

■ writing/directing

LIFE AFTER THE ENDING

**SOPRANOS CREATOR DAVID CHASE
SAYS GOODBYE TO THE MEDIUM-AND
THE SHOW-THAT MADE HIM FAMOUS**

by Jason Hollander / GAL '07

Are you over it? It's been nearly 16 months since your TV cut to black—with Meadow hustling toward the diner and Tony chomping on Jersey's best onion rings. And then there was silence, and an obligatory roll of credits. And we were left, mouths agape, to sit with existential thoughts on the concept of closure and the ticking seconds of our lives—a mood more typically inspired by Shakespearean drama than cable television. Then again, as *New Yorker* editor David Remnick once wrote, "*The Sopranos* defied Aristotelian conventions."

So, really, are you over it? It's okay if you're not.

But David Chase (WSC '68), creator and executive producer of HBO's eight-year-long, 86-episode cultural phenomenon, has moved on. At the ripe age of 63, he just signed his first contract to write, direct, and produce a feature film—fulfilling the life-long dream that started in the same New Jersey town, North Caldwell, that Tony calls home (assuming he's still alive, that is). Chase wrote a few screenplays in the 1980s that

were never made, but his current star power helped ink a deal last spring with Paramount CEO Brad Grey, a former *Sopranos* co-executive producer. While the journey to the big screen may have taken longer than Chase hoped, he'll have unusual control for a first-time writer/director. "I'm not complaining," he says. "Since I've got some heat off the show, people are more interested in what I have to say."

Die-hard *Sopranos* fans should keep their expectations in check,

Chase never faked any affinity for TV, saying he finds it "divisive" and "isolating." He admits: "I did it for the money."

though; there will be no goons named Paulie Walnuts or Big Pussy. Chase is deciding between two ideas for his film: one set in the Jersey suburbs familiar to his audiences, the other a departure he's sure would "surprise" them. In either case, the goal remains to entertain, most likely by way of his penchant for things "mysterious, murky, sad, and strange."

Astute observers might even recognize some familiar preoccupations. "I think there will be elements that will seem similar because it's the same person," Chase explains. "I mean, every time you pick up a book, you know, Kurt Vonnegut is Kurt Vonnegut."

One mainstay throughout Chase's more than 30-year television career has been a prolificacy enviable to many writers. His first major gig was penning *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, followed by writing and producing jobs on *The Rockford Files*, *Almost Grown*, *I'll Fly Away*, and *Northern Exposure*. That body of work, along with *The Sopranos*, garnered seven Emmys, a Golden Globe, and two Peabodys, as well as awards from the writers, directors, and producers guilds of America. The bang-it-out, boot-camp pace of network TV forced Chase to stay focused and, more important, has kept the concept of being creatively "blocked" out of his vocabulary. "It's not something that—and I'm knocking wood now—I've ever thought about," he says. "You just had to get the stuff out there because they were waiting to shoot it. But I do have doubts all the time."

As good as television has been to him, Chase never faked any

affinity for the medium, telling *The New York Times* in 2004 that he finds American TV consumption "divisive" and "isolating," and his reason for working in it unabashedly simple: "I did it for the money." Still, he did pour his heart into some shows and went out with a series as critically acclaimed as any in TV history. Even if his cinematic career

DAVID CHASE SITS IN DR. MELFI'S
HOT SEAT ON *THE SOPRANOS* SET.



someday eclipses his small-screen feats, *The Sopranos* will easily endure as “one of the greatest experiences” of Chase’s life. And while he’s been asked just about every question possible, he’s saddened to think of the time when people might no longer be interested in the show. “If I ever get to be 85,” he laughs, “I’m gonna be talking about [*The Sopranos*] every minute.”

Luckily, the hullabaloo caused by that “ambiguous” ending should keep others talking, and studying it, for years to come. On that farewell night of June 10, 2007, Web chat rooms teemed with those enraged, enchanted, or just confused. Morning news shows dissected the final shots. TV journalists constructed elaborate theories based on bit players from old episodes, a “guy who knows a guy who was on the set,” and the glaze in Tony’s eyes at the very end. As for Chase, who wrote the last episode himself, the answers are all right there. “That was the proper ending for that story,” he says. “I had no interest in seeing Tony Soprano go to prison. It would’ve been easy as hell to have him shot. Plenty of people could’ve killed him, and maybe somebody did. We don’t know.”

Absence of the absolute is part of coming to grips with a life that defies dichotomy—“chiasmic unity,” as Nietzsche called it—and something that Tony, and audiences, grappled with throughout the series. Can a man be both a loving father and stone-faced killer in the same afternoon? Can he live an unusually vibrant life under the suffocating shadow of impending doom? This intertwining makes the ending “proper,” as Chase insists, because it’s a universal experience. “Not to be too philosophical, but at any minute it’s gonna happen to all of us,” he says. “That’s the story of *The Sopranos*. It’s about life and death, you know?” ■

A Voice Made for TV

A FILM DIRECTOR TURNS A FAVORITE RADIO SHOW INTO COMPELLING TELEVISION

by Eryn Loeb / GSAS '07

If radio host Ira Glass now has a distinctive face to match his distinctive voice, he may want to thank (or curse) Christopher Wilcha (CAS '93), the documentary film director who helped bring Glass's popular Chicago Public Radio show, *This American Life*, to television. Debuting on Showtime in 2007, the series marries intimate storytelling with grand shots in widescreen, and avoids that familiar shaky style of so many documentaries and reality shows. The result feels more like individual short films, which



TOP: JOHN SMITH, SHOOTING FIRE-CRACKERS INTO THE NIGHT SKY, IS ONE OF SEVERAL PEOPLE WITH THAT NAME PROFILED IN SEASON TWO'S FINALE. **BOTTOM:** IN THE EPISODE "ESCAPE," PHILADELPHIA TEENS MOUNT UP TO ATTRACT GIRLS AND FLEE THE CONFINES OF THEIR FAMILIES.

PHOTOS © THIS AMERICAN LIFE

have gained favorable reviews, along with eight Emmy nominations in two seasons—including two for best director.

Success for the small screen's *This American Life* was anything but a given. In 2005 when Showtime asked Wilcha to direct the pilot, he knew to expect some difficulty in translating the acclaimed 10-year-old radio show into a visual medium because a series of earlier attempts by Glass and his colleagues had ended in failure. The philosophy graduate was then developing documentaries (and, to pay the bills, doing promotional spots) for MTV and PBS, having already won awards for his debut film, *The Target Shoots First*, which followed his experience working at a mail order music club. "There was always the risk that this thing was never going to see the light of day, that I would literally have this as a DVD coaster on my coffee table," he says.

Part of the challenge was that the

radio show often featured people talking about past events, which painted an interesting verbal picture. But this approach doesn't yield particularly compelling visuals, and so Glass and Wilcha decided to tell stories that unfolded in real time, in front of the camera. Thus, each episode, hosted by the inimitable Glass in a style Wilcha describes as "cliché-averse" and "obsessed with surprise," presents stories that relate to a central theme, such as "Underdogs" or "Scenes From a Marriage." "As distinctive as the radio show is, we also wanted the visual version of it to have that kind of deliberateness and discipline and rigor," Wilcha explains.

One standout episode from the first season follows a Utah artist who stages live, elaborate religious tableaux, which he then photographs and paints. Already a bit unusual, the story further unfolds to reveal that the man standing in for Jesus is a Marxist and

graduate student whose longtime girlfriend, a lapsed Mormon, has complicated feelings about his starring role in the crucifixion.

desk positioned on the side of a road, in front of nuclear cooling towers, and atop the Utah salt flats—the second shed some of that quirkiness as

“There’s virtue in just looking and listening,” rather than relying on the radio convention of voice-over narration.

The second season's hour-long finale, titled "John Smith," told the story of a single life through different men who happen to share the same name, and who range in age from mere weeks to 79 years. In a style typical of the audio-only version of *This American Life*, these narratives touch on the connections and complications found in relationships, family, faith, and art.

While the first season playfully embraced some TV clichés—sitting its host behind a classic-looking news

it has grown into its own. "We felt a little less of a need for the host moments to be conceptually distracting," Wilcha explains, adding that the team also discovered that "there's virtue in just looking and watching and listening" rather than relying so much on the radio convention of voice-over narration. "I still sometimes cannot get over the immediacy and intimacy of radio," Wilcha admits. "But I love the things that light can do, and the images you can make, the way that you can tell a story just using images and sound." ■

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY



■ classical music

MIDORI IN MOTION

A FORMER CHILD PRODIGY EXPANDS HER ROLES AS PERFORMER, TEACHER, AMBASSADOR, AND PHILANTHROPIST

by Janet Allon

On stage at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater in May, the violinist Midori Goto (GAL'00,'05), known simply by her first name, which means "green" in Japanese, exerts

a tiny but commanding presence. As she pitches and keens about in her long black dress with flecks of silver, it's hard to look elsewhere. Her face is a mask of intensity, and her violin seems an extension of her, each note as sure and expressive

as if it were her own voice.

At 36, the world-famous violinist is celebrating her 25th-anniversary year in a concert career that began when she debuted at age 11 as a surprise soloist with the New York Philharmon-

MIDORI HAS RETURNED TO NEW YORK CITY, HER FORMER HOME, FOR SEVERAL CONCERTS DURING HER SILVER-ANNIVERSARY PERFORMANCE YEAR.

ic, under the direction of Zubin Mehta. For this milestone, she has scheduled no fewer than 90 performances around the world, making six trips to Europe and three to Asia, with three appearances in New York as part of Lincoln Center's Great Performers series. With music as both her message and her medium, Midori broadcasts widely. In addition to this rigorous schedule, she was named a Messenger of Peace for the United Nations in 2007, joining the likes of Yo-Yo Ma, Jane Goodall, and Elie Wiesel. Founder of three philanthropic organizations, she also recently became chair of the strings department at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music, where she often performs with her students. From classrooms to concert halls, audiences seldom walk away from Midori without being exposed to something new.

The May concert, which felt like a homecoming—she lived in New York for 24 years until recently decamping to California—is in some ways typical of Midori's eclectic programming, juxtaposing two lesser-known composers who flourished in the past century, Japan's Toru Takemitsu and Russia's Alfred Schnittke, with two of their widely known influences, Johann Sebastian Bach and Maurice Ravel. Her selections were devilishly complex, a challenge to both her fellow musicians and to the audience—and a reflection of her desire to find connections between pieces written in vastly different time periods and continents. "While Takemitsu draws from his Japanese culture and also from French impressionists Debussy and Ravel, Schnittke reveres the formal structures of his Soviet predecessors," she explains. "Both composers were persons of contradictions and their music is very dif-

PHOTO © K. MURA

ferent, but both took Bach as inspiration.” Contemporary music also holds an allure for her, which is why she has begun to commission new pieces. “Today’s music reflects the current world and can provide great insight and social commentary for its audiences.”

Her own insights into the current world, where classical music is sometimes regarded as either irrelevant or rarified, have influenced her work outside the concert hall. One of the non-profit organizations she founded, the New York City-based Midori & Friends, sponsors musical education in the city’s cash-starved public schools. “Music should be presented as an inclusive, essential art form,” she says, “something for everyone to enjoy and experience, rather than as a luxury.” Another organization called Music Sharing, based in Japan, brings live performances to schools and orphanages around the world, and teaches about traditional Japanese music.

As a child, Midori, who was born in Osaka, Japan, and began playing violin under the tutelage of her mother, entertained “a long list of career aspirations,” including diplomat, historian, archaeologist, and clinical psychologist. She earned a BA magna cum laude from the Gallatin School of Individualized Study and then returned for her master’s degree, concentrating in psychology.

But she never stopped recording—her most recent release, on Sony BMG Masterworks, includes sonatas of J.S. Bach (No. 2 in A minor) and Bartók (No. 1 in C sharp minor) with pianist Robert McDonald—and doesn’t plan to rest on her accomplishments over the next 25 years. “I am always on the lookout to expand my musical horizons, whether by visiting more countries and communities, commissioning new works, or teaching. Life is full of discoveries and achievements, both planned and unknown.” ■

CREDITS

ALUMNI HEAT UP THE SUMMER BOX OFFICE AND FALL TV LINEUP

Director **MARC FORSTER** (TSOA '93) continues the James Bond legacy with its 22nd installment—next month’s *Quantum of Solace*, which finds 007 seeking revenge for the betrayal he suffered in *Casino Royale*... New to the prime-time lineup this fall is NBC’s *Kath & Kim*, based on the hit comedy from Australia and starring SNL vet **MOLLY SHANNON** (TSOA '87)... **JOSH RADNOR** (TSOA '99) returns for a fourth season on CBS’s *How I Met Your Mother*, while **PETER KRAUSE** (TSOA '90) is back in the ABC drama *Dirty Sexy Money*... After 15 seasons and 122 Emmy Award nominations—the most for any program in TV history—*ER*, starring **MAURA TIERNEY** (TSOA '89) as Dr. Abby Lockhart, will close its doors for good on NBC... Best known as a regular in Christopher Guest comedies, **BOB BALABAN** (WSUC '77) portrayed Bush legal adviser Ben Ginsberg alongside Kevin

Spacey in HBO’s political drama *Recount* based on the events in Florida during the 2000 presidential election... After nine seasons of detective work, **JESSE L. MARTIN** (TSOA '91) left NBC’s *Law & Order* to play Motown soul singer Marvin Gaye in the indie biopic *Sexual Healing*, due in 2010 and co-starring James Gandolfini... Director **LOUIS LETERRIER**’s (TSOA '96) *The Incredible Hulk* smashed its way into theaters this summer, featuring Edward Norton as the giant green comic book hero... **ADAM SANDLER** (TSOA '88) played an Israeli counterterrorism agent-turned-NYC hairdresser in *You Don’t Mess With the Zohan*, which he co-wrote with **ROBERT SMIGEL** (WSUC '83) and Judd Apatow. Sandler will be back in theaters this Christmas in the Disney comedy *Bedtime Stories*, penned by fellow alum **MATT LOPEZ** (LAW '96), about a fam-



ily whose whimsical nighttime tales come to life... **JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY** (STEINHARDT '77) brings his Pulitzer Prize-winning play to the big screen with *Doubt*, the first film he’s directed since the 1990 comedy *Joe Versus the Volcano*... Last month’s *The Women*, a remake of the 1939 classic starring Joan Crawford, featured an all-female cast including **DEBRA MESSING** (TSOA '93), Annette Bening, Candice Bergen, and Meg Ryan... **JOHN LEGUIZAMO** (TSOA nongrad alum) starred alongside Robert De Niro and Al Pacino in the detective thriller *Righteous Kill*, which was written by **RUSSELL GEWIRTZ** (LAW '92)... **MICHAEL CRAIG** (STEINHARDT '07) is currently starring in the off-Broadway comedy *Altar Boyz*, co-produced by **KEN DAVENPORT** (TSOA '94), as one-fifth of the titular Christian boy band... Guitarist **ADAM STOLER** (STEINHARDT '05, '07) joined Grammy-nominated bassist and Steinhart jazz professor Richard Bona on an international jazz tour... **NANETTE BURSTEIN** (TSOA '94, '04) wrote and directed *American Teen*, which won the Directing Award for a Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival for her look into the lives of five high school seniors in an Indiana town.—Renée Alfuso



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FASHION FORWARD

YOUNG DESIGNERS STAKE A NEW CLAIM ON THE CATWALK

by Megan Doll / GSAS '08

Fashion maven Sonia Huang (CAS '99) bubbles over with excitement. Flitting about Suite Orchard in an emerald-hued disco romper from the fashion line Soni & Cindy, which she co-designs with

her sister, Huang makes final preparations for the boutique's one-year anniversary party. "I'm so nervous!" she exclaims. "I feel like it's my wedding day!"

The frothy, fluid garments that normally fill the Lower East Side boutique—with its pink, white,

and gray-striped walls—have been spirited away to the basement to make space. And with the host's impossibly stylish clothes, vertigo-inducing shoes, and candy-colored cocktail, it's like stepping into a chapter of chick lit. "Our line is girly, edgy, and flirty," Huang explains. "We like things with hearts and bows and stars on them."

When she opened Suite Orchard, Huang joined the growing number of young designers who are foregoing the classical formation once expected of modistes. With a combination of on-the-job training and intuition, the former psychology student with no formal fashion education represents a new charge of aspiring designers. Spurred on by television shows such as *Project Runway*, featuring contestants with diverse backgrounds (and which was at least partly responsible for doubling the enrollment in the fashion department at Parsons the New School

for Design), and helped in no small part by the Internet revolution, they are refashioning the field.

Melissa Coker (STERN '00), the Renaissance woman behind Wren Clothing, is the embodiment of the new interdisciplinary designer. "I know a lot of designers who have a variety of backgrounds, from the more traditional—going to design school—to the completely nontraditional," she says. While studying marketing and international business at the Stern School of Business, she held internships at *W* magazine and Helmut Lang, before landing her first job out of college at *Vogue*. After several years in the magazine industry, Coker accepted a job at Abercrombie & Fitch as a trend-forecaster, thus launching her career in apparel. Founding her line one year ago, Coker sees value in her circuitous career track: "My editorial skills combined with my designing background



combined with my business background created a great foundation on which to start my own business.”

As the Internet has become the Silk Road of the 21st century, a newcomer’s best hope of receiving public recognition often lies on its path. “I feel like new media outlets are willing to take a chance on new designers because they need more content, just by definition of how the Internet operates,” says Coker, who exhibited media acumen at L.A.’s Fashion Week last spring, collaborating with a filmmaker friend on videos to accompany the runway presentation of her “tarnished opulence” fall collection.

One mention on coveted mainstream fashion Web sites such as DailyCandy.com and style.com can translate into a cacophony

of chatter in the blogosphere. Alexandra O’Neill (CAS ’08)—a dewy, young designer who co-founded Porter Grey with her older sister, Kristen—can attest to the Internet’s echo-chamber effect. “We had a great article on DailyCandy.com, and we’ve noticed that we’re coming up on blogs now,” says O’Neill, whose two-year-old line of classic pieces fused with contemporary details has already received an enviable amount of attention from new and traditional media alike. Other designers are actively exploiting the horizons opened up by the Web, advertising their talents on MySpace and Facebook.

But with television and the Internet galvanizing a generation of sartorial aspirants, the field has become saturated with would-be Lagerfelds. Julie Chaiken (STERN

’93), a seasoned fashion veteran, considers differentiation the greatest challenge facing young designers today. “The consumer is overwhelmed with choices, so it’s harder in today’s world to stand out,” Chaiken notes, speaking from 14 years of experience as the head of Chaiken Clothing. Her own designs—created in an aesthetic termed “New American Luxury” by the couturiere—have caught the eyes of celebrity A-listers such as Angelina Jolie and Oprah Winfrey.

So what is a fledgling fashionista to do? One way for designers to survive in a market saturated by domestic designers is to venture over international borders. While big labels have always done that, it’s increasingly necessary for small start-ups to broaden their appeal as well. “We will be exporting more

product and becoming more global,” Chaiken says, because focusing on the American market isn’t “realistic anymore.”

And many burgeoning designers have already branched out internationally. Up-and-coming menswear designer Adam Kimmel (CAS ’01) brought his bohemian catwalk-and-model-eschewing panache last winter to Florence’s Pitti Uomo, a prestigious world fashion preview, earning rave reviews from the *International Herald Tribune*. O’Neill’s Porter Grey, already represented by one store in Ireland, debuts in seven stores in Japan this fall. And the Huang sisters’ pieces can be found on racks in Canada, Australia, and even Dubai. “I’ve always wanted to go to Dubai,” Sonia Huang declares, beaming at the prospect of a business trip. ■

BELOW FROM LEFT: ALEXANDRA O’NEILL (RIGHT) CO-FOUNDED THE CLOTHING LINE PORTER GREY WITH HER SISTER KRISTEN TWO YEARS AGO; JULIE CHAIKEN HAS RUN HER LINE, CHAIKEN CLOTHING, FOR 14 YEARS; ADAM KIMMEL RECENTLY

LAUNCHED A MENSWEAR LINE; SONIA HUANG CO-DESIGNS WITH HER SISTER CINDY; AND MELISSA COKER ALSO LAUNCHED HER LINE, WREN CLOTHING, A YEAR AGO.



PHOTOS FROM LEFT: © MICHAEL SOFRONSKI/POLARIS, DREW ALTIZER, PHOTO BY ARI MARCOPOLLOUS, COURTESY OF SONIA & CINDY, PHOTO BY ERIC RAY DAVIDSON