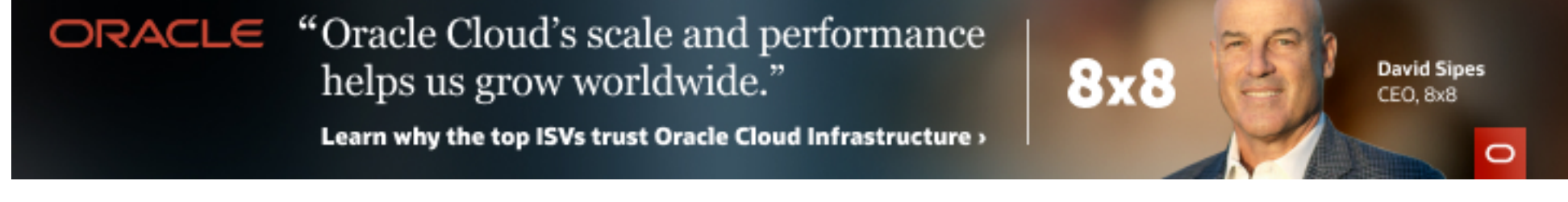


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‘Tinderbox’ Review: Remaking a Medium

On its 50th anniversary, an oral history of HBO, from creative brainstorming and fearless innovation to executive tantrums, backstabbing and worse.



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By Edward Kosner

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Nestled in my bookshelves is an early edition of “An Encyclopedia of World History,” Harvard professor William Langer’s dense tome covering ancient, medieval and modern times in 1,243 pages. Now it’s challenged for heft by James Andrew Miller’s latest book, which takes only a couple of hundred fewer pages to recount the five-decade oral history of ... Home Box Office!

Yes, HBO—the pay-TV service that, since its debut on Nov. 8, 1972, has given us “The Sopranos,” “Sex and the City,” “The Larry Sanders Show,” “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” “The Wire,” “Game of Thrones,” “Band of Brothers” and “From the Earth to the Moon”; Muhammad Ali’s epic “Rumble in the Jungle” and “Thrilla in Manila” fights; a Barbra Streisand concert from her Malibu backyard; comedy specials by every standup star from George Carlin to Chris Rock, compelling documentaries, original movies and much, much more.

It’s a testament to this cultural moment that such a \$50 brick of a book could be published—and become a bestseller—although only the most fervent fans of “Golden Age” TV or those with lots of spare time will turn every page.

“Tinderbox” is both the origin story of virtually everything HBO has ever shown and an exhaustive chronicle of executive brainstorming, tantrums, courage, backstabbing and worse. You are there as the WASPy Time Inc. bosses who started HBO try to manage the raffish creatives who made it a success and as the channel survives corporate mergers with Warner Communications, America Online and AT&T. Mr. Miller, who’s done similar books about ESPN, “Saturday Night Live” and the Creative Artists Agency, has interviewed everyone with even a peripheral connection to the network. The index alone runs 15 three-column pages.

For all their aura of authenticity, oral histories like this have their limitations. For one thing,

they can be misleading. As a fabled executive Mr. Miller interviewed for an earlier book once remarked: “You really think I’m going to tell the truth about somebody I can’t stand in a book?” The reader can easily drown in the anecdotes of corporate lust and the agonies of productions and lose the thread of HBO’s evolution. Still, there are ample rewards for those who stay the course.

The popular culture HBO turned out is remarkable. “Tinderbox” is subtitled “HBO’s Ruthless Pursuit of New Frontiers,” and rarely is heard a discouraging word from the author about how the network did it. “HBO transmogrified television” is his lead sentence—not merely transformed it but, by the dictionary definition, did so “in a surprising or magical manner.” The strategy wasn’t all that magical. It was simply to spend prodigiously and cater to the talent to provide the kind of TV fare the networks couldn’t or wouldn’t: smarter, more controversial, with lots of big names, tons of original content, uncut newish studio films, and live championship boxing and Wimbledon tennis. Plus nudity and profanity that network standards would never permit. And all of it commercial-free for, at the start, a few dollars a month.

The C-suite shenanigans provide some of the liveliest sparks in “Tinderbox.” Among the most vivid figures are rivals Michael Fuchs, the tempestuous, big-spending chief of HBO during its drive to the top, and Gerald Levin, the buttoned-up strategist who negotiated the Time Inc. 1989 “acquisition” of the Warner entertainment colossus and, in 1996, Ted Turner’s network. Later, as chief executive of Time Warner, it was Mr. Levin who presided over the disastrous 2000 merger of his company with America Online, the Titanic of modern business deals that cost him a \$600 million stock loss.

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Tinderbox: HBO's Ruthless Pursuit of New Frontiers

By James Andrew Miller
Holt
1024 pages

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Unlike the Miller source quoted earlier, Mr. Fuchs has no compunction about telling the author what he thinks of Mr. Levin. “He was a chronic bullsh—ter, which everyone eventually realized. He had no balls.” And later, “I finally realized Jerry was good at something, and it was inside f—ing manipulation bull—, like Stalin.” Long into Mr. Fuchs’s run, Mr. Levin added Warner’s records division to the Fuchs portfolio—and pushed him out six months later with a golden parachute worth \$50 million. And Mr. Fuchs, just 49 when he was canned, never had another big-time media job, the author reports. Indeed, over time, nearly all the men and women responsible for HBO’s best work

were sacked.

The best parts of “Tinderbox” are the stories of how HBO’s most memorable offerings got made. There’s David Chase taking rare notes from execs on an epochal early hour of “The Sopranos” in which Tony, on a college tour to Maine with daughter Meadow, murders an ex-mobster. Mr. Chase made the victim less sympathetic so it was easier for viewers to bond with Tony after only four episodes. There’s the power play between the show runner and lead writer on “Sex and the City” that resulted in richer characterizations for Carrie’s gal pals Charlotte, Samantha and Miranda. And Tom Hanks’s emotional leadership in the creation of “From the Earth to the Moon,” about the Apollo program, and “Band of Brothers,” about the Normandy invasion.

For all the memorable tales, after a while, it’s hard to remember whether if that was Spike Lee talking, or the diva of documentaries Sheila Nevins, or Roseanne Barr or Sarah Jessica Parker or the champ Mike Tyson. Indeed, the text sometimes reads like the raw research the author assembled before sitting down to distill it all into a crisp, colorful narrative.

Toward the end of the book, the HBO juggernaut loses momentum. While HBO dithers, great shows like “Mad Men” and “The Walking Dead” are snatched up by cable channel AMC. Netflix forges ahead, outspending HBO with “House of Cards,” “Orange Is the New Black,” “The Crown” and thousands of other offerings. Still, the saga of HBO is an exhilarating example of what driven, innovative, creative people can accomplish with confident, ample funding in the cutthroat world of mass entertainment.

Mr. Kosner is the author of “It’s News to Me,” a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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