'The Deuce' Thinks the Most Boring Part of Porn is the F*cking

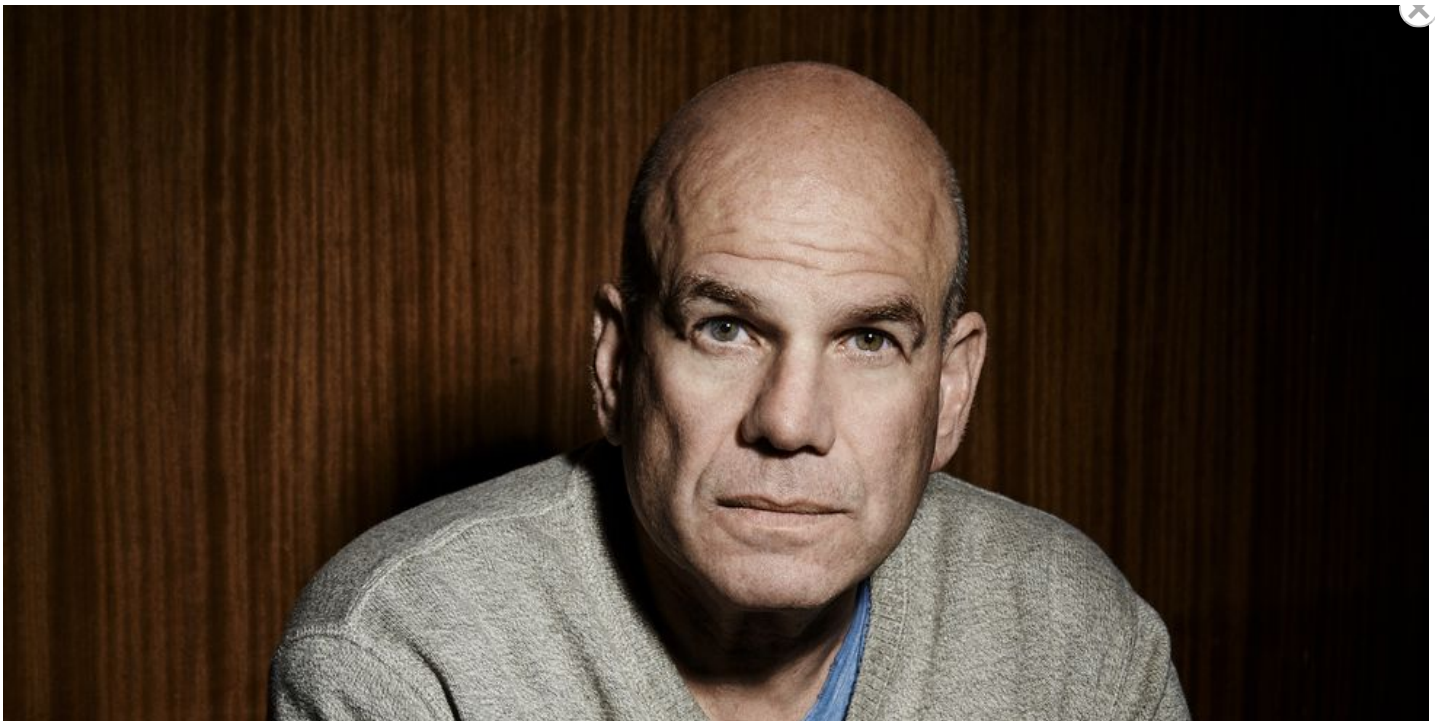
David Simon explains how a TV show about smut became a self-aware statement about sexuality, Hollywood, and American capitalism

BY JOSH ST. CLAIR OCT 1, 2019

In late 2017 after the first season of *The Deuce* wrapped, creator David Simon, the cast, and crew threw a party. They celebrated, hugged, said goodbye, and then parted ways. HBO had already renewed the series for a second season, and as the team left the party, Simon could only assume attitudes on-set reflected his

own confidence. They had successfully produced something that Simon had once thought impossible to artfully pull off: a porn show.

The Deuce premiered in September, about a month before the allegations against Harvey Weinstein went public, spurring the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. And four months later, in January, not long after the wrap party, a set of troubling allegations threatened to derail the show. Five women accused *Deuce* star and executive producer James Franco of sexually inappropriate and exploitative behavior (Franco has not been charged with any crime, and he vehemently denies several allegations.) None of the women had worked with Franco on *The Deuce*, and when Simon and HBO investigated, they found no complaints from department heads or co-stars; Franco had been professional. Still, Simon wanted to continue the conversation and survey everyone who had worked on the first season: How did we, as management, do?



David Simon
KRESTINE HAVEMANN

“And since we've asked the question, we had to be ready for the answer,” says Simon. Actress Emily Meade told Simon that management could do better.

Meade played Lori Madison, a late teenager who audiences first met stepping off a bus from Minnesota and into the waiting arms of a scouting Midtown pimp. As a street prostitute-turned-adult film actress, Lori (and by extension Meade) appeared in transactional sex scenes for much of the first season.

When Meade was given the opportunity to speak about if these scenes had been handled appropriately, she shared her disappointment. In an interview with HBO, Meade explained she wanted some kind of advocate for the sex scenes, someone on set who could act as liaison between herself and the director. Meade hadn’t felt comfortable doing everything she was asked. She wanted representation.

Throughout the first season, Simon had taken a show ostensibly about pornography and turned it into a story about labor—how women like Lori were exploited simply because they lacked collective voice, i.e., representation. Now, the labor of his own

production had made a similar claim, and the series' essential themes of sex and worker protection had somehow come to life on set.

"I didn't go into [the conversation] flippantly," says Simon. "I understood, this is a hard show to shoot. But that awareness doesn't inure you to problems. And we had problems."

At first, Simon had no interest in writing a show about porn. None. He had been pitched the idea by Mark Johnson when the two were working on the HBO series *Treme*. Johnson wanted Simon and writing partner George Pelecanos to meet "Steve," a Manhattan bartender who had run mob-backed nightclubs and "massage parlors" during the city's seedier '70s and '80s. Johnson thought Simon and Pelecanos might take the most interest in Steve's forays into the early adult entertainment industry, financing independent porn productions. But Simon and Pelecanos demurred. Porn, for them, was a punchline that was more half-hour romp than one-hour prestige drama. If only to get Johnson off their backs, they agreed to meet Steve in Tribeca.

Then they heard Steve's stories. The one about two former prostitutes who tried to unionize (unionize!) all the sex workers on Eighth Avenue, incensing all the pimps. The one about a street prostitute called "Thunder Thighs" who, after servicing a John, got pushed out of a Midtown window to her death. And the one about a police officer from the 14th Precinct who fell in love with a prostitute, killed her in a fit of rage, and then killed himself. The stories went on for two-and-a-half hours before Simon and Pelecanos excused themselves to "have a smoke" (neither smoke). "We walked around the block," Simon recalled, "and we just looked at each other and said, 'Shit, we're gonna have to write a porn show.'"

Simon with co-writer George Pelecanos.
HBO

Simon's stories often speak to broken national institutions and the people those institutions fail to protect—as well as how those institutions (legal and illegal) are financed. Whether it's *The Wire*, *Treme*, or *Show Me a Hero*, Simon's work has consistently fixated on the intersection of money and power.

"[*The Deuce*] is effectively a labor story," Simon reiterates. "It's about what happens when labor has no collective representation, and when the product itself is flesh, when the product itself *is* the labor."

Simon exposes this equation through Mead's character, Lori. Though she enters the game somewhat willingly, Lori's entrapment comes quickly; she is owned and abused from the very beginning. Lori explains her relationship with her pimp by saying: "Everything I do. Everywhere I go. Every penny I spend. Everything belongs to him. He is on me. He is in my head. He knows everything: what I wear, where I sleep, who I fuck. There is nothing about me that belongs to me; it all belongs to him."

Emily Meade as Lori Madison

HBO

For Simon, this ownership of labor (being a “pimp”) became a thematic obsession, as did what happens when labor lacks collective voice—outcomes he found epitomized in prostitution. Women get beat and cut and pushed out of windows to their deaths. They are unprotected. “It really highlights just how exacting and how deliberate and ruthless unencumbered capitalism can be,” Simon explains.

That labor logic tracks from prostitution to pornography, Lori’s second career, which contains the same equations: selling the laborer as the product.

But the tragedy of *The Deuce* is not simply this exchange. Nor is it the institutions—police, labor movements, volunteers—that failed to protect those partaking in this exchange. The tragedy also concerns the periphery actors, the people who were complicit in this transaction without being directly involved. That includes the man who launched a thousand sex stories: the bar and parlor owner, Steve (played by James Franco). “By standards of the world he occupied, [Steve] wasn't a bad guy,” says Simon. “He tried to get along with everybody. He didn't try to cheat people. At the same time, he was oblivious to the fact that he was effectively—from an economic standpoint—no different from any of the other pimps.”

Lori Madison (Emily Meade) alongside her pimp C.C. (Gary Carr)
HBO

While Simon’s team hadn’t *exploited* workers or played the parts of “pimps” themselves, the show's environment inadvertently disincentivized people from

speaking up.

"The producer's thought is: *we're here no matter what; all you have to do is come talk to us*," explains Simon. "But that's a presumption that's easy for us to make but hard for us to understand. I mean, we're the *bosses*. And actors and actresses, they're *working* and they *want* to work."

Simon quickly understood how actors might be reticent to voice concerns: if speaking up threatened their careers in the past, then they were conditioned to stay silent. But when Meade spoke up—risking unknown consequences—Simon fully saw the conundrum. "It was our job to listen, to not be defensive, to figure out in what ways we could implement what she was saying," says Simon. "And then after that, we had to hire the right person. And empower her."

"This was our chance to speak to how men and women have come to relate to each other in a post pornographic world."

That person was Alicia Rodis. Rodis came onto the series as an "intimacy coordinator," someone to work with actors during scenes requiring various levels of physical and emotional exposure. If films had stunt, fight, and dance choreography, why not also provide actors similar guidance and training with scenes of sexual activity? Of course, Rodis' role went beyond choreography. She was there to represent actors even when cameras weren't rolling, from a sound person mic-ing a half-naked actor on-set instead of in a private changing room or a last-minute role replacement during a sex scene. These were the everyday expediencies of production, which now become obviously inappropriate.

Simon says hiring Rodis, "formalized something foundational that should have been there all the time in the industry." He himself had never heard of the position before. Now, Simon says he can't fathom working without an intimacy coordinator. "It took

the dynamic away from us—which is essential, because we are in fact *management*—and returned it to labor," he says. "Suddenly there was a shop steward whose job was specifically to *protect workers*."

Worker protection now finds a place in Season 3's narrative, which chronicles characters' attempts to unionize (or, at least, disrupt) street prostitution and provide representation to pornography talent. With art/life crossovers in mind, it can be difficult now to watch the series without seeing the metafiction.

Take a scene from the current season Lori begins working with an agent for her adult films. Lori calls her agent during a shoot in California after the director asks for the male performer to penetrate her with a corncob. Her agent then calls the director; the scene is re-shot. The entire sequence plays out with equal parts serio-comedy and biting self-awareness.

HBO

Whether or not these moments are *intentionally* metafictional, it's clear that Simon and company weren't shying away from self and industry critique. They also weren't shying away from the sorts of scenes that, if first pitched after the Weinstein allegations, might have caused HBO never to air the series, instead calling the concept gratuitous or cliche.

But rather than road-blocking the show, the #MeToo conversations both altered and validated the work done on set. "This was our chance to speak to how men and women have come to relate to each other in a post-pornographic world. Women were walking in the door, knowing that they were the product, but, nonetheless, being utterly human—and having expectations like anybody who's utterly human," Simon says. "That's where the story becomes an interesting metaphor for our times."

The Deuce is not just a show about porn, but an example of how a production team responded to internal criticism. How they shut up, listened, and returned the power to the actors, the labor. And in doing so, Simon's team was able to tell the porn story they wanted to tell all along, one they didn't need metaphor or metafiction to convey. One that's all too real.