story (music videos and two low-budget indies) with much coming and going - and quite a bit of Spike Lee's 1983 short, "Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads," showing its influence - the film boasts a cast that's a lot better than the character-sketch screenplay deserves. Ice Cube is solid as the second-generation barber, Calvin Palmer, who has inherited the shop and its legacy - not to mention its debts-

from his late dad. Calvin struggles between his sense of responsibility to keep the business afloat and his dreams of bigger and better things, like running a recording studio out of his house.

Working the chairs at Calvin's - or sometimes just sitting in them shooting the breeze - are Eddie (Cedric the Entertainer), an old-timer with an opinion on everything; Jimmy (Sean Patrick Thomas, from "Save the Last Dance"), a college kid with imperious airs; Ricky (Michael Ealy), a twice-convicted felon trying to stay on the straight-and-narrow;

Isaac (Troy Garity), a Marshall Mathers-like white kid who walks the walk and talks the talk, but never has a



Ice Cube stars in the upcoming "Barbershop".

customer, and Terri (hip-hopper Eve), a tough cookie who puts up with all the guy talk, but can't abide the fact that somebody's always stealing her apple juice.

For comic relief, there are

the numbskull exploits of JD (Anthony Anderson) and Billy (Lahmard Tate), a couple of crooks who heist an ATM from a corner grocery and then spend the rest of the movie lugging it around trying to smash it open. Keith David, as Lester, the natty local loan shark (powder-blue is his hue, from head to toe), has an oily charisma and a key role as Calvin's would-be financial saviour - or expeditor of his doom.

The cameras in "Barbershop" never miss an opportunity to linger on the backsides of Eve and the other actresses, and the humor can likewise be booty-themed and blustery. But there are smarter scenes - and even a couple of quick-witted comic jabs at two sacred cows of the Civil Rights movement: Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King.

Although it deals with issues of racial prejudice, class, sexism and crime, "Barbershop" manages to keep things light and lively. That may make things sitcom-ish at times, but it's also part of the picture's charm.

### BARBERSHOP

Produced by Robert Teitel, George Tillman, Jr. and Mark Brown, directed by Tim Story, written by Brown, Don D. Scott and Marshall Todd, photography by Tom Priestley, music by Terence Blanchard, distributed by MGM Pictures.

Running time: 1 hour, 40 mins.  
Calvin Palmer/Ice Cube  
Eddie/Cedric the Entertainer  
Terri Jones/Eve  
Jimmy James/Sean Patrick Thomas  
Ricky Nash/Michael Ealy  
Parent's guide: PG-13 (profanity, sex, comic violence)

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