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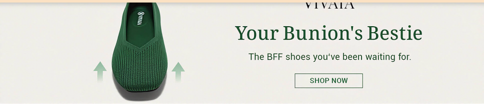

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Magazine

David Simon of ‘The Wire’ finds drama in public housing. But will the public tune in?

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By Carlo Rotella

‘The Wire’ creator’s next move

David Simon takes on a public-housing controversy in his next drama.

“I didn’t stumble out of journalism 20 years ago to be in the entertainment industry, but I am,” said David Simon.

He was sitting on a stool at the basement bar of the Ukrainian Youth Center in Yonkers, N.Y. It was the kind of place where small-time politicos and the reporters who cover them do business: two-tone tile floor, drop ceiling, dim lighting, blond-wood bar slightly sticky to the touch.

Upstairs, a film crew was setting up to shoot a scene for Simon’s new miniseries, “Show Me a Hero,” a six-part drama about the struggle over public housing and desegregation in Yonkers in the 1980s and 1990s. “Show Me a Hero,” which debuts on HBO on Aug. 16, interweaves two main narrative threads. In one, the political process chews up and spits out the young mayor, Nick Wasicsko. In the other, black and Hispanic residents of public housing and white homeowners live the consequences of decisions made by elected officials and government bureaucrats.

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"Show Me a Hero" tells a story that may resonate beyond its immediate subject, but it really is about 200 units of scattered-site low-income housing in Yonkers. There are no chases, no gunfights, no "Game of Thrones"-style "sexposition," and no characters like Omar Little, a refugee from the western genre who robbed drug dealers and lived by a lone-wolf code that made him everybody's favorite on "The Wire" — while he lasted, anyway. Simon said that he would have dispensed entirely with actors if he had access to found footage of everything that happens in "Show Me a Hero." The most conventionally exciting scenes of that documentary would have been contentious public hearings that would look right at home on community-access cable.

[*After 'The Wire' ended, actress Sonja Sohn couldn't leave Baltimore's troubled streets behind*]

Political dysfunction is the main theme. "The battle in Yonkers was to see if anybody could govern," said Simon, and one of its casualties was Wasicsko, who committed suicide in 1993. "The only two currencies that have any traction in our incredibly calcified political culture are fear and money," Simon said. Because "Congress crippled itself" during the 13 years since he optioned the nonfiction book by the former New York Times reporter Lisa Belkin on which "Show Me a Hero" is based, "this story has become directly allegorical to our national political paralysis. Nobody wants to tell the voters what they don't want to hear, that they can't have a whole loaf. We hear a lot of talk about liberty and freedom, but not about responsibility."

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Simon thinks of "Show Me a Hero" as the latest installment in the larger project he has pursued over the course of his career, in partnership with Ed Burns, Bill Zorzi, Eric Overmyer and other collaborators. He said, "My idea is if you went back when I'm done and looked at all these pieces" — so far, "Homicide: Life on the Street," "The Corner," "The Wire," "Generation Kill" and "Treme" — "you'd have a really good sense of what this society was about, what the stakes were and what the processes were that worked and didn't. This is how we waged war. This is why our cities were violent. This is what we were capable of at the turn of the century — which is why 'Treme' is a really important piece of this. Katrina showed us what we were and weren't capable of."

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For two decades, Simon has been writing stories for TV about people who don't transcend the economic, social and political systems and institutions that shape their lives. That makes him a rarity in Hollywood. What you typically see on the screen are heroes rising above circumstances through force of will, moral virtue, superpowers or some other kind of idealized potency. But Simon's stories make such dramas, even at their most high-minded, look like wishful melodrama or, as he puts it, "anti-drama." His characters live within the structural limits of their world, so that their stories become an examination, often a critique, of that world.

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When they test the limits, they find themselves outmatched — like Sgt. Ellis Carver in season four of "The Wire," who pounds the steering wheel of his car in a frustrated rage after delivering a smart, appealing street kid named Randy to a group home that can only harden or destroy him. It's Carver's fault that Randy has been outed as a snitch, leading to the firebombing of his foster mother’s home while it was under police protection, but there’s no heroic way for the sergeant to put it right; the group home is the best he can offer. Belkin took her book’s title from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s line, “Show me a hero and I’ll write you a tragedy.” It could serve as Simon’s dramatic credo.

“I’m interested in what actually happened in Yonkers, and I don’t want to cannibalize it to make it seem like more of a meal than it is,” said Simon. “It’s much harder to tell these kinds of stories” in a way a lot of people will want to watch; it would be easier to tell “a clearer story that’s more provocative and more gratifying, even more entertaining.” One foil he sometimes cites for “Show Me a Hero” is “The West Wing,” an “aspirational” show populated by impossibly clever White House operatives whose intrigues bore little resemblance to how political sausage gets made. Frequently repeating “no dragons, no zombies,” Simon also contrasts “Show Me a Hero” with such formulaic genre exercises as HBO’s “Game of Thrones,” which renders the contest for power as swords-and-sorcery pulp, and AMC’s “The Walking Dead,” a different sort of political fantasy in which government has been abolished and a citizen’s relationship to others consists mostly of aiming for the head.

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"At a certain point I'm trapped by my past and my training, which is not in fiction or TV," said Simon, 55, who spent 12 years at the Baltimore Sun. (He lives in Baltimore and is married to crime novelist Laura Lippman.) "I know that you have to want to follow the characters," he said, "but at the end of the day if all we've arrived at is to entertain you, then f--- us."

That's not an attitude calculated to endear a writer to most TV executives. Simon has a long-standing relationship with HBO, which is known for taking chances in the name of quality, but only last year he was threatening to stop writing for TV because the network had pulled the plug on "Treme" after ordering an abbreviated fourth season. He expresses continuing astonishment that HBO has seen fit to give him six hours of air time to tell a story about housing policy, and assembled the Hollywood talent to help him tell it: the director Paul Haggis, an Oscar winner; the rising star Oscar Isaac; seasoned pros such as Catherine Keener, Winona Ryder and Alfred Molina. Bill Zorzi, Simon's co-writer on "Show Me a Hero," who also worked on "The Wire" and at the Sun, shares his surprise. "I don't want to perform unnatural acts on HBO," says Zorzi, "but letting us make this speaks to what they're about. My wife, Patty, was like, 'Come on, they're actually going to let you *do* this?' "

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When Simon went back upstairs at the Ukrainian Youth Center, Haggis was shooting an election-night scene in which Angelo Martinelli, the six-term mayor, congratulates the 28-year-old Wasicsko on having defeated him. Wasicsko has presented himself to voters as more energetically opposed than the incumbent to a court-mandated plan to build scattered-site public housing in all-white areas of Yonkers, a position he will soon find himself unable to sustain. The city has exhausted plausible legal options and will have to comply, inspiring enraged constituents to turn on their new mayor. Repeated sequences of angry crowds shouting down gavel-pounding officials bring the thread of scenes from the lives of ordinary citizens together with the backroom, courtroom and campaign scenes that tell the story of Wasicsko's rise and fall.

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Jim Belushi, playing Martinelli, moved through knots of reporters and jubilant campaign workers to reach Wasicsko, played by Isaac, who has earned strong notices for his work in "Inside Llewyn Davis" and "A Most Violent Year" and will star in upcoming "Star Wars" and X-Men movies. Martinelli said to his successor, "The voters have lifted a tremendous burden off my shoulders and placed it on yours." Haggis, who wrote and directed "Crash" (2004), had choreographed extras to mill around and partially block the camera, boxing in the two politicians and giving the scene a convincingly imperfect look. Period-evoking party music, Dire Straits' "Walk of Life," would be added later. Belushi delivered his line with a slightly different emphasis in each take: "The *voters* have ..." "... a tre*men*dous burden ..." "... off *my* shoulders. ..."

Simon huddled with Zorzi, considering a suggestion to substitute “put” for “placed” because it flowed a bit better. Simon, who is big and hairless and looks from some angles like Homer Simpson’s much smarter brother, loomed over the shorter, bearded Zorzi as they murmured, heads almost touching. They decided that, since reliable reporting indicated that the real Martinelli had said “placed,” they had an obligation to stick with it.

Over time, Simon's work has grown quieter and less concerned with "action" in the conventional sense as it has moved away from familiar genre formulas. He started out telling crime stories, and "Generation Kill" is a war story, albeit a revisionist one, but the most recent work, both fiction ("Treme") and nonfiction ("Show Me a Hero"), is harder to categorize. In that sense, Simon is like a novelist who made his entrance on the scene writing prize-winning genre fiction but is moving closer to the realist tradition, which shifts his work into the amorphous default category of literary fiction.

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“There’s viewers who probably say, ‘He got more boring; there’s less action,’ ” says Simon. “Maybe I’m just older, or I’ve had more practice, but I feel like I’m getting better at what I do and I can take more risks. It’s not how much plot can we give you, it’s that we’re chasing something a little different.”

The most common complaint about "Treme" was that the show obsessed over getting details about New Orleans music and food right at the expense of advancing an engaging story. If viewers and critics have a problem with "Show Me a Hero," it will probably follow similar lines: *Sure, that's how housing policy affected people's lives, but shouldn't somebody get naked or get killed, or both at once?*

“There’s a part of me that would say, bluntly, that we’re entertaining ourselves to death,” says Simon. “There are so many comic-book characters and comic-book notions of human endeavor coming at us. Is anybody attending to anything that’s real?” All of his work is rooted in reporting, but the three miniseries, “The Corner” and “Generation Kill” and “Show Me a Hero,” all adapted from nonfiction books, are especially close to journalism in method and spirit. They don’t owe much to the documentary tradition, however. Rather, they’re the TV equivalent of literary nonfiction, employing the forms and methods of fiction to tell a deeply reported true story.

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“David is developing an M.O. for the rules you make in depicting nonfiction characters,” says Kary Antholis, president of HBO’s miniseries division. “That’s his huge contribution to the genre of nonfiction miniseries: to apply journalistic skills and standards and hew closely to the truth in the dramatization, to multisource things, to give people in controversial situations a chance to explain themselves.” Antholis is talking up the distinctive achievements of one of his network’s prestige magnets, but it’s still surprising to hear a TV executive take the hard line against invention in nonfiction: “You’ve got to work with the facts,” he says. “You’ve got to work with the quotes you’ve got. You can’t make up your own.”

That’s overstating the case, because of course Simon freely admits to making things up all the time, including dialogue. Producing good nonfiction TV entails striking a balance between the imperative to determine what actually happened and the imperative to tell a story that works on the screen. Zorzi says: “I realize we have to do things to tell a story, like smush a lot of different meetings together into one, but I am very cautious about it because I still have the reporter’s hangover. David never has any trouble jumping out of the plane and pulling the cord.”

Simon took a buyout from the Sun in 1995. Zorzi, a former political reporter who says he has “known David since he had hair,” was not offered one, but Simon eventually persuaded him to leave the paper to work on “Show Me a Hero.” Zorzi can make things up — he cobbled together Mayor Tommy Carcetti on “The Wire” from elements of various Maryland politicians — but he prefers to rely as much as possible on verifiable facts. He went to Yonkers in 2002 and re-reported Belkin’s well-reported book, then drafted the six episodes of the miniseries. Then, as he describes the process with a newsroom veteran’s well-practiced sarcasm, he handed them on to “the genius” (Simon was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2010) to be “Simonized.”

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Simon’s role was to turn good reporting into good TV. “He understands dramatic arcs, what has to happen where,” says Zorzi. Simon pushed to drastically simplify the story by ignoring related battles over additional housing units and the schools. Zorzi’s role was to push back. He says, “Some of the s--- David would write, I’d say, ‘Come on, man, what the f---?’ ” (Both men curse with gusto. A lecture Zorzi received from an editor at the Sun provided the basis for a scene in “The Wire” in which an officious boss asks a disbelieving newspaperman to curb his tongue to help establish “a collegial atmosphere.”) As Simon describes their partnership: “Bill’s protecting the reporting, and I’m synthesizing things: ‘Bill, we can’t explain why they redistricted. At some point the story has to go on a diet so it can get up and walk.’ ”

Zorzi both concedes the point to Simon and lumps him with other TV types intent on abusing the truth in the name of entertainment when he says, “They’re trying their best not to make it as boring as I want to make it.”

When Simon and Zorzi say "boring," they really mean "serious." They're not being self-deprecating; they're paying themselves a compliment. Similarly, when Simon grouses that "nobody watched 'The Wire,' " as he frequently does, he's really staking a claim for his work as having both popular and elite appeal — popular enough, but not too popular. "The Wire" averaged more than 4 million viewers in its final season; he points out that these numbers, though modest for TV, would produce runaway bestsellers if translated into book sales. While he doesn't crank out hits, "Homicide" did run for seven seasons on NBC and his HBO shows are marginally viable in the premium-cable marketplace, and yet his work is also taken seriously by serious people.

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President Obama invited Simon for a one-on-one chat in March as part of a bipartisan summit at the White House on reducing incarceration. The Serious Person in Chief pronounced himself "a huge fan of 'The Wire,' " which he described as "one of the greatest, not just television shows, but pieces of art in the last couple of decades"; Simon explained why stepped-up arrest rates could never eliminate the street-corner drug trade; and soon they were trading riffs on deindustrialization and the unemployment rate among black males. Each man took the lead in turn while the other said, "Right ... right" and nodded knowingly.

“I really believe David Simon has a comprehensive understanding of the way the world works,” says the distinguished sociologist William Julius Wilson, who has taught a course on “The Wire” at Harvard University. “ ‘The Wire’ is a brilliant depiction of systemic urban inequality that makes these complex processes accessible to a broader audience without sacrificing nuance, and it’s far more riveting than sociological depictions.” Wilson is just one of many academics drawn by Simon’s sophisticated merger of story and critique, and by the ideas animating his body of work. Each show takes a fresh angle in examining the decline and fall of the welfare state built by New Deal liberals: the economic desolation and political abandonment of inner cities in a suburbanized and globalizing age, divisively unpopular military adventures abroad, the discrediting of the principle that government can solve problems, the fracturing of the uneasy Democratic alliance between white ethnics and African Americans. As Simon sums it up, “Enough people got enough that they felt they could walk away from the next person in line.”

Prospective projects would fill in additional pieces of the grand narrative. Simon has optioned Taylor Branch's three-volume history of the civil rights movement, intending to emphasize Martin Luther King Jr.'s travails in Northern cities. "They come over the bridge in Selma, and it's roll credits," says Simon, referring to standard uplifting accounts of the civil rights movement, "but that's when the interesting part *begins*."

Simon’s run on HBO has offered him a chance to make what he calls “mid-list” TV drama: absolved of the obligation to try to become a hit, allowed to be serious enough to earn intellectual prestige. “I was always a mid-list author,” he says, speaking of his nonfiction books, “Homicide” and “The Corner.” “And I lived on the metro desk as a reporter, not at the White House on page A1. If you want to be on A1, you don’t hang around with Bubbles,” the heroin addict who is one of the moral centers of “The Wire.” “TV never had the mid-list” until HBO and its competitors came along. “I just happened to come in at a time when the TV audience fractured and the window opened.”

He regularly makes dark predictions that the window might be closing again. “ ‘Homicide’ struggled with a 14 or 15 share” on broadcast TV in the 1990s, he notes, “but now that would be an epic hit.” He believes that a basic-cable share of 15 for “The Walking Dead” “might be the beginning of the end,” an indicator that zombies and dragons are poised to overwhelm reporting and realism.

For now, though, “Show Me a Hero” adds another chapter to the story of our time that Simon wants to tell. “However long this run lasts,” he says, “I can stand back at the end and say: ‘These were our problems. This is how we lived.’ ”

Carlo Rotella is the director of American studies at Boston College. His most recent book is "Playing in Time: Essays, Profiles, and Other True Stories." To comment on this story,e-mail wpmagazine@washpost.com or visit washingtonpost.com/magazine.

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