



Turning *Catch-22* — with its free-form narrative — into a linear, limited series could be seen as a mission of madness. But, in the view of George Clooney & Company, the senseless military mindset at the heart of Joseph Heller's novel was ripe for review. "If you had shown this in ancient Rome," Clooney says, "it would still resonate."

BY GRAHAM FLASHNER

A MORAL MISSION

IN 1961, JOSEPH HELLER PUBLISHED HIS CELEBRATED ANTI-WAR NOVEL, *CATCH-22*.

A cult favorite from the start, the book grew in stature as the Vietnam War dragged on. Hollywood came calling a decade later, when esteemed director Mike Nichols — fresh off *The Graduate* — mounted an ambitious film adaptation in 1970. But while Nichols's film contained scenes of surreal brilliance, he was unable to do justice to the book's sprawling, fractured narrative in a mere two hours. *Catch-22* grossed only \$24.6 million and was eclipsed by another anti-war satire, Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H*, released that same year.

It's no wonder that it's taken nearly fifty years for Hollywood to give Heller's opus a second chance — this time, as a six-hour limited series that premieres on Hulu May 17. George Clooney — executive producer, director and star — makes his first return to series television since *ER*, the NBC drama that launched his career two decades ago. His costars include Kyle Chandler (*Friday Night Lights*) and Christopher Abbott (*First Man*). His fellow exec producers are Grant Heslov, his partner in Smokehouse Pictures; Richard Brown and Steve Golin of Anonymous Content; and the series' writers, Luke Davies and David Michôd, who seized on the timeliness of the source material.

"There's an incredible dovetailing between the madness of Heller's world that David and I tried to translate to the TV screen, and the madness of the world we wake up to every morning," Davies says. "Today, it feels like we are all living in this shared anxiety of what can go wrong when particularly mad people are in charge."

Clooney sees an even wider relevance: "If you had shown this in ancient Rome, it would still resonate."

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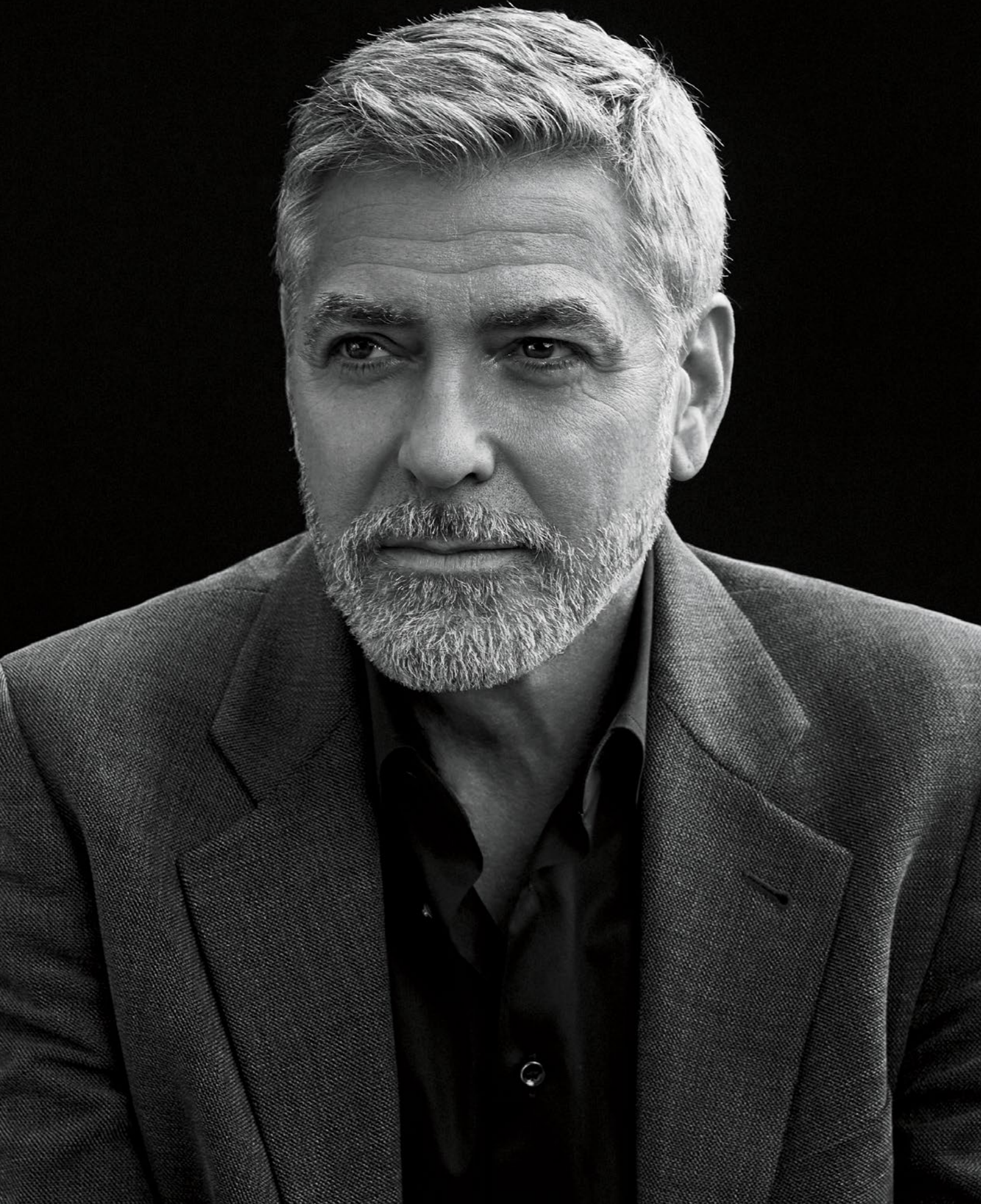
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☆ GEORGE CLOONEY, CHRISTOPHER ABBOTT and KYLE CHANDLER ☆





★ GEORGE CLOONEY ★



★ CHRISTOPHER ABBOTT ★











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THE PROJECT — A COPRODUCTION OF PARAMOUNT TELEVISION AND ANONYMOUS CONTENT — got its start with Brown, whose landmark HBO series *True Detective* helped break ground for storytelling in blocks of six or eight hours. Looking to replicate that series' "one writer, one director" approach, Brown met with Aussie screenwriters Davies (*Lion, Beautiful Boy*) and Michôd (*Animal Kingdom*). Davies pitched a fresh take on Heller's novel, which is considered one of the twentieth century's towering literary achievements.

"We thought, that'd be great," Brown recalls, "but it's been done as a movie and it didn't work. If Mike Nichols couldn't figure it out, we probably can't."

However, after rereading the book and recognizing its parallels to the current political climate, Brown decided it was worth a shot. Happily, Anonymous Content had a deal at Paramount, which had retained rights to the novel. The studio commissioned Davies and Michôd to develop a series format and a pilot script, with Michôd attached to direct.

The series didn't sell, but that didn't deter Davies; he'd become so enamored of the project that he kept writing on spec — much to the dismay of his agent, who urged him to stop until there was a buyer in place. "I felt really positive this would happen, one way or another," Davies recalls.

He powered through the next five episodes over a four-month period, then spent an intensive couple of months rewriting with Michôd. By May 2017, all six scripts were finished. But Michôd was also attached to direct Netflix's *The King*, and when that got a green light, he had to bow out of *Catch-22*.

The producers regrouped. Clooney and Heslov were at the top of their wish list for directors. The scripts were forwarded, and — to quote the opening line of Heller's novel — "It was love at first sight." With Clooney attached to star and direct, Hulu quickly signed on. The streamer had just successfully repurposed another literary classic — *The Handmaid's Tale* — as a series, and it jumped at the chance to follow suit with *Catch-22*.

In the view of Beatrice Springborn, Hulu's vice-president of content development, the strategy unites audiences of various ages. "We're looking to [adapt] books that not only have a classic, timely theme," she says, "but will speak to [you] whether you're sixteen or mid-forties."

BASED IN LARGE PART ON HELLER'S EXPERIENCES AS A B-25 BOMBARDIER IN WORLD WAR II, *Catch-22* tells the story of "Artful Dodger" Yossarian (played by Abbott), a young U.S. Air Force bombardier stationed in Italy near the end of the war. Upset by his repeated brushes with death, Yossarian is trying desperately to get out of the war, but he can't, because his commanding officer, Colonel Cathcart (Chandler), keeps increasing his squadron's bombing missions.

When Yossarian pleads with the squad's medical doctor, Doc Daneeka (played by Heslov) to ground him from flying, the doctor explains that — according to a maddening army rule known as *Catch-22* — Yossarian can ask to be grounded, but that request will not be granted unless he's considered crazy. Unfortunately, any pilot who doesn't want to fly dangerous combat missions must be sane. Therefore, he must continue flying.

"Heller wasn't just writing about war — he was writing about the absurdity of being confronted by systems and power structures that are impossible to defeat," Brown says.

Davies's initial challenge was convincing Paramount that *Catch-22* could be told in a linear fashion. Having first read the novel as so many do — as an impressionable seventeen-year-old — he was most struck by what he calls "the deep anti-war message." He adds: "War is a kind of madness that gets hijacked by the people least equipped to run wars, with young men being sent off like cannon fodder to fight these proxy situations on behalf of older men."

In early 2016, long before the series had sold — and while Michôd was off shooting the Netflix film *War Machine* with Brad Pitt — Davies spent nine months rearranging the story into a linear chronology that would track over

six episodes. He condensed characters and narrowed the point of view to one protagonist: Yossarian.

Extracting that linear plotline was painstaking. The novel's wildly free-form narrative begins in the middle and circles back to incidents in the past and the present through multiple points of view. "Heller followed a literary logic, not a cinematic narrative logic," Davies observes.

"Our mission statement was to try and retain the chaotic mix of comedy and darkness without making the chronological narrative so chaotic and fragmented," he explains. "So the audience has solid ground to stand on and experience the journey of these characters."

And they pulled it off, as Heslov notes: "Luke and David found [a way] to take all the craziness and use a stronger story framework to hang it on."

The first episode, which Heslov directed, brings a welcome coherence to a story long considered unfilmable. It begins in Santa Ana, California, at flight training school (a scene that appears some seventy pages into the novel) and then shifts to southern Italy, two months later.

In between terrifying interludes of aerial combat, the pilots bond at the sprawling U.S. air base in Sardinia while awaiting their next missions. What's striking is how young some of the actors look — barely old enough to drive, let alone fly in combat. In the original film, most of the pilots were played by actors in their mid-to-late thirties.

"Our instinct was, the young guys — which we called the Merry Band, Yossarian and his pals — should be mostly new faces," Brown says. "That's what they are in the context of the story — young guys going off to war. We thought the older guys, military brass — Kyle, George and Hugh Laurie [as Major de Coverley] — should be better known." Another well-known costar is Italian screen icon Giancarlo Giannini, who plays Marcello, a brothel owner in Rome.

The *Catch-22* ensemble also includes Pico Alexander as Clevinger, Kevin J. O'Connor as Lieutenant Colonel Korn, Daniel David Stewart as black marketeer Milo Minderbinder and Tessa Ferrer (Clooney's cousin) as Nurse Duckett.

BACK IN FEBRUARY, AT THE TELEVISION CRITICS ASSOCIATION MEETING IN PASADENA, CLOONEY, CHANDLER AND ABBOTT CHARMED A ROOMFUL OF PRESS, then adjourned to the nearby Ford Cottage, a stately two-bedroom suite built in 1920 and named for President Gerald Ford. Displaying a bonhomie forged by the four-and-a-half-month shoot, they bantered about the marvels of "Peak TV": "Four hundred and fifty-some scripted shows right now," Clooney mused at one point. "And we're not on any of them," Chandler cracked.

When *Catch-22* was first announced, Clooney was slotted to play the meatier role of Colonel Cathcart, but the demands of producing and directing persuaded him to opt for the less taxing role of parade-obsessed Colonel Scheisskopf. Clooney notes that the German name translates to "shithead."

"I had so many lines [as Cathcart], I realized I couldn't direct myself in a part this large," he says. "Even though it's a TV show, it was cross-boarded; we had all three directors working every day... It was too confusing and too complicated. I knew Scheisskopf was only in episodes one, five and six and was a much simpler character — and still a fun character to play."

Scheisskopf — "one of the great sublime mad men in literature," Davies says — gets an appropriately absurd introduction at the top of episode one. Sporting a salt-and-pepper mustache and a glint of madness, Clooney swings his arms and stomps his feet as he addresses a group of cowed privates, lamenting their inability to master basic parade formations. "Why is it so hard... to restrict the swing of your arms to a maximum seven-inch lateral pendulum arc with a maximum four-inch distance from wrist to thigh?" he bellows.

"He's out of his fucking mind," Clooney says affectionately of Scheisskopf.





"He starts at ninety-nine miles per hour and goes from there. He's sort of a fanatic in a way that has nothing to do with saving lives or winning the war. It's just about orders, vendetta and anger."

KYLE CHANDLER WAS SKEPTICAL OF TAKING ON CATHCART, WHOM MARTIN BALSAM PLAYED IN THE ORIGINAL FILM.

"Doing a remake of a very famous piece of material makes me wary," he admits. "But as soon as I started reading the scripts, I realized it was so well put together. I love that time period; I love the history of World War II. Once I started thinking about the possibilities I might be able to bring, I was in 100 percent."

In episode one, Cathcart literally announces his presence with a bang, firing a gun into the air to get the attention of a hangar full of distracted men. Then he reads them the riot act, announcing he's their new commander.

Clooney recalls exchanging high fives with Heslov behind the monitors when they first watched Chandler put his stamp on the character. "The minute he started, we knew everything was solved," Clooney says. "What Kyle did with Cathcart that wasn't in the film — there's times when he's a little dim, a little off. And the way Kyle plays him — his shirt's always out, his pants are hanging down low — he was a fun mess of a character."

If Cathcart and Scheisskopf represent different shades of madness, Yossarian is the anti-hero Everyman driven by self-preservation. The series begins with an indelible opening image — Yossarian emerges onto the airstrip naked and caked in blood, as if from a nightmare — a recurring motif that will be paid off by the finale.

Abbott, a rising young star who gained notice for starring in — and leaving — HBO's *Girls*, previously played a young soldier who goes AWOL in a Broadway revival of *The House of Blue Leaves*. He decided not to revisit Alan Arkin's portrayal of Yossarian in Nichols's *Catch-22* because, he says, "You don't want someone else's performance in your head; you want to make sure you can figure it out on your own."

With the luxury of six hours, Abbott can let the character's layers unravel slowly. "Yossarian never accepts what he has to do, but his is the journey of driving a man to the point of craziness, depletion, exhaustion — to the point of not even knowing who he is any more," Abbott says. "He's not just fighting the war, he's fighting the bureaucracy. These guys are flying missions when the war is essentially over. They're still being sent up to kill people — but to what end, what benefit?"

"Christopher," Brown says, "is the Yossarian I always imagined when I read the book."

HELLER'S CATCH-22 MAY BE SET MOSTLY IN ITALY, BUT PARAMOUNT HAD OTHER IDEAS IN MIND WHEN IT CAME TIME TO SCOUT LOCATIONS.

"Everyone has to work on a budget, and the budget usually includes exploring places that will give you a better tax rebate," Clooney recounts. "So Paramount had us fly to northern England to scout — in January. It was rain, wind, sleet — and green. We knew we wanted red and yellow tones, and hot and sandy... there was no chance we could do it [there]."

"We got off the plane," he says with a laugh, "stood there an hour, and said, 'Okay, we've scouted this.'"

Malta and the Canary Islands were also possibilities, but eventually, Brown says, "It was clear that Italy was where we were headed." The producers found an abandoned airport in the coastal Sardinian town of Olbia, where an authentic World War II air base was reconstructed. "We needed landing strips where we could take off and land old World War II planes," Brown says. "From a topographic point of view, it was ideal."

He credits line producer Barbara Hall with wrangling eight authentic World War II planes; two of them — B-25s from the U.S. — had been used in the Nichols film. The others came from various parts of Europe. "It's incredibly

complicated, getting planes made in the 1930s from wherever they are in the world to Sardinia," Brown notes. The majestic sight of the vintage warplanes appearing in the skies over Sardinia left both cast and crew in awe. "Even the silhouette of it, high up in the sky — I'd never seen that before," Abbott says.

Both Clooney and Heslov were adamant that filming should capture both the claustrophobia of the aircraft and their flimsy construction. "When you see them in real life, it feels like they're made out of tin foil — you don't feel safe in those things," Heslov says. "The back of the plane, where the tail gunner sits, is just a piece of canvas — it's not even closed. We wanted them to be creaky and scary."

"The plane was encased in glass. That in itself was eye-opening," Abbott says. "You're at the front of the plane in the nose, you can see all around you; it's obviously a scary, vulnerable place.... The only way in and out of that nose cone was through this narrow tunnel. I got the sense of how dangerous it was supposed to be."

Fortunately for the actors, the real-life dangers of flying were left to the imagination; for safety's sake, they never flew. Air-to-air sequences were shot with the planes' owners; interior plane scenes featuring the actors were done with green screen at Rome's Cinecittà Studios, where Fellini shot films like *La Dolce Vita* and *Satyricon*. All visual effects, including vivid depictions of planes being strafed by anti-aircraft fire, were also completed in Rome.

Clooney and Heslov were initially slated to direct all six episodes. "They have a shorthand, they've worked together a very long time, it's like they can read each other's minds," Brown says. "But during the process of getting ready, George and Grant felt it would be nice to bring a female perspective to a show about men."

Paramount recommended Ellen Kuras, a cinematographer and Oscar-nominated documentary filmmaker (*The Betrayal [Nerakhoon]*) who'd just directed episodes of Netflix's *The Umbrella Academy*.

Kuras, who directed the second and third episodes of *Catch-22* (she, Clooney and Heslov each directed two), says, "I didn't see it as a male story — I saw it as more of a universal story which happens to be populated by men. To me, it's a question of survival, and it poses a larger question about authority and the misuse of authority."

The directors all felt Nichols's shadow. Clooney says they incorporated stylistic bits such as long, single takes and "one shot of planes taking off — though we couldn't do what Mike did; he had forty planes to work with. That was a tip of the hat."

Clooney directed episodes four and six, which meant he handled the ending. In the Nichols film, a panoramic wide shot shows Yossarian — alone on a yellow dinghy in the Mediterranean — rowing to Sweden to join his buddy Orr, who has escaped the war. Clooney et al. had no intention of duplicating that iconic shot. As Davies says, "That was entirely a Mike Nichols invention, and I thought, we don't have the right to go down that path."

Clooney promises that the series concludes on a very different note that is "faithful to the intent of the book." Invoking Terry Gilliam's dystopic 1985 comedy, he says, "By the end — in a sort of *Brazil* way — you're not sure whether or not he's actually lost his mind.... Viewers can make up their own mind as to whether he escaped or not."

CATCH-22 MAY BE CLOONEY'S BALLYHOODED RETURN TO SERIES TV, BUT MAKING IT WAS MORE AKIN TO SHOOTING A LONG FEATURE FILM THAN AN EPISODIC SHOW.

Nevertheless, the actors all agree that the lines between film and episodic TV are practically nonexistent now when it comes to choosing projects. "I think all of us don't give a damn what the medium is that we work in; we just want to tell good stories," Clooney asserts.

"It's all about the material," Chandler adds. "Nowadays, you're so much more open to being able to create an honesty onscreen that you couldn't do before. It's wonderful." ©

