

# ‘Are we having fun yet?’: The Starz television network and *Party Down* as indie TV

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## Abstract

This article examines the sitcom *Party Down* (2009–10) one of the first shows commissioned by the US premium cable service Starz as it sought to compete with HBO and Showtime, but cancelled after two seasons due to low ratings. Reports in 2021 of plans for its return characterised it as a ‘cult TV’ show revived due to fan demand. Yet by analysing its original production contexts and its aesthetic attributes the article argues that it is best understood as a proto-typical instance of ‘indie TV,’ aligned with Starz’ strategic positioning in relation to its indie-oriented subscriber base at that time.

## Keywords

Starz, indie TV, *Party Down*, American independent film, cable television, cult TV

In March 2021 *Variety* reported that the US premium cable service Starz was ‘reviving’ *Party Down*, a half-hour workplace sitcom that ran originally on the Starz channel for two seasons in 2009 and 2010 before being cancelled - a fact it sidestepped in favour of a quotation from Christina Davis, president of original programming, who instead stressed that ‘fans have been waiting more than 10 years for this revival to happen’ (Turchiano, 2021). The idea that Starz was responding to fans’ desire for more of their show saw it tap into a well-established narrative of television series’ resuscitation stretching as far back as the original *Star Trek* (1966–1969), through *Cagney & Lacey* (1982–1988), to a more recent example such as *Arrested Development* (2003–2006; 2018–2019). Neatly, this narrative also encompassed *Veronica Mars* (2005–2006; 2007; 2019), another show by *Party Down* co-creator Rob Thomas - indeed, the record-breaking 2013 Kickstarter campaign for the *Veronica Mars* film surely served to reinforce a sense of its veracity.

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Press coverage of the show at the time of its original cancellation had described it as ‘cult TV’ (Andreeva, 2010a; Ausiello, 2010), even if that appeared mostly a concise synonym for ‘low ratings but critically acclaimed,’ with *Party Down* making the American Film Institute’s list of the top 10 TV shows of 2009 (Stewart, 2009), as well as *Time*’s top 10 list of 2010 (Poniewozik, 2010) while being watched by an average of 125,000 viewers across its second season (Guider, 2010). The finale was reportedly seen by just 74,000 people, fewer than the population of Santa Monica, where some of the show’s personnel resided (Andreeva, 2010a). As one reviewer noted sardonically, it was rather less of a cult than a ‘coterie’ (Guider, 2010).

Yet looked at from another perspective, the idea of playing up *Party Down*’s fan appeal made perfect sense. As Myles McNutt notes, Starz rebranded itself in 2016 with the tagline ‘Obsessable,’ and which underlined that it had been seeking to differentiate itself from rivals HBO and Showtime by constructing ‘premium audiences specifically as fan audiences’ (2018: 375). Typified by original shows such as *Spartacus* (2010–2013), *Da Vinci’s Demons* (2013–2015) and *Black Sails* (2014–2017), Starz focused on ‘creating programming that generated fanbases, regardless of the prestige attached to them’ (McNutt: 380), and which could appeal to global distributors. The irony, invisible in the press coverage of *Party Down*’s ‘revival,’ is that it was one of a number of shows that Starz had cancelled as it sought to realign its activities to service this ‘Obsessable’ programming strategy. Indeed, McNutt describes *Party Down*, along with several other titles cancelled around the same time, the most high profile of which was *Crash* (2008–2009), based on Paul Haggis’s Oscar-winning film from 2004, as ‘a costly false start’ for Starz in the business of producing original television series (McNutt, 2018: 378).

While it is hardly surprising that this sort of complicating history would be absent from a glorified press release about *Party Down*’s belated third season, it does draw attention to the fact that entertainment industry rebranding is often, as Paul Grainge reminds us, about fashioning corporate narratives that morph past activities to suit present needs (2008). This article takes a close look at the conditions and contexts that shaped the production of the original *Party Down*, as well as the aesthetic and thematic attributes of the show. The objective is not to make a case for it as ‘cult TV,’ although there is certainly some evidence of an ‘intertextually activated’ (Hills, 2003: 522) basis for supporting that description, particularly as Starz leveraged numerous post-cancellation opportunities for its VOD distribution. Rather, it is to argue for an understanding of *Party Down* as a prototypical instance of ‘indie TV,’ affiliated with the demographic, affective and ideological attributes of the period’s indie film culture. These attributes were then finding their way into US television, particularly via its premium cable services, and as discussed below, could be found elsewhere on the Starz cable service, a fact not noted in the scholarship to date on either American independent film or on contemporary television.

Starz’ investment in American independent film and its audiences, which dated back to the mid-1990s, evinced the growing association of commercial television with the sector, and the article makes the case for *Party Down* as further evidence of the cable service’s strategic positioning in relation to this indie-oriented subscriber niche. While its cancellation owed much to the aforementioned vicissitudes of corporate repositioning, the environment of ‘late linear’ television *Party Down* inhabited presented ratings pressures

distinct from the streaming era to come, and which has proven rather more hospitable to subsequent shows we might characterise as ‘indie TV.’ While that term, unlike indie film, has seen fairly limited discursive circulation (for reasons cited below), this article seeks to contribute to a growing body of scholarship that sees in it a more precise means of appraising the industrial, cultural and aesthetic intersection of American independent film with commercial television during an era of wide-ranging media convergence (Ford, 2019; Perkins and Schreiber, 2019; Lyons and Tzioumakis, 2023), and which have served to facilitate its emergence as a distinctive feature of US screen entertainment in the twenty-first century.

### **‘Start doing indie comedy sort of stuff’: The commissioning of *Party Down***

Describing the origins of *Party Down* at a cast and producers’ reunion at *Vulture* Festival 2019 (an event which reportedly helped create the impetus for its revival), Rob Thomas recalled watching *The Office* (2001–2003) on BBC America together with fellow TV producers and writers John Enbom and Dan Etheridge and the actor Paul Rudd. Thomas stated that ‘never in my career had I thought ‘I want to write a comedy’, but sad comedy... called out to us’ (‘A Reunion of *Party Down*,’ 2019). Inspired to ‘write a comedy in that tone,’ the four worked on an episode outline over several years, and then approached HBO. The premise of the show was to follow the exploits of a shambolic catering company called Party Down, comprised mostly of struggling actors and writers, as they worked events around Los Angeles while plotting their next career moves. According to Enbom HBO ‘bought it before we got through the door’ based on the expectation that Rudd would also star.<sup>1</sup> Yet the actor, whose stock was rising after *The Forty-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) decided subsequently not to appear, with HBO quickly pulling out. The creators also cited as key to their rejection the fact that they had submitted something ‘downbeat and small’ whereas HBO, home to *Entourage* (2004–2011) ‘bought it thinking it was going to be very inside Hollywood.’ With Rudd out of the frame as a performer, the creators adopted a different strategy, self-financing a pilot episode shot in Spring 2007 at Thomas’ home, using crew from *Veronica Mars* freed up by that show’s shortened third season, and featuring actors who had all appeared on the show (Adam Scott, Jane Lynch, Ken Marino, and Ryan Hansen). Thomas recollected that ‘we went to every network that was doing comedy and showed them our cut final episode.’ FX and Comedy Central both turned them down, as did Showtime. Running out of options, they sent it to Starz on the suggestion of Thomas’ agent, who reportedly told him that ‘they want to start doing indie comedy sort of stuff.’ Recalling a period a good five years before Netflix and Amazon would begin to finance original series and significantly reconfigure the television production landscape, Thomas admitted that it ‘really was our last stop.’

At the point that Starz agreed to commission *Party Down*, which would become the first show made for the network by its new production and distribution company, Starz Media, it had yet to air any original programming. As McNutt points out, Starz had long looked to multiplexing (offering several channels covering different genres of licenced movies) to entice subscribers, but the burgeoning appeal of original content elsewhere on premium cable, evident

in the success of shows such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) on HBO, or *Weeds* (2005-2012) and *Dexter* (2006-2013) on Showtime, had 'reshaped the concept of "value" in the sector (2018: 377). A hike in the licencing fees for Hollywood movies was also reportedly impacting on Starz' operating income (Hemingway, 2008: 29). Its initial strategy for introducing original content was logical, if not particularly inspired. As outlined by VP of programming Mike Ruggiero, the idea was to commission shows that were 'Hollywood-centered and focused on celebrities...because Starz's subscribers are accustomed to seeing movies on the network' (quoted in Dempsey, 2007). For instance, *Head Case* (2007-2009) was about a Beverly Hills therapist who treats movie star clients, while *Hollywood Residential* (2008) featured stars enduring hapless home improvement antics on their properties. Both sitcoms saw celebrities appearing as themselves. The network also launched *Starz Inside* (2007-2008), in which film critic Richard Roeper examined different aspects of show business such as film fashion or the art of make-up effects. It is therefore easy to see how *Party Down*, centring on the exploits of a party catering crew also promised the opportunity for celebrity cameos, and seemingly aligned quite closely with that commissioning idea. This was further evident in the network's decision to launch it as a 'companion' to the second season of *Head Case* in March 2009 ('Starz Entertainment Caters to Hollywood,' 2008).

While the quick cancellation of all these shows can certainly be seen as a 'costly false start' for Starz, it is important to note that the network characterised its strategy at the time of launch as one of caution and restraint. Ruggiero stressed that 'we're trying to take a measured approach, and not trying to do everything at once' (quoted in Dempsey, 2007), while other network executives let it be known that they were developing 'lower-cost original series as a complement to the channel's movie packages' (Andreeva, 2008). Paul Young, producer of *Hollywood Residential*, explained their appeal to the network by stating that 'my company is an expert at producing low-budgeted comedies' (Dempsey, 2007). While thematically these shows might have promised to extend Starz' association with Hollywood glitz and glamour, cost-wise they were done on the cheap (with the obvious exception of *Crash*). Enbom stressed that *Party Down* was made for a 'scrappy little budget' (Sepinwall, 2010a), and, as with the other sitcoms commissioned by Starz, was a single-camera show with a short production schedule. Moreover, it didn't even require any studio sets. Each episode saw the staff of the Party Down catering company working at a different hospitality event, allowing them all to be shot at varied locations over four days, which Enbom noted 'allowed us to shoot as cheaply as we possibly could' (Abele, 2009). Looking for the best way to characterise the approach to filming *Party Down*, he stated that 'it was done very indie film, run-and-gun style' (Abele, 2009).

Recourse to the term indie to describe elements of *Party Down* – here to pinpoint an economical shooting style, previously to identify a genre (i.e. 'indie comedy sort of stuff') – warrants further consideration. Ruggiero, the executive responsible for greenlighting *Party Down*, had been headhunted by Starz from the Independent Film Channel (IFC), where he was vice president of programming and scheduling, and not long after organising a tenth anniversary event for Quentin Tarantino's landmark indie blockbuster *Pulp Fiction* (1994) ('Starz poaches IFC's Ruggiero,' 2005). The American independent film sector had since the early 1990s grown remarkably in scale, infrastructure and public profile, and in no small part due to the investment in it by major entertainment and media conglomerates. IFC was itself owned by the Cablevision

Systems Corporation, one of the nation's largest cable television providers. This can be seen as indicative of the growing convergence of commercial television with American independent film during its 'indie' phase, and the resulting conversance of key personnel such as Ruggiero with both sectors.

Yannis Tzioumakis uses the term indie to more precisely identify this period, one in 'which the label "independent" ceased to signify economic independence from the majors...instead, the label became a signifier of a particular type of film, the "indie film"' (2013: 34). This is, as Michael Z. Newman points out, consistent with the way in which the 1990s onwards witnessed the 'mainstreaming of indie culture' more widely, encompassing music, clothing, video games and comic books, as indie became 'a buzzword...whose meanings - alternative, hip, edgy, uncompromising - far exceed the literal designation of media products that are made independently of major firms' (Newman, 2009: 16). Nevertheless, most television scholarship to date has tended to limit the use of the term indie to a diminutive for independently produced 'internet-distributed television' facilitated by 'open access portals' (Lotz, 2018: 149–150), with Aymar Jean Christian's work in this area as both theorist and practitioner being particularly influential (2014; 2018a; 2018b). But if this period saw indie used much more promiscuously to connote a form of cultural expression and a taste culture, then it can also be said to encompass commercial television. If indie in the cinematic realm can be characterised as 'movies for hipsters' (Newman, 2013), then we surely cannot discount the fact that, particularly in this era of media convergence, we might be said to have 'television for hipsters' as well.

This would seem a plausible way to characterise shows such as *Portlandia* (2011–2018) or *High Maintenance* (2012–2015; 2016–2020), but a corpus of indie TV might be seen to include a wider array of programs and appeals. For example, Alisa Perren has shown how the Hispanic-focused El Rey cable network attempted to use *From Dusk till Dawn: The Series* (2014–2016) and the 'indie cool' of auteur Robert Rodriguez to brand the entire channel (2018). Jessica Ford used the phrase 'women's indie television' to describe 'a new cycle of women-centric dramedies in conversation with indie cinema, quality television and popular media feminisms' (2019: 928), including *Girls* (2012–2017), *Insecure* (2016–2021), and *Better Things* (2016–2022). Forthun (2019) demonstrated how Terrence Nance's experimental Afrosurrealist *Random Acts of Flyness* (2018–present), produced by A24, blurred the promotional link between film and television in its foregrounding of Nance as a singular Black indie creative.<sup>2</sup> Broader still, the collection *Indie TV: Industry, Aesthetics and Medium Specificity* (Lyons and Tzioumakis, 2023) makes the case for understanding indie TV with reference to a much more complex history of aesthetic, industrial and institutional trends and traditions. This ranges from the ways in which US and international television supported the American independent film sector from the late 1970s to the early 1990s (Tzioumakis, 2023), to the recent mobilising of documentary film as indie TV by A&E networks (Lyons, 2023). While the term indie TV might, as Perren notes (2023), have had limited scholarly and industry traction to this point, not least because other terms such as 'quality,' 'cinematic,' 'cult,' or 'peak' have proved durable in anchoring debates, its efficacy lies in its capacity to more precisely pinpoint instances of convergence between independent film in its indie configuration and the rapidly transforming landscape of US television.

In the case of Starz, that institutional link to indie clearly did not begin and end with Mike Ruggiero. Back in 1995 Starz' parent company Liberty Media Group had reportedly paid between \$750 million and \$1 billion to Turner Broadcasting for exclusive pay TV rights to all theatrical movies from New Line Cinema and its specialty division Fine Line Features through 2005 (Dempsey 1995: 66). Fine Line was at that point firmly established as one of the leading operators in the independent film sector with titles such as *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *Short Cuts* (1993). With the start of the multiplex channel Starz! Cinema in May 1998, launched with a mission to 'spotlight independent and critically acclaimed films for adults' (Hettrick, 1998: 4), Fine Line's indie films found a dedicated home on the cable service. Liberty would consolidate that activity in 2000 when it bought Starz the exclusive pay TV rights to 10 movies by Miramax, another leading specialty division (Andreeva, 2000: 7, 25), and in 2001 the Denver based company saw its \$5 million investment in converting a dilapidated multiplex cinema on the University of Colorado campus realised as the 'Starz Encore Film Center,' which would be a 'premier showcase for film festivals, revivals and first-run art movies' (Zeiger, 2001: 14). This was yet another indication of Starz' desire to bolster its brand association with cinephilia and indie film, and to boost its appeal to a young, upscale demographic.

The trade press took note of such developments, with *Variety* running a full page spread on Starz Cinema the following year, stating that the Sundance Channel and Independent Film Channel had a 'tough new kid on the block' in capturing 'the loyalty of indie-film junkies' given Starz' exclusive deals with the aforementioned distributors and also Universal Focus (Dempsey, 2002: 21). Presciently, *Variety* pointed to the fact that both Sundance and IFC produced original series as well showing licenced movies as an ongoing competitive advantage over the newcomer.<sup>3</sup> Notably, Starz would further strengthen its appeal to 'indie-film junkies' in the year preceding the debut of its original series with the launch of IndiePlex, for 'fans with rebellious tastes,' of one of three new multiplex movie channels offered to subscribers. Friday and Saturday night on IndiePlex would be devoted to 'Indie Icons,' with films 'from directors who have defined Independent Cinema such as Quentin Tarantino, the Coen Brothers, Steven Soderbergh, Spike Lee and Martin Scorsese' (Starz Entertainment Group, 2006), offering yet more evidence of the colloquial use of 'indie' as a loosely defined corpus of the 'cool' and the 'rebellious,' and of its active mobilisation by Starz at this time. Concurrent plans for the production and distribution of theatrical movies by Starz through its new Overture film studio also sought to encompass indie film, as evinced by the high-profile purchase of *The Visitor* (2007) at the Toronto Film Festival, noted by the trade press as a bold statement of intent to operate in the indie and specialty film market (Hemingway, 2008: 30). The overall shape of Starz' strategic positioning at this time thus supports the plausibility of characterising *Party Down* as indie TV, dovetailing with the subscriber niche it was ramping up its appeal to elsewhere, and one that finds further evidence in many characteristics of the actual show.

## **‘Hey, Napoleon Dynamite – is he Napoleon Dynamite?’: Party Down as indie TV**

Although Ruggiero characterised the roster of Starz’ first original series as ‘Hollywood-centered and focused on celebrities’ this far from adequately summed up *Party Down*. In contrast to *Entourage*, a gleefully superficial show with which it shared some similarities (an ensemble cast; a Los Angeles setting; and an aspiring young male actor as a lead) *Party Down* was not about the thrill of being on the inside track in show business, but rather the ennui, absurdity and ignominy of labouring on its periphery. Moreover, even if it wasn’t about those attending the A-list Hollywood parties, it also wilfully resisted the opportunity to entice prospective viewers with the vicarious pleasure of seeing its cast of cater waiters work such glamorous environs. The title of first episode of season one, ‘Willow Canyon Homeowners Annual Party’ made that decision abundantly clear. Indeed, it appears to be the same episode that in outline form was submitted to HBO as ‘Sherman Oaks Neighbourhood Association Potluck,’ and according to Thomas, definitely ‘did not turn them on’ ([‘A Reunion of Party Down,’ 2019](#)). The co-creator, offering his own conspectus in a press release accompanying the show’s launch in 2009 used the British *The Office* as the key reference point, suggesting that if it ‘was a show about people who have given themselves over completely to the rat race, ‘Party Down’ is a show about people who have chased the dream for far too long. We’re particularly interested in mining the comedy of what happens as the dream fades’ ([‘Starz Entertainment Gets Ready To “Party Down”,’ 2008](#)). What is notable about Thomas’s statement is just how inadequately it captures the two shows and the relationship between them. As Ben Walters notes, for all the critical attention *The Office* received for its masterful deployment of contemporaneous Reality TV’s formal devices to amplify its ‘plausible realism’ (Walters, 2005: 3), it also fully conformed to the ‘well-established genre trope’ of ‘sitcom-as-trap’ (Walters, 2005: 124) – albeit one given added pathos by the refusal to mostly forgo the ‘traditional model of high jinks and high farce’ (Walters, 2005: 13) in the workplace seen in precursors from *Citizen James* (1960-1962) to *Black Books* (2000-2004). Indeed, Walters’ description of *The Office* as situating its comedy around ‘the stifling frustrations of jobbing work’ (Walters, 2005: 135) seems just as apt for describing hospitality employment in *Party Down* as it does for working at a paper company in Slough. As Thomas noted, this was a show centring on ‘people whose life ambition is not to be waiting on people at your party’ ([‘A Reunion of Party Down,’ 2019](#)).

This similarity between the two shows is clearer still when considering how each tends to focalise around the worldview of a central romantic dyad. Walters notes that *The Office*’s Tim and Dawn become ‘increasingly enervated by their workplace,’ (2005: 124) and we are frequently invited, via reaction shots and point of view, to align with their perspective on this predicament and the egregious behaviour of their boss, David Brent. *Party Down*’s pairing of failed actor Henry Pollard (Adam Scott) and struggling comedian Casey Klein (Lizzy Caplan) provides the show with a similarly sane and jaded anchor point on the banal ‘teamwork’ speak of their boss Ron Donald (Ken Marino). Both shows also establish from the outset the mutual sexual attraction between the pairings, with Dawn’s fiancé Lee, and Casey’s husband Mike complicating their coupling. Notably,

Gervais and Merchant intentionally created for *The Office* a ‘Ross and Rachel-style romance’ (quoted in Walters 2005: 15), which meant that, somewhat circuitously and unwittingly, *Party Down* found itself aping one of network television’s all-time blockbuster sitcoms.

The fact that this sitcom lineage isn’t readily apparent in a viewing of either show is due in part to the routine nature of workplace romance - *Forbes* reported in 2019 that more than half of employees had at some point been ‘romantically involved with a co-worker’ (Elsesser, 2019) - but is most importantly down to how it is dealt with aesthetically. Gervais claimed that *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) was the biggest influence on *The Office*, ‘a fake documentary but very realistic and about little bits and pieces’ (quoted in Walters, 2005: 9) which by implication meant that *Party Down* was drawing indirectly on one of the most beloved American independent films of the 1980s. Enbom and Etheridge described the approach they were aiming for in *Party Down* with the portmanteau term ‘crealism,’ combining comedy with realism (*Party Down: A Look Behind the Scenes*, 2010). While they jettisoned the mockumentary format, the attention to capturing ‘little bits and pieces’ in a way that feels realistic has a long history within indie film, in part a consequence of what Geoff King terms the ‘mutual reinforcement of practical-industrial and formal-aesthetic factors’ shaping production in the sector, and evident in characteristics such as location shooting and the use of handheld camerawork (2005: 113). Certainly, the indie maxim that ‘the budget becomes the aesthetic’ (King, 2005: 160) is evident in *Party Down*, and the drab interiors of the food preparation spaces where many of the character interactions take place set the stage for foregrounding the minutiae of drudgery. The eschewing of incidental music and stylish transitions, the low contrast ambient lighting, the preponderance of simple medium/medium close-up shots and the unobtrusive editing speed and style all add to that prevailing sense of the quotidian.

If these formal attributes are significant, they are not in themselves sufficient to make a case for *Party Down* as indie TV, not least because they are also in place in shows that don’t warrant that description (e.g. *The Office* or Marion and Geoff (2000-2003)), and are not in place in shows that arguably do (e.g. *Transparent* (2014-2019)). Certainly, *Party Down* anticipates an audience’s cognisance of indie intertexts, such as having catering crew member Roman DeBeers (Martin Starr) be misrecognised as Jon Heder (Napoleon Dynamite in the 2004 indie hit of the same name), or casting Joey Lauren Adams, star of iconic indie films *Chasing Amy* (1997) and *Dazed and Confused* (1993) in the recurring role of Diandra Stiltskin. However, the fact that Henry is a failed indie film actor gives the show a very direct relationship to that world, made more important by the fact that, as Thomas points out, he is ‘the center of the show...he’s the grounded character...the viewer’s eyes into this world...he represents the rest of us in this situation’ (quoted in Sepinwall, 2009). The show starts with Henry having given up on his career as an actor (in episode six he concedes that ‘my fate is with the losers’) with his circumstances being all the more vexing due to the fact that the only part anyone remembers him for is acting in a beer commercial where he uttered the line ‘are we having fun yet?’. Several episodes include a scene where, whilst serving as a waiter or bartender, he is pressured into performing this line by a host or guest, usually only compounding his humiliation. Cannily, this provided *Party Down* with a memorable catchphrase, one used frequently in



press coverage of the show, while at the same time ridiculing the very idea of catchphrases as a sign of commercial debasement (Gervais reportedly made ‘not having any catchphrases’ a rule for *The Office* (Walters, 2005: 9)). *Party Down*’s approach is therefore rather in keeping with the way that indie culture’s critique of an ‘excessively homogenized, commercialized media’ (Newman, 2009: 17) is often itself artfully confected, nowhere better exemplified than Nirvana’s best-selling ‘Flower Sniffin’... Corporate Rock Whores’ T-shirt from 1992, produced after the seminal indie band had signed to a major label.

While the first season of *Party Down* left unexamined the issue of exactly why Henry’s career had stalled, season two sought to offer evidence that he ‘was talented, that the failure of his career was through no fault of his own abilities’ (Enbom quoted in Sepinwall, 2010a), in an obvious contrast to the embarrassing show business ambitions of *The Office*’s David Brent. In an episode entitled ‘Steve Guttenberg’s Birthday,’ which affords what passes for the most stellar celebrity cameo featured across the show’s entire run (only Patrick Duffy even runs it close), Casey finds in the host’s DVD collection a film called *Sundown Strip*, which Henry explains was ‘this indie I did years ago.’ After sneaking off to watch the film in Guttenberg’s home screening room, Casey tells Henry that ‘you were really good...you never told me that you were, like, a legitimate actor for real.’ The event proves to be the catalyst for Henry to attempt to restart his acting career. In ‘Constance Carmell Wedding,’ the final episode of season two, fellow caterer Kyle Bradway (Ryan Hansen) asks Henry to read a script for the film *Velour* - ‘this indie thing. It’s supposed to be great.’ Kyle, who admits that he doesn’t understand the script (he even mispronounces the title as ‘Velower’) is in many respects Henry’s (and indie culture’s) antithesis: an inane aspiring actor/model/singer oblivious to his own lack of talent, but whose blond good looks and alpha male confidence fuel his upbeat disposition. The final scene of what would be the last episode of the soon-to-be cancelled show depicts Henry at an audition for a part in *Velour*, and we cut to black as he enters the casting room. Neatly, this unsettled dénouement is televisually and cinematically apposite, providing a cliff-hanger (albeit a low key one) for the season finale, but also offering a lack of closure that had become something of a cliché in indie films by this point in time, as Henry is poised for his own re-entry into the indie world.

The irony of *Party Down*’s season two ending is that it was designed to craft Henry’s departure from the catering crew, and that of Adam Scott from the show, due to the fact that he had already secured not another indie gig but instead a regular role on the major network sitcom *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015). As with fellow actor Jane Lynch, who had already been cast on the hit musical drama series *Glee* (2009-2015) prior to *Party Down*’s filming, and who left before the end of season one, Scott had signed a ‘non-traditional deal structure’ (Enbom, quoted in Sepinwall, 2010a) with Starz that contracted him to the show one season at a time. This was also the case for the remainder of the cast, and was designed to allow them to participate in the yearly pilot season for new TV shows, with the accompanying risk that they could depart if a pilot got picked up. As a low budget show on a network sparingly entering the original series market, Enbom conceded that ‘we simply did not have the resources to lock everybody down’ (quoted in Sepinwall, 2010a). This gave *Party Down* a strikingly meta quality, in that it was a show that centred

on individuals undertaking low-paid employment that was insecure and susceptible to the likely turnover of personnel, working on a show that was itself low-paid (at least in television terms – at the 2019 *Vulture* Festival reunion cast members competed for who had the lowest fee), featured short term contracts, was susceptible to personnel changes, and was terminated abruptly after a relatively short period of time. The situation of precarious labour, while hardly new (although perhaps more widespread in the era of the ‘gig economy’) is clearly not exclusive to work in the creative sector. However, it has always been a pronounced characteristic of labour in the independent/indie sector, part of the supposed trade-off for a greater degree of autonomy. *Party Down*, ‘done very indie film, run-and-gun style,’ and largely unencumbered by network notes from the Starz’ executive suite, was evidently bequeathed with indie’s characteristic creative freedom *and* its characteristic insecurity.

It would not be a stretch to say that this dynamic of instability was written into the show in a way that very clearly indexed indie ideals. Reflecting on the aforementioned contractual arrangements for *Party Down*, Enbom mused that this was ‘part of the challenge of the show: if anybody enjoys too much success, they are not on the show anymore’ (quoted in [Sepinwall, 2010a](#)). Given this fact, it is striking that by far the most prevalent theme evident across the two seasons of *Party Down* is that of ‘winners versus losers,’ with us as viewers positioned to root for the *Party Down* catering crew, invariably the losers in any given situation. As apparent in Henry’s statement that ‘my fate is with the losers’ most of the catering crew were working a ‘shitty job’ instead of realising their ambitions elsewhere, be that performers Henry, Casey and Kyle, or Roman, a screenplay writer of ‘hard’ sci-fi. In the case of ‘team leader’ Ron Donald that ambition was to run a ‘Soup R Crackers’ franchise, which required the investment of *Party Down* owner Alan Duk (Ken Jeong). This made him susceptible to the vacuous self-motivational ‘winners and losers’ patter similar to that which afflicts Richard Hoover (Greg Kinnear) in [Little Miss Sunshine \(2006\)](#), the breakout indie comedy released during the show’s gestation. Notably, both that film and the show lampooned this discourse as facile and unequivocally sided with the losers.

The *Party Down* crew was completed by Constance Carmell (Jane Lynch), a former actor in B movies forgettable to everyone but the enamoured mobsters she meets in the episode ‘Celebrate Ricky Sargulesh,’ (1:8) and her season two replacement Lydia Dunfree (Megan Mullally), new to Los Angeles and cheerfully ambitious about getting her teenage daughter Escapade (Kaitlyn Dever) into show business. Their function was in part to mitigate what Enbom described as the ‘underlying current of bitterness’ on the show (quoted in [Sepinwall, 2010a](#)). Nevertheless, they still formed part of the collective defined by their status as losers. The show doubled down on this fact by having the *Party Down* crew be losers *as* caterers, shambolic and unprofessional when compared to their competitor Valhalla Catering, led by the slick and abrasive Uda Bengt (Kristen Bell). This reached its apex in season two episode ‘*Party Down* Company Picnic,’ (2:7) when Valhalla worked the catering company’s own event, and Roman and Kyle accepted a challenge to stage a ‘catering contest’ against them. As Henry notes sardonically to them, ‘so on your day off you turn your shitty job into a contest?’ Yet the contest turns out to be a ruse to get Kyle to open a shaken beer bottle and spray his own face, at which point a

member of Valhalla exclaims that ‘you guys suck at everything.’ After Casey wins the internal Party Down picnic games competition, and declares ‘now that I’m a winner I can’t stop winning...it’s all I want to do...I’m addicted to winning,’ a false sense of confidence leads them to challenge Valhalla to a kickball competition. Predictably, they lose emphatically, with a ringer drafted into the team failing to provide a competitive advantage and instead collapsing in a late-game fit of vomiting. Kyle’s pre-game protestation that ‘just because you’re better looking and more talented does not mean you’re better’ thus proves to be a futile disavowal of how the universe actually works, as the episode archly resists the occasion for an uplifting underdog victory.

Across *Party Down*’s original two seasons it stages numerous instances of ‘winner versus loser’ with the former invariably characterised as either undeserving or insufferable. The invidious or fatuous nature of competitiveness is also particularly prevalent. The very first episode, ‘Willow Canyon Homeowners Annual Party,’(1.1) skewers the banality of middle class suburban rivalry with a neighbourhood awards ceremony including the categories ‘best mailbox’ and ‘best Christmas decorations,’ with the host smugly declaring ‘we’re all winners.’ Episode two, ‘California College Conservative Union Caucus’ (1.2) takes aim at Republican rhetoric by featuring a motivational poster declaring ‘I’m a conservative because I believe if you work hard you succeed,’ and ends with Ron, desperate to meet Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, setting fire to the national flag in a parking lot. Engaged in a futile attempt to artificially weather it, Ron declares ‘you can be two things in life, you can be an achiever or a fuck up.’ Questioned by Henry as to ‘which one are you being right now?’ Ron replies that ‘I’m an achiever.’ Episode four, ‘Investors Dinner’ (1.4) centres on the attempts of con man host Tony Carolla (Daran Norris) to steal his guests’ money through a sham Mexican condo investment scheme. Ron is seduced by Carolla’s Powerpoint presentation of individual success, entitled ‘Gumption and Guts: The Rise of Tony Carolla, Self-Made Man,’ and gullibly parts with his own money before the scam is revealed. In ‘Taylor Stiltskin Sweet Sixteen’ (1.6) an entitled teenage girl’s party gets off to a bad start, with Kyle asking ‘can you imagine inviting two hundred people to your party and 10 losers show up?’ After being cajoled by Casey and Constance into reframing her thinking and eventually hitting the dance floor with the ‘losers,’ she abruptly leaves when the cool kids finally turn up, but only after offering a parting ‘fuck this.’ The episode ‘James Rolf High School Twentieth Reunion’ (1.9) sees Ron have the crew cater his very own class reunion, subsequently attempting to make out with Melinda Weintraub (Molly Parker), the event organiser and Prom Queen. Egged on by former high school friend Donnie to ‘score one for the losers,’ Ron’s plan is scuppered by the late arrival of Mark Defino (Kyle Bornheimer), onetime jock and Melinda’s unrequited love, now ‘running a venture marketing company and doing some heliskiing.’ In despair Ron downs an entire bottle of whisky onstage and declares ‘I am a new man and I am a success now’ before collapsing outside, vomiting and crying out for an ambulance. In the very next episode, ‘Stennheiser-Pong Wedding Reception’ (1.10) Ron attempts to get back on track by adhering to the slyly named Bentway Motivational System ‘for motivation and clear confidence.’ After having his mettle shaken by Valhalla Catering’s Uda Bengt’s withering assessment of him as a ‘fucking idiot,’ Ron again hits the bottle. Henry brings him back from the brink by improvising an alternative mantra,

‘Don’t Stop Believing,’ which Casey instantly spots as the title to the hit song by the band Journey. With remarkable synchronicity, this episode aired in the same week of May 2009 as the pilot episode of *Glee*, featuring the departed Jane Lynch, and for which the cast’s cover version of ‘Don’t Stop Believing’ would become a signature tune, exemplifying that show’s contrastingly upbeat ethos.

Thomas conceded that *Party Down* was a ‘pretty dour, misanthropic comedy’ (quoted in Halterman, 2010) but as the examples above attest, its animus was principally directed in paradigmatic indie fashion towards the venal and counterfeit nature of a society that produces winners and losers after its own image. In ‘Joel Munt’s Big Deal Party,’ (2.8) thrown to celebrate Roman’s old writing partner being paid \$1.5 million to adapt the sci-fi book *Axiomeleon* into a movie, Roman tells him ‘you fucked yourself by being a hack and a sell out.’ As Newman notes, the pitfalls of ‘selling out’ for a version of success seen as compromised and inauthentic is key to indie culture’s rhetoric of ‘purity and danger’ (2009: 19). Indie’s customary allegiance with the loser, as broadcast in Beck’s breakthrough hit of the same name from 1994 (in re-release when he moved from an independent label to Geffen’s DGC, which only reiterates indie’s internal contradictions) is predicated in large part on the superiority of rejecting mainstream values over compromising for the sake of success. For Roman, this results in vexing yet hilarious self-sabotage in the episode ‘Sin Say Shun Awards Afterparty’ (1.5) when he ruins the chance to flirt with an avowed sci-fi loving adult movie actress because she admits that what she really likes ‘is dragons.’ Despite the opportunity presented to him Roman simply can’t stop from interjecting that ‘dragons are fantasy’ – the start of a purist diatribe that sees her walk wearily away.

## The party is over. Sort of

Given its orientation it would be fair to conclude that *Party Down* was rather complexly related to the idea of conventional success, something conceded in Thomas’s comment that ‘I’m sure they [Starz] would love to have something that breaks through in a more mainstream kind of way’ (quoted in Sepinwall, 2010a). This was uttered in interview just after the show’s second season broadcast, and as the co-creators waited to see if Starz would grant them a third season. On 30 June 2010 executive VP for programming Stephan Shelanski announced that the show had been cancelled, while reiterating that ‘Starz remains committed to aggressively expanding our original programming lineup’ (Andreeva, 2010a). Yet by August the trade press was reporting that Starz was catching ‘flak from TV-oriented blogs’ for removing the show from Starz on Demand and Netflix (Umstead and Spangler, 2010: 6). The company soon made it available for transactional VOD through Amazon, Xbox Live, iTunes, Playstation 3, iTunes and Sonic/CinemaNow, with Starz’ SVP for digital media Marc DeBevoise stating that ‘those platforms are the right audiences for this program. It had limited audience on our network but high buzz in the critical community’ (Umstead and Spangler: 6). Adam Scott described his decision to agree to appear in *Party Down* by stating that ‘the stakes were pretty low. It was going to be on Starz, so if it was terrible, it wasn’t going to be that widely seen’ (Sepinwall, 2010b). The critical consensus was to the contrary, yet the issue for Starz was that the plaudits

didn't convert into network numbers. Selling broadcast rights to the Esquire Network in 2013 ('[Starz Worldwide Distribution](#),' 2013) and streaming rights to HULU in 2014 ([Maglio](#), 2014), it would continue to offset the failure to be widely seen by at least being widely sold.

The decision to cancel *Party Down* had been taken by Chris Albrecht, the former head of HBO who had been installed as Starz CEO in December 2009. While Albrecht had publicly declared himself a fan of the show ([Andreeva](#), 2010a), he had also been cagey about its recommission, sidestepping a question about an early renewal in January 2010 by asking rhetorically 'how do you know they'll be successful?' ([Hibberd](#), 2010). As McNutt notes, Albrecht had been hired by Starz in large part because of his remarkable record in overseeing original programming at HBO, but he was intent on conceiving a different strategy for his new employer (2018: 380) - one that evidently did not include *Party Down*, commissioned by the previous regime. Albrecht set out what he called 'a new focused strategy' at Liberty Media's annual investor meeting in October 2010, one that centred on Starz 'looking to be more of a 'popcorn brand' than others in the premium TV space,' exemplified by historical fantasy dramas that could be 'globally monetizable' ([Szalai](#), 2010) such as *Spartacus* (2010-2013) and *Camelot* (2011), the first show greenlighted under his tenure. Unlike Roman, the refocused Starz would certainly not balk at the presence of dragons.

What was particularly striking was the way that Albrecht's strategy for Starz was geared towards making it a more profitable and streamlined entity that could be spun off from Liberty Media, as indeed it was in January 2013, as both became separate publicly traded companies. In so doing, Albrecht became the head of 'an indie cable programming group' ([Littleton](#), 2014), perhaps somewhat ironic given that this shift in direction had involved ditching its most indie TV show along the way. However, that should not be taken as an indication that Starz had exited the indie TV business altogether. Albrecht's commissioning of *The Girlfriend Experience* (2016-present), based on Steven Soderbergh's 2009 film of the same name, and overseen by indie filmmakers Lodge Kerrigan, Amy Seimetz and Anja Marquardt, and also Tanya Saracho's *Vida* (2018-2020) and Gregg Araki's *Now Apocalypse* (2019), evinced an ongoing willingness to develop original programming that could appeal to those subscribing to IndiePlex, all of which seemed more parts prestige than popcorn.<sup>4</sup>

It is also notable that most of these shows were developed after Starz was bought by Lionsgate in December 2016 (*The Girlfriend Experience* was commissioned prior to this). The company, described by Tino Balio as the largest 'mini-major' operating in the indie/specialty film sector, had built a reputation in the 2000s by 'releasing midrange and sometimes offbeat pictures' ([Balio](#), 2013: 145), such as *American Psycho* (2000), and *Crash* (2004), but also found tremendous mainstream success with the *Hunger Games* franchise (2012-23). Its television division had co-produced the short-lived *Crash* series with Starz, but found much more traction delivering shows such as *Weeds* (2005-2012), and *Mad Men* (2007-2015) to other cable networks. Albrecht left Starz in March 2019, having overseen a 48% growth in its subscribers during his tenure, one largely credited by observers to the 'Obsessable' roster of fan-oriented original content developed over that time ([Andreeva](#), 2019). Given the fact that the aforementioned *Vulture Festival Party*

*Down* cast and producers reunion occurred just several months after Albrecht left, it would be tempting to attribute its subsequent revival to his departure. Yet the more pertinent fact may be the growth of Starz as a standalone video streaming service, started by Albrecht in 2016, and which by 2022 had grown to 11.5 million domestic subscribers, and with over 24 million subscriptions worldwide (Tamanini, 2022). As McNutt notes, 'streaming platforms have altered the logics of premium cable narrowcasting' (2018: 381), and if *Party Down* had failed to work as a 'conventional' ratings success in the linear US prime time schedule of 2009 and 2010, the metrics have been reconfigured in the ensuing global streaming era. While Albrecht had deemed *Party Down* a loser, he would subsequently oversee the development of the Starz digital infrastructure that would ultimately support its return with a markedly different calculus for winning.

## Conclusion

*Party Down*'s original run occurred in a period in which, as Perren points out, 'journalistic discourses surrounding indie TV were still relatively sparse' (2023: 65) and certainly did not stretch to encompass it. Yet understanding the show through this lens nevertheless allows us to best grasp a number of its key attributes. Starz' impulse to 'start doing indie comedy sort of stuff,' which resulted in *Party Down*'s commissioning as one of its first slew of original programs can be understood as a response to the wider commercial appeal of indie content at this time, such as the aforementioned *Napoleon Dynamite* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, but more significantly as a further investment in the indie-oriented subscriber niche it had courted since the mid-1990s, most directly with IndiePlex. The fact that the Sundance Channel and the Independent Film Channel, its direct competitors for this demographic, could also offer their subscribers original content made the notion of commissioning shows that could serve this purpose all the clearer. In its mobilisation of indie intertexts, its focalisation around the struggles of an indie actor, its employment of a low-key indie aesthetic, and through its indexing of indie ideals (most centrally in siding with the 'losers') *Party Down* offered up much evidence to corroborate its courting of this subscriber niche, albeit one deemed underperforming as *Starz* sought largely to change tack under its new CEO.

The decision by Starz to focus instead on commissioning 'Obsessable' original content was characterised by one of the companies that supplied it as providing 'compelling cinematic' programming for the network (Andreeva, 2010b). The idea of 'cinematic' television has been a point of much discussion and debate within television scholarship (Jaramillo, 2013; Wheatley, 2016; Restivo, 2019; Gray and Johnson, 2021; Lotz, 2021; Richards, 2021), with Mills noting that many 'such uses of the term draw on unexamined ideas of cinema in the first place' (2013: 81). With this caveat in mind, it might be suggested that Starz' change in strategy instead be seen to involve supplanting one facet of the cinematic (the lo-fi, low budget indie aesthetic and sensibility offered by *Party Down*) with another. Certainly, the show appeared to be more in dialogue with indie film than with the 'compelling cinematic' programming that replaced it. Yet conceiving of *Party Down* as indie TV best captures the institutional and aesthetic dimensions of its production. The investment by cable networks in indie-oriented content in the mid to late

2000s offered a relatively low-cost way to experiment with exclusive content to service the parent company's brand identity and its subscriber base (Lyons, 2023). That such 'late-linear' entities were unevenly received makes them no less instructive as precursors for the more high-profile instances to follow.

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### Notes

1. All quotations from Enbom and Thomas in this paragraph are from 'A Reunion of Party Down,' 2019 - see reference.
2. The commissioning of shows such as *Insecure* and *Random Acts of Flyness* attests to the fact that, as Michael Z. Newman notes, indie 'prestige TV comedy has broadened to include more diverse voices over time' (2023, 195), but the predominant whiteness of casts (and target audiences) prevails. Indeed, Nygaard and Lagerwey's work on the 'Horrible White People Show' (2021), a category they argue includes indie prestige TV shows such as *Broad City*, *Girls*, *Transparent*, *High Maintenance* and *Better Things*, makes that whiteness clear. In the case of Starz, which via 'Starz in Black' has long been the 'only premium cable service with a channel explicitly targeting this demographic' (McNutt 2018, 376), it is notable that *Party Down* (a show with its fair share of horrible white people), served to underline that racial disaggregation across its multiplex channels. For more on post-network comedy television, narrowcasting and race see Nick Marx's chapter on Comedy Central in *Sketch Comedy: identity, reflexivity, and American television* (2019), which opens with a discussion of IFC's *Portlandia*.
3. Through its production and distribution company IFC Films, IFC was also responsible for a number of original indie movies, with *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002) being the most successful, a sleeper hit that made over \$240 million at the US box office.
4. For more on the precarities of indie auteurship on Starz see Anthony P. McIntyre's 'Apocalyptic Visions and Commercial Constraints: Gregg Araki's Negotiation of Emerging Modes of Indie TV Auteurship' (2023).

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