

Wrap it up

'The Deuce' returns for its third and final season

TV Media

There's nothing worse than a sudden cancellation. When a show ends abruptly, fans are left wishing and wondering, but a slow, deliberate ending can leave us satisfied in a way that enhances the series, even if we're sad it's over. Starting Monday, Sept. 9, fans of the HBO series "The Deuce" can begin to experience that slow wind down. Season 3 is its last, and knowing that beforehand has given its showrunners a chance to offer their audience a conclusion that feels natural.

"The Deuce," named after slang for a section of Manhattan's 42nd St. that was once considered the city's red-light district, depicts the eclectic community of that section of New York City during the 1970s. It's creators, David Simon and George Pelecanos, are best known for creating the HBO megahit "The Wire," and the stars of the series are no less qualified. The show stars Maggie Gyllenhaal ("The Honourable Woman") and James Franco ("The Disaster Artist," 2017) as two (well, three, actually) people living their lives in and around New York's seedy underbelly from the early 1970s onwards. I say three because Franco plays twins.

Other cast members have been promoted this season, going from smaller recurring roles to regulars as the timeline of "The Deuce" jumps ahead several years and new characters emerge as central figures. Among those receiving meatier roles are Olivia Luccardi ("It Follows," 2014) and David Krumholtz ("Hail, Caesar!," 2016), who play the young escort Melissa and director Harvey Wasserman, respectively.

The supporting cast of "The Deuce" is strong from top to bottom (a trademark of David Simon's television shows), but the leads have received special attention for their performances in the show's first two seasons. Gyllenhaal



Olivia Luccardi in "The Deuce"

plays Eileen "Candy" Merrell, a former street hustler who eventually gets involved in the production of, well, unsavory films. Candy's arc has been one of self-improvement and personal discovery, as she fought her way up from the gutter to a job that has a new sense of legitimacy (but also poses new risks and challenges). It's no surprise that the hard-working, Oscar-nominated actress has received constant, glowing praise for her portrayal of Candy — she was also nominated in the Best Actress category at the 75th Golden Globe Awards last year.

Franco has also been praised for his performance in "The Deuce," but in his case, it has been less for rendering an ex-

cellent, original character than for the technical prowess of his work. Franco plays twin brothers Vincent and Frankie Martino in the show. Vincent began the series as a down-on-his-luck bartender working long hours to provide for his family. His brother, Frankie, is more of a loose cannon; he's a gambler and occasional scam artist who has ties to the mob.

In Seasons 1 and 2, the brothers saw their fortunes rise as they took advantage of their mob connections (sometimes reluctantly) and got involved in bar ownership and brothels. The Vincent and Frankie characters have been criticized for being stereotypical "New York guy" caricatures, but Franco has received almost

universal acclaim for his dual performances, which regularly require him to act in scenes with only himself. His ability to perform in a convincing manner opposite thin air (that is subsequently filled in by seamless CGI) has captured the attention of fans and critics alike.

Several years ago, after the finale of the first season of "The Deuce," multiple members of the cast and creative team indicated that the show had a roughed-out narrative designed to last for three seasons.

Back then, the future of the series was in doubt, and there was no guarantee it would be renewed enough times to make it to its natural conclusion — HBO isn't above canceling critically acclaimed

shows when the ratings aren't there, and ratings for "The Deuce" have never been particularly strong. Instead of the twists, turns and cliffhangers that propel so many shows to must-watch status, "The Deuce" simply depicts the lives of its characters in a realistic, believable way and allows the narrative to play out naturally. In the end, HBO allowed the show to run its full course, and audiences can expect a solid, thought-out conclusion instead of the abrupt or scattershot ending that can plague shows canceled before their time.

The third season of "The Deuce" will replicate the five-year timeline jump that occurred between Seasons 1 and 2. The show's first season

was set in the early 1970s, the second played out five years later, and this one takes us five more years into the future to the start of the 1980s.

The season finale of Season 2 hinted at the goals of the final season when Harvey gave Candy a preview of an emerging form of technology: the VCR. The final season will look at the impact of that technology. It will also take a look at the emergence of HIV and AIDS in New York City in the early 1980s, and the devastating toll the epidemic took on New York's LGBTQ community. You can also expect the show to delve into the early '80s cocaine trade.

"The Deuce" begins its final season on Monday, Sept. 9, on HBO.