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'Boardwalk Empire' Comes to Harlem



By

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“One looks down in secret and sees many things,” Dr. Valentin Narcisse (Jeffrey Wright) deadpans, speaking to Chalky White (Michael K. Williams). “You know what I saw? A servant trying to be a king.”

And so begins a dance of power, politics and personality between two of the most electrifying, enigmatic actors on the television screen today. Each time the two are on screen—together or apart—they breathed new life into tonight’s premiere episode of *Boardwalk Empire* season four, with dark humor, slight smiles, powerful glances, smart clothes and killer lines.

Entitled “New York Sour,” the episode opened with bombast, unlike the slow boil of previous seasons. Set in 1924, we’re introduced to the tasteful opulence of Chalky White’s new club, The Onyx, decorated with sconces custom-made in Paris and shimmering, shapely dancing

girls. Chalky earned an ally, and eventually a partnership to be able to open the club, with former political boss and gangster Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi) by saving Nucky's life last season.

This sister club to the legendary Cotton Club in Harlem is Whites-only, but features Black acts. There are some cringe-worthy moments when Chalky, normally proud and infallible, has to deal with racism and bends over to appease his White clientele. But more often, Chalky—a Texas-born force to be reckoned with—breathes an insistent dose of much needed humor into what sometimes devolves into cheap shoot 'em up thrills this season.

The meeting of the minds between Narcisse and Chalky takes root in the aftermath of a mistake by Chalky's right hand man, Dunn Purnsley (Erik LaRay Harvey), who engages in an illicit interracial tryst that turns out to be a dramatic, racially-charged sex game gone horribly wrong. The mess Dunn leaves behind is cleaned up by Narcisse, who uses his leverage wisely. Narcisse is Chalky's complicated nemesis, an intellectual doctor of divinity and a powerbroker in Harlem's nightclub circuit and the illegal lottery (colloquially known as the number's game). He's ambitious and forward thinking; looking to enter into what was then an emerging heroin market, while simultaneously serving as a leader in the continuation of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association and lecturing the uninitiated on Black history. Narcisse does it all, while intimidating without emotion, belittling with bemused looks, and directing murder without opening his mouth.

Jeffrey Wright's character is based on the Harlem racketeer Casper Holstein, who hailed from St. Croix in the Virgin Islands and became a millionaire during Prohibition in the numbers game. As benevolent as he was cunning, he gave much of the money he earned to Black colleges, became a patron to Black writers, artists and poets during the Harlem Renaissance, helped to establish a Baptist school in Liberia, and wrote regularly for the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine.

Wright's is one of several new faces appearing this season, including Patricia Arquette as a speakeasy owner, *The Wire*'s Domenick Lombardozzi as Al Capone's brother, Brian Geraghty as an FBI agent, and Ron Livingston as a rich businessman.

And main characters continue to avert disappointment. This season provides some enlightenment for war veteran Richard Harrow (Jack Huston), increased rage for Al Capone (Stephen Graham), and continued dancing with the devil with Gillian (by Gretchen Mol), arguably the most complicated female role on television today.

For season four, we witness racial politics play out in grand fashion via entrepreneurship, sexual liaisons, power plays and murder. Nucky and Chalky's interracial partnership and mutually respectful friendship grows in a barren wasteland of unrealized racial harmony in 1924. There are also intra-racial and class tensions between Chalky, who plays the up-by-the-bootstraps field Negro, to Narcisse's progressive, intellectual house Negro.

Wright, a movie star with chops that could bite through an Atlantic City jitney cab, would be enough reason alone to tune in. But the repartee and tension between Chalky and Narcisse provide fiery entertainment for the too-scarce moments they're onscreen. In fact, they're a spinoff waiting to bloom.

Ericka Blount Danois is the author of Love, Peace, and Soul: Behind the Scenes of America’s Favorite Dance Show—Soul Train: Classic Moments. Follow her at Twitter @erickablount and her website, ErickaBlount.com.

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