

TV Sunday

THE OTHER HBO

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Mobster Tony Soprano better hope he never does time in "Oz."

The lead of "The Sopranos" may be a tough guy in New Jersey, but the prisoners of HBO's other critically acclaimed dramatic series would eat him for lunch.

Returning for a third season with eight new episodes starting Wednesday, "Oz" is executive produced by Barry Levinson and Tom Fontana — with Fontana being the heart and soul of the show, writing or co-writing every episode.

"Oz" may be tougher, but ratings battles aren't won with brute force. The lacerating drama set in a maximum security prison certainly has cachet — Matt Dillon, Steve Buscemi and Barbara Kopple direct some of the new episodes, for example. But it's been overshadowed recently by the relatively friendlier and wittier world of "The Sopranos".

"Oz" is a tough show to watch," admits the 47-year-old Fontana. "I totally agree with you. It demands another kind of viewing. What's brilliant about "The Sopranos" is it takes an old worn out franchise — the family show — and has reinvented it in a way that's accessible but true. "Oz" is an aberration; it isn't following a long tradition of prison shows."

On "The Sopranos," when someone takes Holy Communion, it's Tony's wife (played by Edie Falco, who also plays a guard on "Oz") and the priest is trying to control his attraction to her. On "Oz," it's a prisoner in solitary confinement who gobbles up an entire tray of hosts because the guards are quietly starving him to death.

The one show is a gentle slap in the face, friendly but with a touch of menace; the other is a punch in the gut.

But that very grittiness helps "Oz" internationally. It's a big success in Canada and also airs in Israel, Great Britain and France. "I've done about

Two years before "Sopranos," HBO gave us a head-snapping series about life behind bars. "Oz" proved that adults would watch a show that Harrison Ford wasn't going to make into a movie some day.



HBO's unflinching prison drama has developed a rabid following in Europe. In France, they call the show "Oozoo."

10 French interviews, where they call it 'Oozoo,' laughs Fontana. "Tell me about 'Oozoo,' they say, which I love."

Like most of the great dramas of the '80s and '90s — "Hill Street Blues," "St. Elsewhere," "ER" — "Oz" is at heart a soap opera; albeit one where if a main character stabs another one in the back, they literally stab them in the back.

It's packed with fine actors ranging from veterans like Ernie Hudson,

B.D. Wong and Rita Moreno — who plays a nun inspired by Fontana's own sister — to lesser known actors getting their best work yet like Kirk Acevedo, Edmond Walker and Dean Cain.

Oh, and it's narrated by a handicapped inmate in a wheelchair (Harold Perrineau) who philosophizes from a multi-media platform nicknamed The Box.

So it's hardly surprising that — like "The Sopranos" — no one is getting rich off of "Oz."

Brillstein/Grey, which produces the mob drama, has said not every series needs to be an out-of-the-ballpark hit — a polite way of saying they're not printing money despite its accolades.

Fontana certainly agrees with that philosophy. "Whether anyone is making any money off 'Oz,' I don't know," says the Emmy Award-winning writer.

"The truth is I don't pay attention to it," he says. "Going in, everyone said

this will have no life beyond HBO. But I so wanted to do it that Barry Levinson and I were resolved to the fact that this wasn't going to be a money-maker."

It hasn't been easy just trying to break even. "It's tough; we've had to keep the costs way down," Fontana says. Point out that it has perhaps the biggest cast on TV — some 35 cast members — and he jokes, "But I only pay them a dollar each."

Having a critically acclaimed show that's lost in the shuffle is hardly a new situation for Fontana. The first time his name appeared on a TV screen was for "St. Elsewhere" back in 1982. "I wrote the third episode," Fontana says. "It was about Down's Syndrome — a real chucklefest."

That series was proclaimed to high heaven

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SERIES



The creator of "Oz," Tom Fontana (above), claims his Jesuit upbringing prevents him from liking any of his own work, which includes "Homicide" and the hospital drama, "St. Elsewhere." He modeled Rita Moreno's nun character (upper right) on his own sister. He ended the first season with an apocalyptic jail house riot (top).

but always on the verge of shutting down — just like the rundown St. Eligius hospital it portrayed.

Then came "Tattliners," a charming and sophisticated drama starring Stephen Collins and Blythe Danner. That was the first real series Fontana could call his own and it lasted all of eight episodes.

Most recently, he and

Levinson enjoyed a seven-year run with "Homicide," another show that was always on Death Row but received short stays of execution thanks to network clemency and critical hosannas.

"I wouldn't know what not being on the bubble is like," says Fontana. "With 'Oz' we've been very lucky, but there are no guarantees. I don't as-



sume anything. I think because we were the first drama on HBO that they feel very protective about us. It's one thing to be on NBC and be the ugly sister they want kept in the attic, which was "Homicide." It's another thing to be on HBO and be the prettiest girl in school."

Despite being ranked 60th, "Homicide" might have been back for another year — and Fontana feels the show really hit its stride after a lumpy first half adjusting to the departure of Andre Braugher. But it was sidetracked by the unexpected commercial success of "Providence."

"It's one of those hard realities of life," says Fontana. "OK, something's finally working Friday night on NBC. I can understand the network's impulse to build on that. I just think it's unfortunate they couldn't have found another place for us."

But hopeful talk about a TV movie spin-off of "Homicide" now seems justified. Fontana has a target date to begin shooting in time to make the February sweeps and he's calling the actors right now to see who's available. "If Andre Braugher and Kyle Secor come back, it's a different movie of course," he points out.

Fontana and Levinson also shepherded the Showtime basketball drama "The Hoop Life,"

which just began its 22 episode run. He's in the early stages of prepping a 10-hour miniseries based on the Ten Commandments — one episode for each commandment. And they're prepping "The Beat" — about two cops on the streets of New York — for a midseason berth on UPN. Fontana describes it as "a cross between Barry Levinson's 'Diner' and 'Adam-12.'" Suggest that UPN was probably thrilled they were willing to do anything for the struggling whelp and he gives a polite, noncommittal laugh.

But Fontana is loathe to describe himself as an artist — despite watching his shows earn dozens of Emmy nominations.

"This may be my Jesuit training or my own anal Virgo character," says Fontana, "but I hate everything I write."

Obviously, not everyone in Hollywood is so modest. "I was at lunch once with some writers and I won't say any names. One of them said to me, 'Did you see last night's episode of [the show he worked on]?' I said no. He said, 'It was one of the most extraordinary hours of television ever.' I said, 'Really? Oh, my God. Who wrote it?' He said, 'I did.' And I turned to the other two writers we were at the table with and said, 'Isn't that extraordinary? I wouldn't have the courage to say that.'"