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Emmys Watch: Damian Lewis on ‘Homeland’ and ‘The Forsyte Saga’

By [JEREMY EGNER](#)



Kent Smith/Showtime Damian

Lewis in a scene from “Homeland.”

We have been talking to [Emmy nominees](#) leading up to the awards show on Sunday night. Previous entries in this series include [Don Roy King](#), the director of “Saturday Night Live”; [Abi Morgan](#), nominated for writing “The Hour”; [Christine Baranski](#), nominated for best supporting actress for “The Good Wife”; and [Jesse Tyler Ferguson](#), nominated for best supporting actor for “Modern Family.”

[The Emmy Awards](#)

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On Sunday night [at the Emmy Awards](#), Showtime’s geopolitical thriller [“Homeland,”](#) which returns for its second season on Sept. 30, will vie to end the four-year reign of “Mad Men” as television’s top drama. Damian Lewis, who stars as the P.O.W.-turned-plotter-turned-politician Nicholas Brody, was also nominated for best actor in a drama.

A decade before he was Brody, Mr. Lewis was Soames Forsyte, the priggish Victorian businessman at the heart of [“The Forsyte Saga.”](#) In 2002 the mini-series, based on books by John Galsworthy, was a hit for ITV in Britain and “Masterpiece Theater” on PBS. Mr. Lewis’s Soames is still featured in that series’s title sequence.

We talked to Mr. Lewis for [an article looking back on “Forsyte,”](#) which Acorn Media recently released on DVD. But the actor, who in conversation is as wry as Brody is tightly wound, also discussed fake tans, first fans and the new season of “Homeland.” These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Q.

You’re shooting the second season of “Homeland” [in Charlotte, N.C.]. Does it feel any different now that it is an acclaimed show as opposed to unknown?

A.

Yes I think people feel a certain pressure. Coming back you’re much more of a fish in a big goldfish bowl with people staring at you. I think we all feel a pressure to keep people as exhilarated as they were in the first season. So it is different. But as you guys like to say here, it’s a high-class problem. I’m not losing any sleep over it.

Q.

So all this success isn’t wearing you down.

A.

It is [laughs]. It’s been remarkable what happened to this show — I’ve been in hits and successes before, but I

don't think I've ever been in something in which within days of the second episode, everyone was going, 'Oh my God, you have to watch this show.'

Q.

How is your brief different this season?

A.

Well, last season Brody was the guy who might commit some sort of terrorist act and people stuck around to see what he was going to do. Now having changed his mission statement and having said he wants to use nonviolent means to achieve his political ends, Brody is like a crook trying to go straight. He's trying to subvert from within. But what I think you'll see this year is he's not master of his own destiny — he's too exposed to too many people and they can pull the strings pretty much as they want. So Brody will live in a state of extreme high anxiety and paranoia and uncertainty. I think you'll really see just to what extent that he is a victim of his war, a victim of his circumstances.

Q.

What has been the biggest change in shooting the second time around?

A.

We've got new characters in the C.I.A.; we've got a new character on my side of the storm. I won't tell you who because it would ruin the plot for you. Charlotte's still hot — nothing's changed there.

Q.

It's good to have some consistency amid the twists and intrigue.

A.

Charlotte just being [very] hot is the most consistent thing about filming in North Carolina.

Q.

Any other new developments?

A.

What else can I tell you? We gamble at lunch now — there's been a gaming table set up. I've just bought a Ping-Pong table for the crew so there will now be quite an involved and highly competitive "Homeland" Ping-Pong championship. These are really the important developments for Season 2. And obviously now we make our show for the president. So we hope he likes the second season as much as he liked the first.

Q.

Yes you've talked about attending a White House dinner and learning that President Obama was a "Homeland" fan. What was that like?

A.

I was like a kid at a candy shop. I was trying to ask them questions without sounding like a tourist. It was unforgettable — sitting at the president's table next to Warren Buffett, hearing about Warren Buffett's high school reunions. Talking to the president about your energy policy and his views on the geopolitical map of the next 100 years, and hearing him say that on Saturday afternoons Michelle and the girls go and play tennis and he goes in the Oval Office and pretends to work, and he puts his feet on the desk and switches on "Homeland." How amazing is that?

Q.

So you sorted out the whole energy policy thing?

A.

I gave him one or two notes. You guys can sleep easy in your beds tonight, it's all under control.

Q.

Acorn Media is bringing "The Forsyte Saga" back now, in part, to capitalize on your "Homeland" popularity. How does it feel to be a marketing hook?

How does it feel to be a marketing nook?

A.

Years of rejecting publicity and now, the irony [laughs]. It's flattering, first and foremost. The nature of what we do, it requires an audience. It requires a response. Obviously when the response is good, that's better than when it's bad. I'm hugely proud of "The Forsyte Saga."

Q.

How do people within the acting community in Britain think about the country's endless string of big costume dramas?

A.

When the BBC trots out another Jane Austen, you think, 'Really, do we need another one?' That's certainly my response to some of them. And then of course every now and then one stands out from the crowd — "Downton Abbey" is an obvious example.

Q.

It's certainly one of the most popular ones ever on these shores.

A.

"Downton Abbey" might be the greatest costume drama hit since [Colin Firth got his shirt wet in "Pride and Prejudice."](#) But "Forsyte Saga" sits very proudly up there in the top handful of the biggest costume successes.

Q.

You'd just starred in "[Band of Brothers](#)" on HBO in 2001, which was your breakthrough role. Why go back to a British mini-series after that?

A.

I'd just had this big success with "Band of Brothers" and the expectation was that you go to L.A. and try to step up into studio movies. Buy some muscles from somewhere and a fake tan — by the way, I would need a lot of fake tan — and go be a Hollywood guy. I found a project called "[Dreamcatcher](#)" — I was a big fan of Larry Kasdan and the other people who were involved were sort of A-list. "Dreamcatcher" then tanked horribly. It didn't work out and I was slightly scared away by that experience. I determined that I would go and do stuff where I could earn my stripes as an actor rather than try to be a star. So I went back to England to do this television show. I just thought it read so well and so beautifully that I really wanted to be involved in it.

Q.

Do you see common influences or parallels between "Forsyte" and something like "Downton Abbey"?

A.

Well it's the same period of time, tellingly, I think. That Edwardian period, which really is the dying light of the British empire. Once we hit the First World War, the British empire is really handing over to the American empire. I think it's a bygone era where things just for the very last time seemed ordered and elegant and structured before the chaos of the two world wars.

Q.

There seems to be something compelling about fading glory.

A.

"Downton Abbey" is very clever in that; it's an entirely romanticized view. Lord Grantham is a sort of benign force, isn't he? He's actually a very gentle, thoughtful man, whereas Soames Forsyte is anything but. He's everything that I suspect Victorian England was probably more like — snobbery and an absolute belief in the class system.

Q.

The class issue is murkier in "Forsyte" than it is in "Downton Abbey."

A.

Of course the lower classes have always felt downtrodden and aspired to a better life. But there is this theory that people respond to a class structure in England — there was a time when people knew who they were and knew whom they served and as long as management wasn't abusive, it was a good life for people. God knows if you took a poll that would not be the response now. It sounds so unlikely. But it's a very compelling argument that people have put forward and the growing middle classes confused all those boundaries. It's a period of nostalgia that "The Forsyte Saga" captured very cleverly.

Q.

Speaking of polls, "Masterpiece" [did one](#) a few years ago and "Forsyte Saga" was voted the second most popular installment, after "Upstairs, Downstairs." You're still in the show's title sequence.

A.

I get more face recognition from people going "You know, you're the guy who floats across the front of 'Masterpiece Theater.'" The fact that I'm still there, I'm chuffed to bits. It's my proudest achievement.

Q.

So "Masterpiece" intro, No. 1. Hanging out with the president, No. 2.

A.

[Laughs] As long as the president knows his place.

This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 21, 2012

An earlier version of this post misidentified the start date for the second season of "Homeland." The season premiere will be on Sept. 30, not Sept. 23.