



Claire Danes and Mandy Patinkin

It was not a pledge that called for hand over heart. But during eight seasons of *Homeland*, Claire Danes and Mandy Patinkin proved their allegiance to each other as actors, time and time again. "I felt so safe with Mandy as a performer," Danes says. "I got to go to my edge always with him." Says Patinkin: "Claire is incapable of not being truthful, as a character and a human being."

BY ANN FARMER

A LONG ALLEGIANCE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK SELIGER/SHOWTIME

IN THE END, THERE WERE CARRIE AND SAUL.

Showtime's potent espionage thriller, *Homeland*, concluded in April, having unspooled multiple terror plots and political conspiracies in its eight seasons. Heroes and villains — often hard to tell apart — came and went. Locations shifted; one season they were in Berlin, the next, Brooklyn or Pakistan. The United States elected its first female president, who then resigned. Throughout, we endured bombings, sieges, kidnappings, betrayals and killings. But in the end, the two characters who always meant the most to us and to each other remained: Saul and Carrie.

Carrie Mathison, Claire Danes's brilliant, driven CIA officer with bipolar disorder, was *Homeland*'s clear protagonist. Saul Berenson, Mandy Patinkin's sober-minded CIA counter-terrorism operative, served as her mentor. Together they formed a counterbalance that, as the seasons rolled on, proved the beating heart of the show — more even than their romantic interludes with others.

"It wasn't intended at the beginning," Patinkin says. "We don't know the chemistry between us until the director yells action."

Danes agrees: "Their relationship evolved. It was kind of surprising. It's not one that holds a story together all that often."

Not long after production wrapped on the final season (and well before the coronavirus quarantine), they met at the Library lounge of the NoMad Hotel in Manhattan, exchanging kisses on the cheek before sitting down to reflect on the overall arc of the series and their dogged commitment to their roles. They made clear that their onscreen rapport was a product of the mutual respect and appreciation that flourished during production. After all, these two intense actors don't just perform — they inhabit their characters. Both strive to be emotionally transparent in their roles. "Claire is incapable of not being truthful, as a character and a human being," Patinkin says. "Even her lie is truthful as the character."

"I just felt so safe with Mandy as a performer," Danes responds. "I got to go to my edge always with him." She's referring, in particular, to her formidable task of appearing mentally unhinged each time Carrie stopped taking her bipolar medications and succumbed to either manic or depressive symptoms. Those scenes were often painful to watch, but Saul never wavered in his support of Carrie. And Patinkin met Danes's unflinching acting style each step of the way. "To share that space where you are so vulnerable, so many times, through so many years, and in so many places on the planet..." she reflects, trailing off.

Patinkin, likewise, had to convince us that Saul knew what he was doing when he placed his trust in this unpredictable and impulsive young colleague — and that together they really were saving Americans from serious terrorist threats. "I've never been in combat, thank God," he says. "But it feels like being in the trenches with your buddy."

Which is why the final season's plot twist takes us by surprise: it becomes apparent that Carrie, recovering from confinement in a Russian gulag, may no longer be the Carrie that Saul and viewers have put their faith into all these years. But no further clues! Readers will have to watch the final season to see how the writers flip the show upside-down while nimbly turning the first and last seasons into a sort of bookends.

THE SERIES WAS ALWAYS INTENDED TO REFLECT ACTUAL U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE ROLE OF THE CIA IN COMBATting TERRORISM. The first episode of *Homeland* aired October 2, 2011. That was eight years after al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack on American soil prompted President George W. Bush to send troops into Iraq under the pretext that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction. ISIS, which was initially tied to al-Qaeda, sprang up in the aftermath of that invasion.

Showrunner Alex Gansa wrote the pilot with his fellow executive producer—cocreator Howard Gordon and Gideon Raff (also an exec producer, Raff created the Israeli hit series *Prisoners of War*, from which *Homeland* was adapted). The first episode unfolds with an American POW, Marine Sergeant Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), returning from Iraq after eight years in captivity. He's greeted by Americans as a hero, but Carrie suspects he was turned by his al-Qaeda captors. Demonstrating a near pathological devotion to protecting America, she begins surveilling him without approval from her boss, Saul.

Though he was wowed by the storyline, Patinkin initially doubted that the show would resonate with viewers. "I kept thinking, 'This isn't going to go.' The material was just too good," he recalls. Danes, meanwhile, was apprehensive about spinning a tale off the tragedy and aftermath of 9/11. "I was concerned it might be exploitation," she says.

PERFECT DANGERS

Bombings, betrayals, kidnappings, killings.... For CIA agent Carrie Mathison, her allies and her adversaries, life was always perilous and often poignant.



SEASON 1

CIA officer Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) develops an unusual relationship with Marine Sergeant Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), newly freed from captivity in Iraq.



SEASON 3

In the aftermath of a terrorist attack on CIA headquarters, Carrie makes a last-ditch effort in Iran to save Brody's life.



SEASON 2

Brody is brutally interrogated by CIA officer Peter Quinn (Rupert Friend) in "Q & A"; executive producer Henry Bromell won an Emmy posthumously for writing this episode.



SEASON 4

Following a botched U.S. drone strike, Taliban leader Haissam Haqqani (Numan Acar) takes a prominent hostage: CIA director Saul Berenson (Mandy Patinkin).

KENT SMITH/SHOWTIME; DIDIER BAVEREL/SHOWTIME; DAVID BLOOMER/SHOWTIME

Homeland, on the contrary, riveted viewers and drew critical acclaim, winning the Emmy Award for outstanding drama series in its first season, as well as for writing, editing and casting. Danes and Lewis received Emmys for outstanding lead actress and actor. (Danes won again the following year.) As a result, the writers extended the Brody storyline for two more seasons. "It actually went one season too long, story-wise," Patinkin says, referring to increasingly outlandish zigs and zags in the third season before the writers finally had Brody executed by hanging in a Tehran square.

In its fourth season, Homeland broke out again. The writers installed Carrie as CIA station chief in Kabul, Afghanistan, where she makes a bad call. Targeting a suspected terrorist, she orders a drone strike that inadvertently kills civilians at a wedding, not unlike actual drone strikes by U.S. military forces that have killed innocents. When she next takes over as station chief in Islamabad, Pakistan, the subterfuge, canny twists and nail-biting action continue. The U.S. Embassy in Islamabad undergoes a siege, and Saul is kidnapped and held for a prisoner swap. "I love the trunks of cars," Patinkin jokes, having been abducted more than once over the years.

Critics again praised the show for its political relevance and rip-roaring ride. "The fourth season was kind of amazing because it was such a scary reset," says Danes, who also served as an executive producer of the series; Patinkin

was a producer. From that point on, the storylines crisscrossed continents and settled at times in Washington, D.C., and New York City to showcase homegrown terrorist activity. President Obama reported he was a fan.

BESIDES LIFTING IDEAS FROM THE NEWS, THE SHOW BENEFITED FROM INPUT FROM THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY. The CIA's entertainment liaison office arranged for Homeland's creatives to attend "CIA bootcamp," where agents and think-tankers shared some of their most pressing national security concerns. Patinkin recalls that at the conclusion of one eye-opening session, he and Danes exchanged looks that wordlessly said, "That was more than we needed to know."

Playing someone in the CIA's top echelons, Patinkin gleaned ideas for Saul's temperament from two mentors at the agency. "These people for me are gold," he says. "Just knowing that they're real, I don't have to pretend that it's real when the camera is on."

When he says one of them was "as high as you can go in the intelligence community," he may be referring to former CIA director John Brennan, whom the *New York Times* once described as having "ushered" Patinkin into his office. Whoever it was, Patinkin was warned: "Don't get on his bad side." The



SEASON 5

Allison Carr (Miranda Otto), the CIA station chief in Berlin, has an affair with Saul — but is she also in bed with the Russians?



SEASON 7

Radio host–provocateur Brett O'Keefe (Jake Weber) is on the run and broadcasts conspiracy theories from a safe house.



SEASON 6

A woman is elected president, but Elizabeth Keane (Elizabeth Marvel) is skeptical of Carrie, now working at a foundation that provides aid to U.S. Muslims.



SEASON 8

Carrie and Yevgeny Gromov (Costa Ronin), a Russian intelligence officer, cozy up in their Moscow condo... Say what???

STEPHAN RABOLD/SHOWTIME; IOJO WHILDEN/SHOWTIME; ANTONY PLATT/SHOWTIME; ERICA PARISE/SHOWTIME





remark took the actor aback. "That was something when I was with this guy I could never imagine or see. But I got it. When he needs to, this guy will do whatever is required."

Likewise, Danes had a "CIA big sister," who dispensed tips on how to play an agent who's always on high alert. Her appearance, the actress says, was "understated and never drawing attention to herself." At a club one night, the woman challenged Danes: "Who in the room is the lead singer's girlfriend?" While the actress was still looking around, the agent had no trouble "clocking" the right person, Danes recalls. "She could read a room."

She and Patinkin were also impressed by the powerful sense of patriotism they observed in their CIA counterparts. When Carrie leaves the CIA in season five to pursue a job as a private citizen, she can't help but reflexively jump into action when she gets wind of a nerve gas attack in a Berlin subway. "I always liked playing Carrie as someone who's in the game, who's an active officer," Danes says. "She was meant to do it."

As if those traits weren't enough, Danes also had to grapple with Carrie's bipolar condition. Depicted as both a blessing and a curse, her illness allows her to intuit intelligence, obsess over details and make connections that elude her peers. On the other hand, she suffers mental breakdowns and undergoes electroconvulsive therapy at one point. That scene concerned Patinkin. He spoke to the writers about making it clear that alternative treatments exist. "There is great responsibility in telling a story about mental illness," he says.

This wasn't Danes's first time portraying a character with a developmental challenge. She won her first Emmy for her arresting depiction of an autistic animal-science expert in HBO's acclaimed film *Temple Grandin*. Playing Carrie afforded Danes the opportunity to show what it can be like to live with a bipolar disorder. "I never wanted to be glib about her having this condition," she says. She studied YouTube videos posted by individuals who'd recorded themselves in a manic state. "I found such deep respect for people who go through so much just to get through their day," she says. "It's dangerous. It's painful. It can be corrosive. But there is value in seeing the world from a different vantage point."

At times, fans and critics poked fun at Danes's "cry face," her instinctive manner of crumpling her features when Carrie was distraught. But Danes relished playing someone so fragile yet hardboiled, so oversized and paradoxical. "I grew to really love her. It was such a pleasure to play someone so outrageously smart and brave and daring. And defined by her relationship to her work."

WHILE CARRIE AND SAUL SERVED AS HOME-
LAND'S THROUGHLINE, OTHER INDELIBLE
CHARACTERS WOVE IN AND OUT, LEAVING
THEIR MARK. "I'll never say goodbye to Rupert," Patinkin says, referring to Rupert Friend, who played Peter Quinn, a CIA paramilitary officer with a crush on Carrie that many fans hoped she'd reciprocate. F. Murray Abraham recurred as Dar Adal, a squirrely CIA black-ops specialist who never fully reveals his cards. "It's interesting," Patinkin says. "We're playing people who are living in a world where we trust no one." And yet, to function as a tightly knit TV ensemble, "You need and have to trust everyone."

Some gambles to align the plot with real events paid off. Others didn't. For season six, Elizabeth Marvel came aboard to play President-elect Elizabeth Keane just as Hillary Clinton was presumed to become the first woman U.S. president. "They did expect her to win," Patinkin says. Smack in the middle of production, however, Donald Trump capsized Clinton's bid. Danes says, "I think that was the hardest moment for our writers, actually."

One other person straddled the show from start to finish: Maury Sterling played Max Piotrowski, a tech whiz with Asperger's syndrome who routinely supported Carrie's unsanctioned surveillance operations. Danes says the only line she ever improvised on the show was her description of him as a "weird little brother." Usually depicted as her sidekick, Max turns downright heroic in the final season, when the story returns to Afghanistan and U.S. efforts to facilitate peace. "I think it's fair to say that season eight is the Maury Sterling show," Patinkin says.

When it came to tackling foreign intelligence issues, nothing was ever black and white on *Homeland*. And in the final season, a big question hovers over everything: what has the U.S. learned from how it handled things after 9/11, when it invaded Iraq and Afghanistan?

"I think we can agree we were too reactionary," Danes says. "We may have aggravated the crisis as much as we defused it. Who's good and who's bad?"

"Who are the terrorists?" Patinkin asks.

"Are they us?" Danes counters.

In season eight, Saul attempts to draw a Taliban leader, Haissam Haqqani (Numan Acar), into peace negotiations. Viewers first met the Turkish-born actor in season four, when Haqqani led a U.S. embassy siege. As an aside, Patinkin notes that he and Acar may sit on opposite sides of the table in *Homeland*, but in reality they are lifelong friends. "Why can't the world be like this?" he says.

WITH *HOMELAND* DONE AND EVERYONE SCATTERING TO NEW PROJECTS, THEY ARE READJUSTING. The day after production wrapped, Patinkin was in a New York restaurant and told a friend, "It's over." Suddenly he found himself overwhelmed with unexpected emotion, crying and unable to speak. To ease the transition, he was returning to his musical theater roots with a thirty-city concert tour that he completed just before the virus shutdown.

Danes, meanwhile, underwent several major life changes through the course of the series. She wed actor Hugh Dancy just before they shot the pilot. (He notably played a presidential adviser in the final season.) Over the years she also gave birth to two boys, now seven and almost two years old. So, her initial plan was to simply allow her new reality to settle in. Easier said than done: "For the first two weeks," she says, "I had a dream every night that I was shooting the last day. I was stuck on the finality of it."

They will miss everyone. "You really become a family," Patinkin says, recalling how the props department went out of its way to imbue his last scene with a special resonance. Saul is moving and packing up his belongings, which includes an heirloom silverware box. When Patinkin picked it up, he noticed that its gold nameplate was embossed "Sinton." "How can that be?" Patinkin pondered, getting chills. "That's my mother's maiden name." He later learned the props people had researched it. "It made the world of Saul Berenson completely connected to the world of Doris Sinton."

"I was happy with the ending," says Danes, referring to how the writers brought the show full circle, leaving viewers to wonder whether Carrie is acting for or against her homeland, just as they wrestled with Brody's motives in season one.

As the interview comes to a close, Patinkin and Danes discuss getting together soon. "She will be more than with me forever," he says, as they lean together for a goodbye embrace. Does he mean Claire... or Carrie? ☺

Homeland is available on traditional on-demand platforms and Showtime's stand-alone streaming service.



