



TRUTH BE TOLD
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THE POLITICS OF BALTIMORE

Sheee-it.

Yup. That's it. Of all the words written for all the characters in *The Wire's* political realm, that's the one best remembered.

And, I'm chagrined to admit, the writers had little to nothing to do with it.

The wit and nuance of that utterance was all Isiah Whitlock Jr., the actor portraying R. Clayton Davis, the shamelessly larcenous state senator who popped up time and again in and around the edges of the Baltimore drug game. He just trotted it out one day on set, and it was an instant hit.

Ironically, Isiah's rendition of that old favorite was exactly the reaction of most of the writers when the notion of a political storyline in *The Wire* was floated for Season Three.

Nonstarter.

In fact, if it had been up to the majority of writers on *The Wire*, the political storyline would have been immediately dispatched, never to be heard of again. It was a hard sell, close to being lost in a not-even-close vote, victim to a chorus of “Not our show” and “Not *The Wire*.”

Okay. Politics is difficult. It can be boring to some folks. Inside-baseball stuff. Besides, in film terms, there’s no action. It’s all sitting behind desks and talking. Not necessarily compelling TV. They almost convinced *me* – and I didn’t even have a vote on that committee.

Thankfully, for me and my then-future employment possibilities, balder heads prevailed, and David Simon convinced the others that this was the way to go. With that, the fictional universe of *The Wire*’s Baltimore expanded yet again, this time swallowing City Hall.

At first, it seemed a tough fit for a white city councilman named Thomas J. “Tommy” Carcetti, a guy with skyrocket-high political aspirations, to find a *raison d’être* in *The Wire* World. It was not exactly a seamless match with the established storylines on a show best known for its real-life insight into the urban drug culture.

Sure, state Senator Clay Davis made the first of his recurring appearances early in the series – back in Season One, before I started – but he seemed to meld perfectly. He was a politician who understood his West Baltimore constituents, the street, the life and especially the draw of the long con. He played it so well.

On the surface, the politics practiced by Carcetti and others in the Establishment didn’t seem to lend itself to the life-and-death questions that the street world and police work often deal with.

Yet, it is exactly that machinery that pulls the strings, causing the chain reactions down the line, from City Hall to police headquarters, on out to the corner.

It wasn’t so far-fetched. It was a natural. Politics has everything to do with the war on drugs. After all, it was invented by politicians.

It seemed a natural for me, as well. I grew up with the politics of the city and state all around me. My father was a newspaperman and covered politics. It was always talked about at the dinner table. It was in the blood. And then I spent nearly 20 years covering government and politics for the *Baltimore Sun*.

So, I had street cred to do this. All I needed to do was carve out a little space for Carcetti in *The Wire* and populate it.

I stole shamelessly from the stories I knew – some true, some thought to be true, some too good to be true. I spent hours upon hours in the writers’



room with Ed Burns – an initially reluctant, but ultimately very good sport (as he is wont to be) – running out the threads of potential storylines, many of which fell by the wayside for want of airtime.

While some of the characters who inhabit the political realm are rooted in reality, they are composites, drawn from any number of politicians we’ve known over the years.

Viewers are always asking if such and such a character is so and so. (And usually make the pronouncement that a particular character is absolutely based on a single, real-life person.)

I always hate to disappoint them, though they can rarely be persuaded otherwise, but story was always paramount, and that meant that no storyline was ever twisted or bent in order to squeeze in a “real” character. If anything, it was the other way around. Some characters were just

pure fiction, created solely for the purpose of story.

Which is not to say there wasn’t room for a little hometown homage. The political piece of *The Wire* did present an opportunity for a tip of the hat to some of the pols we’d known – the power-brokering “b’hoys” and the solid party-line-voting muldoons alike – who inhabit the world of Maryland politics.

Among those folks I wanted to salute in some way were Thomas J. D’Alessandro, Jr., aka “Big Tommy,” a three-time Baltimore mayor, and his son, Thomas J. D’Alessandro III, “Young Tommy,” who was elected mayor eight years after his father was finally defeated, but called it quits after just one term.

In Season Four, Carcetti has lunch with a former mayor very much modeled on Young Tommy – we called the character “Tony” – who advises

the councilman and mayoral aspirant on the daily pain and difficulties of holding that office.

He recounts one of my all-time favorite stories, first told by Tommy in his waning days as mayor in the early 1970s, though I'd heard it many years later. The shorthand for it would be "the bowl-of-shit story." It involves the mayor sitting in City Hall on his first day in office, only to be served, and forced to eat, silver bowl after silver bowl of shit, each sent by another constituency.

"And you know what?" an aide tells the young mayor. "That's what it is: you sit there eating shit, all day long, day after day, year after year."

Then there's the story of D'Alesandro's father, Big Tommy, sometimes known as "Old Tommy," and what could best be called "the conversation between desks."

I first heard the tale from my father, a political reporter for the old *News-Post* and *Sunday American* who had covered D'Alesandro's City Hall. But the conversation apparently had occurred with more than one reporter and been repeated countless times over.

David Simon had heard it and saw that it was included in my Episode 52 script in Season Five. In the version he'd heard, Frank P.L. Somerville was the reporter. Somerville, now long retired, was the *Sun's* religion editor (earning the nickname "Father Frank"), one-time night editor and all-round desk hand who'd been a young reporter in Big Tommy's last years as mayor.

As the story goes, the reporter tells the mayor that his "desk" – a common reference to a newspaper's editors, particularly when a reporter's looking for cover – wanted to know some sort of information that the mayor didn't want to give up.

At that point, Big Tommy, seated at his desk, puts his ear down to the blotter, nods a couple times, mutters a few words, looks up at the bewildered reporter and says: "My desk tells your desk to go fuck itself."



Very funny stuff. All the more so because it's true.

There are other familiar touches, as well. About a minute into the opening title sequence of Season Three flashes a quick shot of a little shrine designed and assembled by the art department, mainly production designer and Baltimore boy Vince Peranio, behind a bar that was supposed to be in Carcetti's political clubhouse.

The tavern never made it as a permanent set, but the display is captured on film for good. It includes mock campaign literature for Rep. Nancy Pelosi – the California Democrat who is Big Tommy's daughter and Young Tommy's sister, and now speaker of the US House of Representatives – and a poster based on a real flyer from nearly 60 years ago.

The poster is designed around a piece of campaign literature from the 1955 Democratic primary that I found among my late father's political memorabilia, a pamphlet promoting at the top of the ticket the elder D'Alesandro for mayor and Leon Abramson for City Council president.

Also being pushed are four candidates for City Council from Northeast Baltimore's Third District, including the father of the former Maryland Attorney General, J. Joseph Curran, Jr., who also happens to be the father-in-law of Martin O'Malley, once Baltimore's mayor and currently Maryland's governor.

Viewers always seem to invoke O'Malley's name when talking about Carcetti, though they are different animals.

True, Carcetti's rise to mayor from city councilman has elements of O'Malley's own ascension. O'Malley's election as mayor is a fascinating study on many levels, but particularly because it happened in a city that's 65-plus percent black.

So surprising was O'Malley's 1999 win that the *Washington Post* recorded the event with this politically incorrect headline on its front page: "White Man Gets Mayoral Nomination In Baltimore." It was big news that this white man won. And how it happened was a good story.

I had always seen the political storyline on *The Wire* as an opportunity to examine politics and race, a subject that seems almost dated, but not quite, now that we've elected an African-American president of the United States.

We never explored it completely, but we touched on it, and Carcetti's mayoral bid was one of the ways.

O'Malley made no secret of his disdain for *The Wire* and publicly attacked it on more than one occasion. Nevertheless, we asked him to appear in a cameo, as we had other politicians. The question was barely raised before it was shot down.

One former mayor who had no qualms about appearing was Kurt L. Schmoke, now dean of Howard University School of Law. Schmoke turns up in Season Three as the city's health commissioner, advising fictional Mayor Clarence V. Royce when Hamsterdam and its *de facto* legalization of drugs come to light.

The irony is that early in his own mayoral tenure, Schmoke, also once the city's top prosecutor, had recommended a national debate about "decriminalizing" drugs, suggesting that perhaps it should be treated as a public health issue, rather than a criminal one. Needless to say, his suggestion hit the fan and some believe derailed an otherwise bright political future.

Reacting to his comments in a rather hyperbolic diatribe, US Rep. Charles B. Rangel, the New York Democrat, went so far as to call Schmoke "the most dangerous man in America."

So, it is with a barely concealed grin that Royce's health commissioner, played by Schmoke, warns the mayor, "Better watch out, Clarence, or they'll be calling you the most dangerous man in America."

There were more than a few inside jokes like that.

In Season Four, then-Governor Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr., a Republican, portrays a Maryland state trooper who intercepts Mayor Carcetti and aide-de-camp Norman Wilson at the door of the State House after the two tire of waiting to see the fictional governor about school funding.

This was not unlike what really happened once when Mayor O'Malley was forced to go see Ehrlich, hat in hand, about a city schools budget shortfall.

Ehrlich had asked to appear in the show, and a brief exchange with Carcetti was his commercial cable debut.

In Season Five, there's Carcetti's mention of having dinner with "the P.G. County boys" specifically referring to "Steny, Miller and Maloney."

The reference is to three very real Democrats from Prince George's County – US House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer, Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, and Timothy F. Maloney, a one-time

power in the Maryland House of Delegates who still carries some political sway in the Washington suburbs.

And lest we forget, in the final season, Clay Davis appears on a radio talk show program with one Larry Young.

Who is Larry Young?

He's an actual radio talk show host in Baltimore. But he's also a Democratic former state senator from West Baltimore who was ousted from the Maryland Senate in 1998 for ethical breaches and later tried, and acquitted, on political corruption charges.

Why the hell not? Politics is, after all, an insider's game.

Sheee-it.

William F. Zorzi