

With no catchy taglines or slogans, Showtime has muscled its way into the premium-cable elite. "A brand needs to be much deeper than a slogan," chairman David Nevins says. "It needs to be a marker of quality."

# BEYOND THE BRAND

BY GRAHAM FLASHNER



**Sixteen floors above the Wilshire corridor in West Los Angeles**, Showtime chairman and CEO David Nevins sits in a plush corner office lined with mementos, including a prop knife from the *Dexter* finale and ringside tickets to the Pacquiao-Mayweather fight, which Showtime presented on PPV. "People look to us to be adventurous," he says. "They look to us for the next new thing. Everything we make better be pushing the limits of the medium forward."

Every business has its longstanding rivalries. Coke and Pepsi. Marvel and DC. For its first thirty-odd years, Showtime Networks (now owned by CBS Corporation) ran a distant second to HBO. But over the past decade, Showtime has significantly closed the gap, thanks to a bold slate of ambitious, even risky programming.

"Their identity compared to an HBO is a little more pop, a little less literary, a little less nuance, and a little more blatant and bold and sexy," says *New York Times* TV critic James Poniewozik. "They're best at smart, pulp

entertainment. In comedy, they have a sub-brand of doing interesting things with damaged or self-destructive characters."

Showtime can skew male (*Ray Donovan*, *House of Lies*) and female (*The Chi*, *SMILF*). It's dabbled in thrillers (*Homeland*), black comedies (*Shameless*), adult dramas (*The Affair*), docu-series (*The Circus*) and animation (*Our Cartoon President*). It's taken viewers on journeys into worlds TV rarely explores, from hedge funds (*Billions*) to management consulting (*House of Lies*) and drug addiction (*Patrick Melrose*).

Fox 21 president Bert Salke calls Showtime "the thinking man's network," noting, "They make smart television. HBO tries to be more things to more people: comedy specials, more half-hours. Showtime is a bit more interested in spectacle. David's interested in storytellers."

Under Nevins's guidance for the past eight years, Showtime has muscled its way into the premium-cable elite while resisting easy brand categorization. Notably, the network has no catchy taglines or slogans. "A brand needs to be much deeper than a slogan," Nevins says. "It needs to be a marker of quality. In the last couple of years, to have a brand that can encompass *SMILF*, *Billions*

JOHN RUSCO

DAVID NEVINS





William H. Macy in *Shameless*



Liev Schreiber in *Ray Donovan*

and Sacha Baron Cohen [*Who Is America?*] — I think all those shows make sense together. They're all aspects of the same sensibility. They're timely, zeitgeist-y, daring — all feel like they're very singular."

Gary Levine, Showtime's president of programming, says, "There are no formulas. There's a certain subversiveness at work in our shows, but along with all of that, we want to make them entertaining."

People in the business of pitching and selling to Showtime say an undefined brand can be liberating.

"It's helped more than hurt them to not have a brand," says Dave Holstein, executive producer of *Kidding*, the Jim Carrey comedy that will return for a second season next year. "It's freeing, for me as a showrunner, to not have to live up to a one-word directive of what the mission is."

Ray *Donovan* showrunner David Hollander concurs: "There's no clear line as to what is a Showtime show, and that's to their benefit. This brand of Showtime, under David's leadership, is very much going to play to what David is interested in."

**Since taking the reins in 2010, Nevins has boosted subscribers by 29 percent.** According to Q1 '18 numbers provided by SNL Kagan, HBO leads all pay-cable networks with 37.2 million subs, followed by Showtime (25 million) and Starz (23.5 million). The conventional TV business model, however, continues to evolve at breakneck speed.

"People try to make it HBO vs. Netflix or Showtime, and the reality is, traditional linear TV is under attack and there's lots of opportunities for many companies," says Rich Greenfield, media analyst for BTIG. Nevertheless, in a world where Disney and Apple are joining Amazon, Netflix and Hulu in the ever-expanding streaming universe, Greenfield believes Showtime's biggest challenge moving forward will be ramping up its content. "Their present-day pace is not enough for the longer term," he says. "They're going to need bigger budgets and more shows."

Nevins points out that Showtime will have twelve shows this year, twice its output from just a couple of years ago. Much of the impetus comes from its streaming channel, which launched in 2015 and has made the network more direct-to-consumer, profoundly transforming its business model. "It's changed the way we market and the way we schedule," he says.

New programming, which used to roll out once a quarter, now rolls out every few weeks. Streaming has also lured cord-cutters to Showtime at bargain prices. Viewers who used to spend more than \$100 a month just to have cable and its premium channels can now stream Showtime on top of their Amazon or Hulu subscriptions for as little as \$9 a month.

"We're a club," Nevins says simply. "We need you to want to be a member, and buzz makes you want to be a member of that club."

Nothing was buzzier for the network this summer than *Who Is America?*, the undercover prank show hosted by provocateur Sacha Baron Cohen (*Borat*, *Da Ali G Show*). The series was kept under wraps for eighteen months; only a cryptic tweet by Cohen alerted viewers to its existence just days before its July premiere. Despite mixed reviews, the show was a force on social media, with Cohen's most incendiary bits going viral — like the segment that drove a Georgia state lawmaker to resign. Most important, its premiere drove the network's best single day of streaming sign-ups. "Streaming," Nevins says, "has unlocked a lot of value at Showtime."

**Launched by Viacom in 1976, Showtime used to be better known for first-run movies and soft-core erotica.** "When I came to Showtime, HBO had two once-in-a-lifetime hits at the same time," Levine says, referring to *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. He came aboard in 2000 to help put Showtime on the map for series. Under the

leadership of a new president, Bob Greenblatt, the channel made a serious bid for respectability with edgy shows like *Dexter*, *Weeds* and *Nurse Jackie*.

When Greenblatt jumped to NBC in 2010, then-CBS president Les Moonves tapped Nevins to replace him. (Nevins added the CEO mantle in 2016. In October of this year, he was named chairman of Showtime Networks as well as chief creative officer of CBS Corporation, with a portfolio that includes CBS Television, CBS All Access and the CW network.) A former exec at NBC and Fox, Nevins had turned producer, running Imagine Entertainment's TV division for eight years and developing prestige series like *24*, *Friday Night Lights* and *Arrested Development*, for which he won a producing Emmy in 2004.

"The tempo was very different when I got here," he says. "Showtime was a little modest in its ambition. I didn't want a culture that was comfortable being number two, in other people's shadow. I wanted to set the tone that we could and should be the boldest, most adventurous programmer in the business."

The first show that Nevins green-lit more than fulfilled on his vision. *Homeland* — a post-9/11 spy thriller starring Claire Danes as a CIA officer with bipolar disorder — became Showtime's first series to win an Emmy for Outstanding Drama. It also won a Peabody Award and fulfilled Nevins's desire to make shows that contribute to what he likes to call the "cultural conversation."

Based on the Israeli series *Prisoners of War*, *Homeland* was developed in the States by executive producers Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa (24) and produced by Fox 21. The series will conclude in 2019 with its eighth season. Bert Salke says its immediate success assured Hollywood that Showtime would continue to prosper after Greenblatt. "The handoff from Bob to David was much smoother than people might've guessed," Salke recalls. "*Homeland* allowed the town to feel there was not going to be a drop in quality at Showtime; there wasn't going to be a down period."

If there had been any doubts, Nevins's next offering erased them. *Shameless*, a family-centered black comedy, has become the network's most popular series, with 8 million weekly viewers. The show celebrated its hundredth episode this fall when it returned for season nine. It stars William H. Macy, a two-time Emmy winner (as actor-writer for the TNT film *Door to Door*) and an Oscar nominee for *Fargo*, along with Emmy Rossum (*Mystic*



River), who is leaving after the current season.

Originally a British series created by Paul Abbott and developed for the U.S. by über-showrunner John Wells (*ER*, *The West Wing*), *Shameless* spent seven years in development, passing through HBO and NBC before landing at Showtime. "I always believed the show would get made," Wells says. "There are tens of millions of families like the Gallaghers in America, and their story needed to be told."

"When it first came out, it was so dark, so hard to watch," Nevins says. "But it's precisely those things that made it so relatable. Take that darkness and make it human."

*Shameless* is anchored by Macy's turn as irascible patriarch Frank Gallagher — "the guy you love to hate," Macy says. By any standards, Gallagher is one of the most irresponsible parental figures ever conceived: a self-centered drunk barely able to care for himself, let alone his many children.

After carving out a niche as a down-on-his-luck loser in indie films like *The Cooler* and *Fargo*, Macy — inspired by wife Felicity Huffman's successful run in the ABC hit *Desperate Housewives* — decided to give series television a try. "Playing a scoundrel who's unlikeable — that's my cottage industry," he says.

Only Macy could get away with a scene in which Gallagher punches a little girl in the face when caught trying to steal her horse. "At its core, we're

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Jim Carrey in *Kidding*







trying to tell the truth about people who live on the fringe of society," says the actor, a five-time Emmy nominee for this role. Wells notes: "Bill has an extraordinary ability to play complex, damaged, sometimes unpleasant characters that he makes you feel empathy for."

Nevins has attracted A-list film actors and directors by positioning the network as an artist-friendly home, a place where everyone, from writers to stars, is involved with the network process at every level. "One of our big selling points is you get a kind of handcrafted attention," he says. "Most CEOs aren't as hands-on in the creative side as I am."

He's experienced enough to know when a show can support a radical narrative departure. Such was the case with the fifth season of *Ray Donovan*, which stars Liev Schreiber as an unorthodox L.A. "fixer." The normally testosterone-driven show turned its focus to Ray's wife, Abby (Paula Malcomson), using a non-linear timeline to depict her battle against breast cancer, which she eventually lost.

"In many ways, it polarized our audience for the year," says Hollander, the showrunner. "But I wouldn't have done it any other way. There wasn't one moment when Showtime balked. The bolder and braver, the more they seem to get behind it. They are deeply unafraid of risk." The show relocates to New York in season six.

Don Cheadle, who collected four Emmy nominations and a Golden Globe as the star of *House of Lies*, is equally blunt. "If a network exec isn't there to make it better, you don't want them around," he says. "David is the antithesis of that. And he isn't afraid to say when he doesn't understand something. You want your exec to be someone who's reflective of the audience."

**N**evins is also unafraid of investing in new talent. The network's future may lie with shows like *The Chi* and *SMILF*, created by first-time showrunners Lena Waithe and Frankie Shaw, respectively.

*The Chi*, a one-hour ensemble drama, is set in motion by the killing of an African-American teenager in a Southside Chicago neighborhood. Its appealing young African-American cast features Jason Mitchell (*Straight Outta Compton*), Jacob Latimore (*Collateral Beauty*) and Yolanda Ross (*How to Get Away with Murder*). The series continues a long-standing Showtime commitment to diversity, which began more than a decade ago with shows like *Queer As Folk* and *The L Word*.

Waithe had already broken ground as the second African-American woman to win a comedy-writing Emmy, for the Netflix show *Master of None*. She acts in that series as well and appeared this year in Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One*. On *The Chi*, she and the Showtime execs had to build mutual trust. "I was asking them to allow me to show black people in a light they'd never seen before," Waithe says. "They really cared about getting things right. Because it's a world about black people, they do have to trust me or my showrunner when we say, 'That's real.'"

Like Waithe, Shaw is a multi-hyphenate who acts, writes and directs. She sold the *SMILF* pilot on the strength of an award-winning short loosely based on her own life. Shaw plays Bridgette, a struggling twenty-

something single mom and aspiring actress in South Boston who's trying to navigate a social life while raising a toddler. She's the kind of character who, Nevins muses, "has a lot of strikes against her, but you know she will be okay in the end." Rosie O'Donnell (*A League of Their Own*) costars in a formidable turn as Bridgette's world-weary mother.

The half-hour comedy tackles topics like child abuse and social class, but Shaw says its real agenda is to spotlight how mothers have been displaced. "If the work of mothers were valued the way other professions are," she says, "we'd have more progress socially, economically and emotionally."

Shaw brought a distinctly female perspective that excited Showtime execs. She says they "encouraged me to 'make it the way you want to make it.'" *SMILF* has resonated with both audiences and critics. This past January, Shaw received Golden Globe nominations for acting and producing, and the show received a second-season order just six weeks after its premiere.

Another first-time showrunner, Dave Holstein, is no stranger to





Don Cheadle, Andrew Rannells and Regina Hall in *Black Monday*

MILLER MOBLEY/SHOWTIME

Showtime, having written on five seasons of *Weeds*. He now oversees *Kidding*, which brought Jim Carrey back to series television when it premiered in September. It's a tragi-comic look at the life of Jeff Pickles, a children's TV host dealing with a divorce and the death of his son. "Mr. Rogers loses his shit" is how Gary Levine describes it.

The ten-episode series, produced by Jason Bateman's Aggregate Films, reunites Carrey with *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* director Michel Gondry. Frank Langella (*Frost/Nixon*) and Catherine Keener (*Get Out*) costar. As that pedigree suggests, *Kidding* is a visually arresting mix of absurdist comedy and pathos. "We take a lot of left turns on this show," Holstein says. "Showtime has done an awesome job of letting us be weird, even when they don't quite understand what we're up to."

Holstein began his Showtime career at twenty-three, getting coffee for the *Weeds* writers. He and Carrey met while working as producers on *I'm Dying Up Here*, Showtime's stand-up comedy series set in the 1970s. When Holstein spec'd out the *Kidding* pilot, his intro to Pickles was, "Think Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show*." Not everyone was amused.

"People said, 'Jim will never do television,'" Holstein recalls. "Don't put his name on the first page of a TV spec script, because nobody will read it." It took two years for Carrey to commit. Speaking at a Television Critics' Association panel, Carrey explained his attraction to the role: "The idea of a character being hit by a freight train in life definitely called out to me."

**U**p next is the half-hour Wall Street comedy *Black Monday*, a Showtime/Sony Pictures coproduction created by David Caspe and Jordan Cahan. It stars Don Cheadle, two-time Tony nominee Andrew Rannells (*Girls*) and Regina Hall (*Girls Trip*). Cheadle also executive-produces with Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg. The show is a sardonic look at events leading to the stock market crash of October 19, 1987.

Cheadle plays the self-destructive head of a small investment firm

trying to stake its claim as a Wall Street heavy hitter. "It's the Bad News Bears trying to play with the big boys," he says. "They create the worst trade in the history of the stock market." Describing his character as a "lovable loser who's always punching up," Cheadle says he was most intrigued by "subject matter that hadn't been treated in this way in a series before."

While Showtime rarely ventures into genre territory, Nevins is excited about *Halo*, a space-based sci-fi series inspired by what he describes as "the most popular video-game franchise ever."

Anticipation is also high for:

- *Escape at Dannemora*, an eight-episode limited series based on a widely publicized prison break in upstate New York (see next page)
- *Shut Up and Dribble*, a three-part sports documentary series produced by NBA superstar LeBron James
- *City on a Hill*, a legal drama set in 1990s Boston, starring Kevin Bacon and executive-produced by Tom Fontana (*Homicide*)
- *The Loudest Voice in the Room*, a limited series starring Russell Crowe as Roger Ailes, the late chief of Fox News
- *Desus & Mero*, the network's first late-night talk show, starring comedians Desus Nice and The Kid Mero.

**S**howtime and HBO will doubtless continue to monitor each other, but John Wells, for one, thinks the battle for network supremacy has fundamentally changed.

"The 'horse race' competition between pay, broadcast, basic cable and internet content companies is retreating in the rear-view mirror," he says. "Viewers find shows they like everywhere, with very little distinction about where they receive them, making the 'prestige' notion of any outlet less important than it once was."

Gary Levine has his own take on the current landscape. "The world is a big place," he says. "It can handle a few different networks doing the best high-end programming. We're happy to be one of them."

The true story of a prison break draws top-flight talent to Showtime's *Escape at Dannemora*.

# BREAKING POINT

**I**n June 2015, convicted murderers **Richard Matt and David Sweat broke out of the Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York.**

They didn't do it alone. A prison seamstress, Joyce "Tillie" Mitchell, conspired with them. There were lurid reports of sex between Mitchell and both men; the *New York Post* dubbed her "Shawsank." The daring escape riveted the country, and the ensuing three-week manhunt terrorized the area, which lies near the Canadian border.

Police eventually killed Matt and recaptured Sweat, who returned to jail to serve out a life sentence. Mitchell is serving up to seven years for her part in the escape, which exposed widespread corruption and lapses in security at the antiquated prison.

The breakout is the subject of *Escape at Dannemora*, a limited series premiering November 18 on Showtime. Ben Stiller directed all eight episodes from a script by Michael Tolkin and Brett Johnson. Oscar winner Benicio Del Toro plays Matt, Golden Globe nominee Paul Dano is Sweat, and Emmy and Oscar winner Patricia Arquette is Mitchell. Executive-producing are Stiller, Johnson, Tolkin, Michael De Luca, Bryan Zurliff, Nicholas Weinstock and Bill Carraro.

**S**tiller was filming *Zoolander 2* in Italy when he first heard about the story. Tolkin and Johnson, who had met on the Showtime series *Ray Donovan*, began writing a script even as events were still unfolding. But on his return to the U.S., Stiller wasn't sure there was enough material. "They had written all they knew was true, but it wasn't a lot," he recalls. "I didn't think I had enough info. What interested me was the reality of how something like this happens."

The full story came together a year later, when the inspector general of New York released 170 pages of transcripts, including lengthy interrogations of Sweat and Mitchell. The documents painted a fascinating picture of how inmates and prison employees alike felt equally imprisoned at Clinton.

One of Hollywood's most bankable comedy stars, Stiller hardly seemed like an obvious choice to direct a prison drama, but the genre has long fascinated him. Even so, he admits, "I was nervous about not getting it right, because it was so outside my experience."

To ensure authenticity, Stiller was meticulous in his attention to detail. The governor of New York allowed the filmmakers to shoot exteriors around the Clinton prison, including its North Yard. They used a recently decommissioned prison in Pittsburgh for the main within-the-wall exteriors and tunnel sequences. The Clinton manholes that Sweat and Matt escaped through — which had been sealed since the breakout — were reopened for the shoot.

Only the Honor Block — the teeming cellblock area that served as the production's main set — was built on a stage, with an emphasis on its tight quarters and drab surroundings. "That same color green, the same tiny spaces every day..." Dano recalls. "Our work was there for us — rage, claustrophobia, complicated dynamics." In addition, real-life prison workers and officials who took part in the manhunt appear in the series, and a number of former prisoners serve as extras.

*Escape at Dannemora* is ultimately about human connection in a bleak, hostile environment that, Dano says, is "the last place you want to show your vulnerability." Richard Matt, nicknamed "Hacksaw" for the brutal murder that

landed him behind bars, is the skilled manipulator who seduces Sweat into doing the physical grunt work that makes the escape possible.

"He never met his mom, grew up in orphanages — the only way he could survive was through fear, cruelty and lies," Del Toro says of Matt. "Once I'm acting in front of the camera, it's not my job to judge him. The script lets the audience be the judge."

If Matt is, as Del Toro says, "the CEO of the escape plan," Sweat is his tireless subordinate. A skilled worker in the prison's tailor shop, Sweat masterminds the digging of tunnels and conceives the idea to hacksaw through a steam pipe, through which they eventually shimmy to freedom.

After taking a year off from acting to direct an indie film, *Wildlife*, Dano welcomed the script's physical demands. "The idea of working out, crawling through shit, taking a sledgehammer to a wall just felt interesting," he says. Dano also benefited from a sit-down with Sweat at the prison, which left an indelible impression. "It was hard to process," the actor recalls. "Here's this person sitting across from us who's behind bars and who seemed nice and funny and... he's killed somebody."

In prison, Matt and Sweat formed a symbiotic relationship. Matt, an amateur artist, taught Sweat how to draw. But once they were out, the power dynamic shifted. "Suddenly they're in an environment where Sweat is much more comfortable. He's a survivalist, able to take care of himself out in the woods," Stiller says. "Matt, very much out of his element, slowly started to devolve. The question of whether their friendship was based on mutual need or something else was a question that the actors were exploring all the time."

**T**he most complicated character in the series may be Mitchell, who slept with both men, smuggled tools to them concealed in frozen meat and even briefly plotted with them to kill her husband of twenty-one years. For Arquette, the chance to play a middle-aged woman who's unapologetically sexual — a woman who, as she notes, "doesn't have the type of body Hollywood thinks you need to have" — was a revelation.

"Tillie takes care of her needs before anything else," Arquette says. "She doesn't mind being a bitch, and I'm really not a bitch, so I thought it'd be exciting to explore that part of the human experience."

Mitchell's relationship with the killers satisfied different needs. "With Sweat, that's a huge crush; she can imagine what her life would be like with him," Arquette says. "With Matt, he's the only alpha male she's been with. She knows he's a killer and a scary guy, but he's also really exciting. He's much more like her; everything she's capable of doing, he's capable of worse." Ultimately, she says, "Once you cross a line with a prisoner, they have power over you. It becomes this slippery slope. Tillie's main flaw is wanting to feel alive, to feel love again."

For cast and crew, the eight-month shoot was a grueling and sobering introduction to the harsh realities of incarceration. "The reality of our prison system is, it's really screwed up," Stiller says. "It does not help rehabilitate people."

"My feeling," Del Toro adds, "is that a cage is not something any human being is designed to be in." —G.F.

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Go behind the scenes of emmy's cover shoot with Patricia Arquette, Benicio Del Toro and Paul Dano of *Escape at Dannemora*. Visit [TelevisionAcademy.com/cover](http://TelevisionAcademy.com/cover).



PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JOHN RUSSO**

STYLING FOR PATRICIA ARQUETTE BY **ANNABELLE HARRON**/THE WALL GROUP

HAIR BY **RICHARD COLLINS**/TRACEY MATTINGLY

MAKEUP BY **AMANDA CARROLL**/TRACEY MATTINGLY

DRESS BY **PETER PILOTTO**; EARRINGS BY **DEAN DAVIDSON**

**PATRICIA ARQUETTE**



GROOMING BY **KIM VERBECK**/THE WALL GROUP  
CLOTHING HIS OWN



**BENICIO DEL TORO**

STYLING BY **ASHLEY WESTON**/THE WALL GROUP  
GROOMING BY **SYLVIA VIAU-KISTLER**/CLOUTIER REMIX  
JACKET AND SHIRT BY **TOPMAN**



**PAUL DANO**