

Succession, The White Lotus, Dopesick collect significant number of Emmy awards

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The 74th Primetime Emmy Awards ceremony, broadcast live this year on September 12 from Los Angeles, resulted in victories for some of the more serious shows currently on television. The latter medium has undoubtedly produced more intelligent and socially critical work of late than the Hollywood film studios, dominated by bombastic comic book and superhero movies.

HBO's *Succession* and *The White Lotus* received the most nominations and earned awards for outstanding drama series and a limited or anthology series, respectively. Apple TV's *Ted Lasso* took home awards for outstanding comedy series. Other notable shows that received honors included *Dopesick*, *The Dropout*, *The Squid Game* and *Abbott Elementary*.

Succession effectively dramatizes the power struggle between monstrous, Murdoch-esque media mogul Logan Roy (Brian Cox) and the rest of his dreadful family. The vicious infighting at the corporate empire has a tragi-comic character. The series sharply satirizes the American ruling elite and the upper echelons of society in general, which it shows to be veering toward authoritarianism. The WSWS noted about the show, "Treachery, power, abuse, corruption, backstabbing, betrayals and outright fascist conspiracy are portrayed powerfully and sharply criticized and satirized in *Succession*."

Jesse Armstrong, the lead writer and showrunner for *Succession*, took home an award for outstanding writing in a drama series. In interviews with HBO and other media outlets, the talented Armstrong has referred to numerous artistic influences on his work, including Balzac, Fitzgerald and others. Rupert Murdoch and family was Armstrong's initial source of inspiration, but there are clearly traces of various corporate dynasties, including the Trumps, in the portrayal of the

Roy family.

For his performance in *Succession*, English actor Matthew Macfadyen won an award Monday night for outstanding supporting actor in a drama series. Macfadyen plays Tom Wambsgans, an outsider who tries to rise within the Roy family's internal power struggles, doing whatever he can to placate the Lear-like Logan Roy.

Tom suffers a number of setbacks in the Roy household, including in his relationship with Logan Roy's daughter, Shiv Roy (Sarah Snook). In turn, Tom punches down on the buffoonish Greg Hirsch (Nicholas Braun), a Roy cousin and another social climber. Tom and Greg often provide the comic relief in the show's generally tragic arc, but Tom has been played especially deftly and amusingly by Macfadyen for all three seasons.

Dopesick powerfully dramatizes the opioid crisis in the United States and how Purdue Pharma, owned by the billionaire Sackler family, pushed the drug OxyContin on the population. Michael Keaton deservedly won outstanding lead actor for the show as Dr. Samuel Finnix. We wrote that the series is "unusual in its unvarnished hostility to the legal pill mill, presided over by the Sackler family and the three Purdue executives who realized OxyContin was being abused early in the crisis."

Equally deserving, Amanda Seyfried won an award for her excellent performance in *The Dropout*, which chronicles the rise and fall of Elizabeth Holmes, the founder of Theranos, a biotechnology startup that turned out to be a major fraud. The WSWS commented that the mini-series "says an immense amount about the parasitical, swindling and openly thieving character of contemporary American capitalism. ... The drama brings to life the brutal reality of doing medical research

within contemporary capitalism.”

The White Lotus portrays the clash of classes in a hotel resort in Hawaii with a degree of sensitivity and intelligence. Wealthy and upper middle social layers collide with the hotel staff with tragic results.

Mike White, who wrote and directed *The White Lotus*, collected an award for outstanding writing in a limited series. White previously directed the perceptive television show *Enlightened* and a critical film about the rich, *Beatriz at Dinner*. The social picture offered by White in *The White Lotus* is sharply drawn as well, particularly in poking fun at the money-obsessed layers in the show who harass their “inferiors” in the hotel staff.

Murray Bartlett won outstanding supporting actor for *The White Lotus* in his role as the hotel manager Armond, the Tennyson-quoting figure—shades of Basil Fawlty (John Cleese) from *Fawlty Towers*! Armond is caught between his selfish guests, on the one hand, and the hotel workers, on the other. Bartlett is excellent in his role. The talented Jennifer Coolidge also won for outstanding supporting actress as Tanya McQuoid, a sad and lonely wealthy tourist.

Lee Jung-jae received an Emmy for outstanding actor in a drama series for his strong performance in *Squid Game*, a series about a dystopian survival game that gained a wide audience. The WSWS observed that the show “is clearly a critique of capitalist society, and generally deals with the issues confronting the characters in a humane way—in spite of the brutal and violent premise.”

Sheryl Lee Ralph earned an award for outstanding supporting actress in a comedy series for her role as Barbara Howard in the perceptive *Abbott Elementary*, which portrays with varying degrees of success “the comedy in the tragedy” of public education. We remarked, “To the show’s credit, its humor is never drawn from situations that ignore the social context.”

Ted Lasso also took home awards. The show is a sports-comedy drama with a certain amount of warmth and humor, but it more often than not ends up being a formulaic feel-good comedy with “believe-in-yourself” clichés. The warmth of the show at times veers into sentimentality.

Without idealizing anyone or anything, television in the US is currently demonstrating that it is possible to create intelligent works that draw wide audiences.

Specifically, the success of a number of series (*Succession*, *Dopesick*, *The Dropout*) proves that hostility to the corporate oligarchy strikes a chord with millions of people.

Hollywood’s argument that it merely gives the public “what it wants,” as though the public had any choice in the matter, is proven once again to be hollow and false.

Of course, even in television, there is much that is mediocre and insubstantial. But there are signs that some artists are seeing things with a clear and steady eye. That trend needs to deepen, and extend itself to the very premises of the social order.



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