

## **A Conversation with Dominic Chianese—*The Sopranos'* Uncle Junior**

Pope Auditorium, Fordham University, Lincoln Center Campus

### ***The Sopranos: A Wake***

May 23, 2008

This is a more or less verbatim transcript of the interview that David Lavery and I conducted with Dominic Chianese—Uncle Junior of *The Sopranos*—at *The Sopranos: A Wake* Conference at Fordham University in New York City on May 23, 2008. Thanks to Giselle Isner for the transcription.—Paul Levinson

*Chianese*: Dominic Chianese

*Levinson*: Paul Levinson

*Lavery*: David Lavery

*AM*: audience members

*Levinson*: Welcome to Fordham University and our conference on "*The Sopranos: A Wake*." For those of you who may not know me, my name is Paul Levinson. I'm Chair of the Department of Communication and Media Studies. In fact, I'm ending my second and final term as Chair and I can't think of any better way to end it than doing a conference like this and in fact this very panel that you're soon going to hear, with the two people seated at the table.

Let me introduce you to probably the lesser known person, [*audience laughter*] but certainly a very significant person, and actually he is someone who helped put together most of this conference. In fact he was here with me and the other people who put together this conference back in September 2002, when we had a little vest pocket conference on *The Sopranos*. His name is David Lavery, and he [*audience applause*]...He certainly deserves a round of applause. He has edited two books about the Sopranos. One of which I am especially fond of because an essay of mine is in there, but the

other book is pretty good too. I would say there's probably no one in the world who knows more about television—not just *The Sopranos*, but *Lost*, *Buffy*, *Heroes*—than David Lavery. So I am very happy that David is here with us.

And sitting next to David is someone who was born in the Bronx in 1931. Actually I was born in the Bronx too just a few years after that—not that many years after that. He may look familiar to you because in *The Godfather II*, you may recall that tall sinister figure, Johnny Ola [*applause*], but of course he's probably far better known, in addition to that role and many other distinguished and wonderful roles over the years, for the role he played in *The Sopranos* as Uncle Junior [*applause*], otherwise known as Corrado Soprano.

And when I was speaking to Bob Milang the other day, when he called me and we were discussing Uncle Junior coming to this conference, I said to him I thought that that character in many ways was the heart and soul of the show. It was such a wonderful show, there were so many important characters, but there was something about the Junior character that brought out aspects of the show that no other character did. Now the actor has a name other than Uncle Junior, and his name is Dominic Chianese, so we are going to have an interview with Dominic ... well, really not so much of an interview, more a discussion in which both David and I will ask questions and I encourage Dominic to answer however he pleases, however short or long because far be it from me to ever tell Dominic what to do, but then, you know, we want to this to be a group experience as well, so we will leave a lot of time for all of you to ask questions. By the way, we do have another member of *The Sopranos* cast here in the audience, Katalin Pota. You may remember Lilliana [*applause*]... She played the housekeeper on *The Sopranos*, so we're glad to have her here as well. All right, let's then go to the discussion. I am going to sit down right at that table, and I'll ask the first question and we'll see how it goes.

Why don't we start at the end if that's okay. One of the things that struck me with the final season of *The Sopranos* was the diminished role that Uncle

Junior had on that show, and I was wondering if you could perhaps speak to that. How did you feel about approaching that as an actor? Were you disappointed in that? Did you think the story called for that?

*Chianese*: You speak specifically about the ending?

*Levinson*: Yes, we can talk specifically about the very last minutes of the show, and also the whole final season.

*Chianese*: The final season...well I think the ending is a good indication of, I think of what David [Chase] was trying to write, in my opinion. I noticed that when we read the script, the final script, we were amazed at the quietness of the ending. However, when all the actors read the final script, there was no indication that there would be a blackout for maybe 15 or 20 seconds. We just thought they'd end up having an ice cream soda and onion rings together, and that was it. Finito, complete, you know. Even David said, "Why not?" So we were all surprised when the blackout came. My wife and I thought, of course, we had lost television. But, my daughter pointed something out to me, which I think is very interesting. David – the greater genius that he is – he may put clues sometimes, and we don't realize it. If you remember, she told me...I haven't checked on it, but if you go home and check on the jukebox that he was playing at the table, it had a song in it – "Don't Stop Believing," or something like that. There was a "B" side to that. Does anybody know what the title of the "B" side was?

***Audience member #1: "Any Way You Want It"***

*Chianese*: "Any Way You Want It." [*audience laughter*] I think maybe that's David's motive or something, his idea or his motive for putting it in, and that struck me as something David possibly would do. Any way you want it. You make the idea. A lot of teenagers come up to me and got mad at me, and said "why don't you kill him?" What am I gonna say? [*audience laughter*]

*Lavery:* Paul started at the end. I would like to go back to start at the beginning. Could you reflect or remember anything about the casting, about how you were actually cast in the show?

*Chianese:* The usual way. Georgianne Walken and Sheila Jaffe were summoned to be casting directors, and they do a lot of New York actors. I remember being involved in the casting, reading a scene, they were casting for Livia and Nancy Marchand's name was not mentioned until later, I guess. But I was so happy when she got it because I knew her work. And I just auditioned. It was a very regular, normal audition. I was just called up to read, and then called back to read. So that was the only indication I had. Later on I found out Jimmy Gandolfini was cast as Tony and that was good because we had both worked on a previous Sidney Lumet film, *The Night Falls on Manhattan*, and Jimmy and I were both happy to see each other because I really respected his work. Obviously he liked me too, so...that's how I remember it. The rest of it was all...I didn't even know if I was going to get it. You know, I was just lucky. Some actress called me and said "You got it!" "I got what?" "You're Uncle Junior." I said, "Wow, I'm Uncle Junior." An actor. Not even my agent called me. [*audience laughter*]

*Lavery:* This is a slightly vague question, a follow up. Did you have any sense at that point of what you were about to become involved with?

*Chianese:* No, none whatsoever. None whatsoever. I just knew it was a good part. In fact, I was limping. If you look at the first episode, I said, "Maybe I'll give him a limp." I had no idea who he was. [*audience laughter*] I didn't know there were relationships in it. I just knew that I was an uncle, which helped a lot. And he had an Italian family, and I started to use my imagination. I had no idea what kind of an uncle he was. I knew he was a Mafia guy. I knew the outside, but I didn't know the inside of the man yet, at all.

*Lavery:* When did you know?

*Chianese:* Probably about at the end of that first season I knew. By that time I knew. By the first season. Because I knew that Jimmy, there was a love-hate relationship with my nephew, there was a little jealousy, and a little bit over critical, but he loved him underneath, you know. Very kind of, normal, human family relations.

*Lavery:* Do you drive as slowly as Uncle Junior?

*Chianese:* I'm sorry?

*Lavery:* Do you drive as slowly as Uncle Junior?

[audience laughter]

*Lavery:* Remember the pilot?

*Chianese:* Do I? ...That's interesting, because we were shooting the pilot, yeah, and David said "Dominic, Junior,"...if you notice I didn't have on big goggles, I didn't have the glasses. I had my regular small eyes, I don't have big eyes. I think they gave me – I always thought they gave me – glasses to make my eyes bigger, because everybody on the show has big eyes, but David said, "No," he said, "I had an uncle," he told me, he said "no, that's not the reason Dominic." He said, "The reason is I had an uncle who had glasses, and you reminded me of him"...so if you look at that first episode, I was saying to David...we were on a truck, they had the car on a truck, on a flat-bed truck, and David was, and David said, "Do something, do something, do something." So I remembered my uncle, my uncle Didi, my father's brother. He used to drive like he was boxing. That's how I learned. "That's it, that's it." It meant something to me, so...

*Lavery:* Christopher calls you Magoo...does he?

*Chianese:* He did, yeah...

*Lavery:* Nothing personal.

*Chianese:* He's a wise ass.

[*audience laughter*]

*Levinson:* Do you know what would be interesting? If you could tell us what your favorite single line was, and then your least favorite line, and if not line, your least favorite scene in the series.

*Chianese:* I'd like to preface it with my Aunt Rose's. She's still alive, she's 97. She always said when she watched the show, she watched it faithfully, that she would, whenever I came on the screen she would turn the volume all the way off. [*audience laughter*] "You never cursed as a kid, you never cursed." I said, "I know Aunt Rosie but you know this is a character." "You never cursed." My own mother, she lived to 93, she saw it, thank God. When she found out what money I was making she said "Ah, let him curse."

*Levinson:* Apropos of cursing and people getting upset about the show. You are an Italian American and there has been some criticism of the show by Italian Americans. What's your response to that?

*Chianese:* Oh, God bless America. That's my response. I think it's a very serious question and I first became aware of it when some professor – I won't mention his name – he said to me, he said, "Dominic, you were in *Godfather*." I said "yeah, I played Johnny Ola." He said, "Don't you feel like you're disgracing the Italians?" Some comment. And I thought about it. That's the first time I became aware of even that I would be...why would I disgrace my roots which I love dearly? "I'm an actor," I told him, and that's the only statement I can make. I say that in all truth. I'm an actor who is living the American dream because my grandfather and my father made it possible for me to get an education, so how could I put down a vehicle which shows my talent as an American citizen? I feel that besides that, to me a man can write anything he wants in this country, and I don't think you should be criticizing when he is expressing his soul. That show came from David's own relationship with his own mother – I know that for a fact. And

you can't stop an artist from being an artist. If you do, we're on our way to being lost.

[*applause*]

*Levinson*: I agree with that.

*Lavery*: Let me just follow that a little bit further – Paul's excellent question to you. How conscious were the people making the show, including yourself, of that question? Because the show, one of the things that I thought that *Sopranos* did ingeniously, was they incorporated the debate into the show. We had the Ralphie family sitting around debating it, we had the Columbus Day issues. I mean, was it known on the show that they were responding purposely?

*Chianese*: First of all, as an ensemble, what made the ensemble, was, of course, a complete dedication to the script. In the making of a show, you go to Silvercup [Studios], you go to location, you work, you don't have time to question why we're doing it – you're just concentrating on doing your job. If the question has to be answered sociologically, you have to ask the writers. The writers are the ones who...we just, our job was to make those characters come alive, so I don't think we were really conscious of any kind of controversial subjects at all. I think David put that in there just to, maybe just to, so we could have conferences like this one. [*audience laughter*] So he knew that...to me it's about education and it's about dialogue and it's good to, I think it's good to open up issues like this. We should talk about prejudices and intolerances and issues. I'm an advocate of the arts. I'm starting a public charity, arts...it's called "Joy for the Arts Foundation." Bank of America is giving money now to send artists into the community. And I think just by being an artist you're already trying to help, you're trying to help our country, and I think you're helping by opening this up to discussion too because it clears the air and makes people communicate and that's the beginning I think of education. It's communication. But I always really believed in my heart that the word "education" means to re-juice and to draw forth that which our citizens have in them, so our job is to bring out

the goodness, the learning, the skills, the talents and abilities of individuals. I think David has really, really written a wonderful piece in the *Sopranos* and he's given a lot of Italian American actors a chance to really, to really draw on their images of their own culture, and that to me is a good thing, it's an artistic thing, it's an artistic choice. I remember when we were in California. The global people were there – reporters from all over the world. They said "Dominic, what do you like about being Uncle Junior?" I said, "Well I like it because like he yells ... I had an uncle who used to yell like that. He'd get angry over nothing. Why'd you order the pasta fagioli? Why did you order pasta fagioli?" He was nuts, but he was a good-hearted person. He made me feel Italian. And then they laughed. [*audience laughter*] It was a good thing.

*Levinson:* Looking at the artistic side of the writing and your acting, you have people like Marlon Brando who, correctly or not, always said he came up with all the great lines – that whatever the writers wrote was just a springboard – and then there were other actors and actresses who religiously followed what was written. What was the situation with your character?

*Chianese:* Well the writing itself, Paul, I think it's funny because David's grandfather was a stone mason and so was my grandfather, a stone mason, so, I'm just making a little analogy here, those words were written in concrete, you don't change it. We had a guy from L.A. one time, and I said to him, "don't change it, don't make it any better because you'll never work again," you know. It's true, they worked very hard and I crammed the writing. Each little semi-colon and comma was important. That's the way I looked at it. It was really very important I think.

*Levinson:* Well you did a splendid job delivering the message.

*Chianese:* Thank you.

*Lavery:* You know Alfred Hitchcock's story – he was asked once if it was true that he said that actors were cattle...and he said, "I didn't say that, I said that they should be treated like that." [*audience laughter*]

*Chianese:* There's a lot of trust...there's a lot of trust on our show. Directors sometimes can screw things up, but they didn't do it on *Sopranos*.

*Lavery:* There's an interview with Chase, it might be in Martha Nochimson's book, where he says that, he sort of answers that question, "No, the actors don't get to make up what they're going to say. They do what we tell them."

*Chianese:* That's right, and he's right. He's 100 percent right because to me those words, to me they were treated like Shakespeare, or the Bible – they were very well put. I did have a problem, to answer your question before. One time the "F" word was to be used in front of Livia, and I really agonized over it; I couldn't sleep. I said "oh my God." I was talking to my wife about it. I was saying "oh God..." I can't say the "F" word. First of all, my Aunt Rose would be mad at that. [*audience laughter*] My sister, when I said the "C" word, called me up and complained. [*audience laughter*] "How dare you." She's twenty years younger than me. She's my baby sister; I'm like a father to her. "How dare you say the word when you fell in the tub. You said that word." I said, "Gina"... I said, "Take it easy, relax would ya." My brother-in-law was laughing. But she really believed like it was truth, as if it were a soap opera because I used the "C" word. "How dare you use the 'C' word." I forgot the question. [*audience laughter*]

*Levinson:* That's what happens when you start talking about the "C" word. [*audience laughter*] Actually, I don't have any questions. [*audience laughter*]

*Lavery:* I have one. I think it's on the DVD commentary, David said that there's a scene in the pilot where Gandolfini responds to Imperioli by virtually picking him up off of the ground when he suggested the first time he was going to write a screen play. Chase said that that moment was the first time he first realized what he actually had there with Gandolfini. Can you remember that instance?

*Chianese:* I do remember. I think when I saw it, I wasn't there for the shooting of that particular moment, but when I saw it on the screen...I think the implication is that David is saying that the actor brings something to the

character. That was Jimmy's own improvisation, his own, his own take on the character, that moment, and that's what David meant. We expose the character. It's a creative process. We help David write. David always gave us credit. He said "I loving writing for you." I love writing because I know you're going to bring something to life and that's very smart I think. It inspires them for the next episode. That's the creative process. That's what made the show so wonderful. We fed off each other. For example, he let me sing in one of the episodes because he knew I could sing. That story came about because we were at Lorraine Bracco's house. Her father is Italian. Neapolitan Italian...I'm not sure – he's from the South anyway – and I was singing this particular song, "Cuore Ingrato" and David came up to me at the party – a year before it was put into the script – and asked me what one of the lines meant. He knew I was a singer, he heard me sing, and he asked me what that line means in "Cuore Ingrato," "Tu nun'ce pienze a stu dolore mio," and I said, "it means that 'you're not thinking of my pain,'" and a year later he puts this into the script, so you know he's using the actors talents and abilities...which is interesting.

*Levinson:* A follow up to that, along the same lines. You're a very distinctive actor and as you said earlier, you auditioned for the part like everyone else. Did you see the part, as it developed, being written more for what you uniquely brought to it, as the series went on?

*Chianese:* Well I did. I think it's because the lines that were given to Uncle Junior were so funny that every staged reading we had – we all sit around a big table, people constantly laughing – I think that's where the writers started to realize Uncle Junior, because they knew I could deliver a line and I think that's important, but they also kept it true to the character too. Every one of his funny lines comes out of his own dilemma, or his own perceived dilemma where he's seen in dementia, or his hatred, his anger. That's what makes him so funny. He's kind of narrow focused. He always saw things his own way. If you're thinking about Comedia dell'arte, the audience would laugh at him because they thought who the heck did he think he was. He's so self-centered, that kind of thing. That means something. That's a good kind of comedy.

*Levinson:* Why don't we start opening up for questions. Both David and I have many more questions to ask, but I want to begin getting to you in the audience. We have a microphone over there, since this is being recorded, so if you'd like to step up to the microphone...

*Audience member #2:* I have a question for Dominic. In the scene when Junior shoots Tony, he says something in Napolitano. Even though I grew up in the language, I couldn't catch what he said. Could you say what that line was?

*Chianese:* When I shot Tony?

*AM #2:* Yeah.

*Chianese:* "Non me fa gazare, Malanga"...which means, [*audience laughter*] well it's hard to put. If there are any old fashioned Italians willing to say it, you know...but it's really saying: don't really make me angry because you're gonna be sorry. That's basically what he's saying, I'll strike you. Non me gazare could be, don't break my you-know-what.

*Levinson:* See, I thought Malanga was the name of a character.

*AM #2:* Yeah! It was...

*Chianese:* Pussy Malanga

*Levinson:* Ok.

*Chianese:* It was an old enemy of...

*Audience member #3:* Looking back on the series now, how do you feel about Uncle Junior?

*Chianese:* I'm sorry?

*AM #3:* Looking back on the series now, how do you feel about Uncle Junior, about the character that you played?

*Chianese:* I'm still in the dark because I still don't know if the guy was faking or not.

[*audience laughter*]

*Chianese:* I had to play it like he was faking it, but it's in the writers' hands. Isn't that wonderful? It's in the writers' hands, because...of course I played it like he was losing it. I had to play it like that, but it's very possible that he could be faking too. Probably not, he ended up in a wheel chair...you know, really out of it, but he had his moments of lucidity. I personally think that he had a downward spiral, personally. When I shot Tony, I knew that I was...first of all I said, "Who's down there." He said "Marty Shore." I said, "Marty Shore, you can't bullshit me, it's not Marty Shore, he's dead." So you know, I used that, and I didn't know what I was doing, and we even had a moment where the gun went off by accident because it was an old gun, and so I played him that he was losing it. Of course it's more fun that way. You don't live in a closet, unless you are losing it. I played him like a man losing it, and scared of what he did. I found myself shaking, and everything like that. That was a choice I had to make, and David said, "Do it the way you want to do it." But then I look back on it, and it's very possible that maybe he is faking, who knows...I doubt it.

*Lavery:* Anyway you want it...

*Chianese:* Anyway you want it. Well, I think that's Tony's arc, not so much my arc.

*Levinson:* There was a real life Mafioso who did pretend, who was wandering around the streets of New York – Gigante, was that it? Yeah, he was faking...

*Audience member #4:* First of all, I want to congratulate you about your charity. It sounds absolutely terrific, and it's very exciting.

*Chianese:* Yeah, let's all light a candle for that. I think it's important. The arts are important.

*AM #4:* I do, I do. It's exciting to be received that way. It's going to mean so much to New York for you to do that, so thank you. Another thing is of course, I loved your performance. One thing that I loved so much about it was there was a gesture that you had where you would lower your eyelids and raise your eyebrows, you know like this...and it was so incredible, it was the character distilled and what I wondered is where did you get that from? It was extreme. It was amazing.

*Chianese:* Genetic, I don't know.

[*audience laughter*]

*Chianese:* My grandfather had a look. I remember when I was a kid, at a bowling alley in the Bronx, 14 to 15, and we played barrel pins and we tried to hustle each other, you know for barrel pins, a dollar a game or something, and my grandfather used to come and stand at the door, and I could see him from like a hundred yards a way with that look he had. A lot of it is genetic. And you know who had a wonderful look, was Nancy, Nancy Marchand. She could stare you down with one look. That's very important, and the eyes of course, as we know, are very important in acting.

*AM #4:* Thank you.

*Chianese:* Thank you.

*Levinson:* Let me just ask a question about Nancy Marchand and then we'll get back to the audience here. How do you think the death of that actress, and therefore taking Livia out of the story, had an impact on *The Sopranos*?

*Chianese:* When we went to Nancy's memorial, David mentioned right off the bat, he said that it would never be the same. He had to make changes, I'm sure. It would never be the same. Nancy had been sick for the first two seasons. She had COPD. The trooper that she was, as sick as she was, sometimes she had to have oxygen given to her after the end of the day's work. She would have lasted a long time. What we realized is Nancy passed away because she had lost her husband of 47 years. When she lost him, something gave out. She never made it to the third season or the fourth season, whatever it was. But I know that when her husband Paul died, that took the fight out of her, but she was a real trooper, a wonderful actress, and she was sorely missed. David really, was really...everybody was crying. I remember handing Gandolfini Kleenex tissues – not Kleenex – Bounty tissues [*audience laughter*]. We were crying so hard because she was so loved, you know, and we all had worked with her for two seasons, so he did say it would be different. He never extrapolated on that remark, but I know that it was different. He had to make changes, but it's, again, it's the belief in the creative process, but she was always remembered and talked about, and it did make changes, and that's life. It goes on.

*Levinson:* And I think that *The Sopranos* did a lot better than *Dallas*, for example, when they basically just put in a different actress to play Miss Ellie.

*Lavery:* But then brought the original one back.

*Levinson:* Right, it was totally confusing.

*Chianese:* Nobody could replace her.

*Audience member #5:* I'd like to ask about the writing issue: everyone talks about it being David Chase's show, but as you say, there's a group of writers, and I'm curious, when you read a script, could you feel, as you read the lines, a difference between a Robert Green and Mitchell Burgess' script or a Frank Renzulli script or a Matthew Weiner script? Is that something that you felt or did feel that it was Chase everywhere?

*Chianese*: You mean a difference in the writing?

*AM #5*: Yeah...when you were given the script.

*Chianese*: I noticed...Frank Renzulli was writing for the first two seasons and, but then it depends on the assignment that David would give to certain writers, whether Renzulli's style would fit it, or Weiner's style would fit it, or Mitch and Robin. They did have different styles. I could see, but it would disappear once the script came. Then it did not become obvious, so you know that they were sticking to the characters' intentions. I liked Renzulli's kind of pattern. I remember liking it as Uncle Junior, but I never noticed any real difference later on. Everything was real, everything was real. There may have been slight differences, but not enough to affect my intention of the character. The only time was when the "F" word was used. I didn't want to use it in that scene. And they argued with me, they said, "But Dominic, he's very angry at her." I said, "I know, but still, a man of that persuasion would not be saying the "F" word in front of a woman, especially his sister-in-law. It's just disrespectful." So I did it, but I did it very operatically, and it worked I guess.

*Audience member #6*: Just going back to the point where you were talking about how David Chase put your singing into the script. And I've got to ask this. How did that come about – that marvelous scene when Uncle Junior suffered from dementia and sees *Curb Your Enthusiasm* on TV?

*Lavery*: That scene where you're seeing Larry David...you think you're on TV and you're seeing *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

*Chianese*: That was strictly the writers' idea.

*AM #6*: That came from where? Because *Curb Your Enthusiasm* came kind of after *The Sopranos* and it was such a lovely scene.

*Chianese:* I only got that script three or four days before we shot. I mean had no idea. I did not propose that. Is that what you're asking?

*AM #6:* No no, I just wondered where that came from. Who was it, you know?

*Chianese:* The writers.

*AM #6:* Yeah.

*Chianese:* I never gave any ideas to David. I don't think any actors gave any ideas. Just by acting what was written, the creative process worked that way. David would come up with the complete ideas. I think there was one idea that was given to him. When Joe Gannascoli had mentioned a newspaper account of a man in the Mafia who was chastised for being homosexual. I think that was a newspaper...I think that he used that, David. Joe Gannascoli told me he presented the problem. He presented that particular issue. So, they may get ideas... but I don't know where they got their ideas for that scene. The Larry David idea was very much of an in-idea I think, you know, and it makes sense because we do look alike...with glasses.

[*audience laughter*]

*Lavery:* And you're both on HBO.

*Chianese:* We're both on HBO, exactly.

*Levinson:* And they're both hilarious comedies.

[*audience laughter*]

*Audience member #7:* When Ralphie is killed by Tony – apparently there's doubt as to whether he would or not and Joe Pantoliano apparently played the scene that he was innocent, as in, the character was innocent, and that's how he chose to play the scene. When you sing, "Ungrateful Heart" at the

end of Season Three, David Chase remarked that the song reveals hypocrisy in the family. How did you choose to play the singing of the song? That's really what I'm getting at, because, is the message different from how you played it? That's really what my question is.

*Chianese:* I think David used the words of the song, and he also used what was also probably very common. I know my own grandfather, I was told – I don't remember him doing it – but he would sing at weddings, he would sing at Italian-American weddings back in the 1930's, so David used Uncle Junior as an Italian-American. Of course, with David's dark sense of humor, if you remember, it was not a wedding, it was a funeral, and they asked Uncle Junior to sing, and he doesn't want to sing, but he does want to sing. He had a couple glasses of wine, and what does he sing – "Ungrateful Heart." But he's just singing because he happened to sing that particular song, but David is using it because the words indicate Tony Soprano's feeling towards his own family, his children especially. That's why they try to hit me with those meat balls or something, spit balls made out of bread or something, to show that these kids don't appreciate what their father is trying to do – they're criticizing their father, which is kind of...its interesting, its an interesting idea I think. So that's what I think he was trying to do. You have to ask David specifics, but there is a moment of Tony, when you get the feeling that Tony is not being appreciated by the kids, you know...and they just...there's a generation gap there or something. Does that answer your question? It's really an indicator of the show.

*AM #7:* Meadow throws the bread-balls at you. You say Meadow's throwing those pellets because she disapproves of what her father is doing, but she's throwing them at Uncle Junior.

*Chianese:* Yes, yes that's right.

*AM #7:* And it's a symbol?

*Chianese:* It's a symbol of her trying to have her father killed, you know that's part of it. That's part of it. It's the last show of that particular season,

and something...somebody's ungrateful, I don't know. [*audience laughter*] I don't know why he did it, but it works. It works with my character, there's no question about it, because I can sing "Ungrateful Heart," Uncle Junior has feelings – he had a girlfriend – you know he has feelings, and the song is really about you leaving me, and you don't understand my pain. And Uncle Junior does have pain, it's probably one of the times, the only time he could express it in the whole show. After he hit him with the pie, that was pain, and the only other time was when he sings "Cuore Ingrato," so he made a very sympathetic character out of my character. I'm not sure why she hit him with the pellet, but that was partially because of her father, but it also shows an ungratefulness toward the family, toward respect for the uncle.

*Audience member #8:* Isn't she suffering from the grief from the loss of Jackie, Jr...

*Levinson:* Yep

*AM #8:* First I'd like to sing "Melancholy Baby" [*audience laughter*] She's suffering the pain and the loss of Jackie Jr., so the irony is that your song is actually singing her feelings, that she's so deracinating, so cut off, that she's not seeing that it's speaking for her.

*Chianese:* You're probably right. I never thought of that. You're probably 100 percent right. You're probably right, cause she lost her boyfriend. The fact that her boyfriend was probably killed and she knows, she suspects her father to be, you know, criminal.

*Levinson:* See, this is the purpose of academics, to tell actors what the lines really mean, four, five years after the show.

[*audience laughter*]

*Audience member #9:* First off I wanted to say how much I enjoy the "NY 1" spots that you do.

*Chianese*: Thank you, I hate it, but go ahead.

[*audience laughter*]

*AM #9*: Well I don't know if you hate it, but it's a real treat to hear your voice and see you on that, and my question is kind of on the lighter side. Uncle Junior had a very distinct look, which is very different than Dominic's look, and a couple of years ago Six Flags, the amusement park company, had a commercial, a series of commercials with someone...

*Chianese*: Oh that was me all the way.

[*audience laughter*]

*Chianese*: Mikhail Baryshnikov and I worked on that for hours.

[*audience laughter*]

*AM #9*: ...But that was kind of a big joke in our group...

*Chianese*: It was probably Malanga actually.

[*audience laughter*]

*AM #9*: Was that...

*Chianese*: Was that me?

*AM #9*: Was that a dancing Uncle Junior.

*Chianese*: They kept saying, were you the guy dancing on that?

*AM #9*: You did hear that a lot? That's sort of my question.

*Chianese*: At the time, yeah, thank you, that was fun. It was a left-handed compliment...a bald guy... it must have been a 17 year old.

[audience laughter]

*Audience member #10:* You mentioned watching the final episode at home and being surprised by the...

*Chianese:* Blackness.

*AM #10:* ...blackness and how long it lasted. I was wondering, first of all, if you made it a habit of watching the show actually because I read a lot of actors saying, "no I never watch things I'm in," and secondly I've read that a lot of the show is constructed not so much through, well through the writing primarily, but then also through the editing, and how things were put together and changed. I was wondering if, when you watched the show, you were often surprised by things that you saw that you weren't expecting to see or that brought out different aspects of it.

*Chianese:* Yeah, I purposely waited to watch like everybody else would, to find out, first of all, if, if the work was sincere and...it's hard to be your own judge, but I watch it with my wife, and I watch her reaction. When I shot Jimmy, she said "[gasp] you're gonna kill him." We kept that, for eleven months we kept that a secret. But I always ask my wife. She never said anything negative, so I know I was doing the right job, because you know, you have to ask somebody else. It's hard for you to be your own judge. But I would watch very carefully. I was surprised only once when Jimmy said to me at one point, I think it was the last season, he said, it was a very, very tender moment, and he said, his character says to Uncle Junior, "Don't you love me." It was very powerful. When I saw it I was crying because I didn't realize how powerful that moment was while we were doing it, but it shows the whole dynamic of what's happening, and the arc of Uncle Junior was starting to fade away, and the tears came out of frustration, and all kinds of inner dynamics that I can't even explain as an actor. But then you know that something's going to change. So that was my most powerful moment that I think, that I like.

*Audience member #11:* I have a question about the long periods of time between seasons. I'd like to know how that affected the actors. Were you filming all that time, or were there periods where you didn't know if you could take a job, or, you know...?

*Chianese:* That's a very good question. I was a stage actor many years ago. In 1985 we had a hiatus. I was doing a show with John Lithgow called *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, and I remember we had done it at the theater. And we had a long layoff of nine months, and I realize that in that nine months...it's interesting that it was nine months because it is like gestation, it's like giving birth, you know, and I think that to a real actor the time doesn't hurt. It gives you a chance to just let it grow. It doesn't really hurt. When we went back, you don't really lose the art. I think it affects the writer, and I think they gave David time off because they knew that he'd come up with something, and I think that the more time you give a writer, the more you're gonna get too, so he came up with a lot more than seven or eight episodes in that fifteen month hiatus. But it didn't affect me personally at all, and I'm sure it gave Gandolfini a rest, which he needed. Nobody has ever worked so hard as I far as I know in my life. He was 35 when he started, he was working seven days a week constantly...I don't know how he did it. He has tremendous stamina, and he deserves a lot of credit, James. But it didn't hurt, I don't think.

*Lavery:* Can I ask a quick question. I am probably not alone in this, but maybe my favorite Uncle Junior episode, I guess I call it Junior-intensive episode, is "Boca."

*Chianese:* My favorite too.

[*audience laughter*]

*Lavery:* Yes it is, I mean, I don't know if that was the one you had the most lines in, for example, I'm guessing it probably was the most...

*Chianese:* I enjoyed that.

[audience laughter]

*Lavery:* Could you comment on that? How many takes did it do to hit him with the pie, for example?

*Chianese:* This poor apprentice. They hit him 11 times with coconut, custard, chocolate. I said to him, "you're gonna end up using custard," because that's what they did, that's what they did in vaudeville, you know. They said, "No let's try something else." They hit him with cherry pie. This poor kid, young man. He said, "I'll volunteer." He got hit 11 times or 12 times. We ended up, of course, using the custard. That was my favorite scene. It was also the most frustrating because I had to run out and hit her with a pie, and of course they measured with tapes, and it becomes a technical thing, you know, but it was one of my favorite things to do, and of course, Robin, the actress, was wonderful to work with, and I enjoyed it. All my ex wives got it right in the face.

*Lavery:* Given our controversy about the language, I hesitate to bring this up, but it has been pointed out by *Sopranos* scholars that the title of the episode, Boca, "boca" is Spanish for mouth.

*Chianese:* Si, si.

*Lavery:* And you were aware of that?

*Chianese:* Jimmy and we all had a good laugh on that one. Even Lorraine Bracco called me and everybody was starting to laugh. I remember Edie Falco was laughing. "What are you laughing at?" I said, "We read the script." "What about it?" "You'll find out on set." [audience laughter] On the golf course, Jimmy and I had a lot of fun with that. It was a lot of fun.

*Levinson:* That's a classic example of: it's a tough job, but somebody's has to do it.

[audience laughter]

*Audience member #12:* Dominic, thank you so much for taking the time to come down.

*Chianese:* Thank you. Nice to be here.

*AM #12:* You mentioned before about having to create the internal life for Uncle Junior, and I'm wondering if you could tell us about Ercoli.

*Chianese:* Ercoli was the brother who was retarded, and he was loved. I know Uncle Junior loved his brother and felt sorry for him, but obviously he died young. And Ercoli probably had some kind of Downs syndrome or something, but Uncle Junior liked him...and I loved when he said, "Gee you looked like George Murphy," to Uncle Junior. Uncle Junior really had a nice feeling for his brother, ... so you know Uncle Junior had a heart. And then we have what we call "Ercoli Awards." I think it was, who was it?, Terence Winter who told David, "Let's do a little private thing." We have these Ercoli awards that they would give when we go to parties after the end of the season at Brad Grey's house in California. They'd hand out these Ercoli awards and they'd make up some stupid idea, you know, and the Ercoli awards are given out. And I have three of them in my office. It's just a white ball on top of a square black thing, but it's kind of nice. It's something friendly. It's something that we like. Ercoli meaning Hercules, I guess, in Italian.

*Lavery:* Was there ever any talk of maybe, actually showing him in a flashback? After all, there was an actor who played your younger self.

*Chianese:* Yeah...well, no they never showed Ercoli.

*Lavery:* No, but was there ever any talk of that actually happening.

*Chianese:* David and the writers never talked about what was possible to the actors. I think it would only add tension or pressure. It was not our job. At least that's the way I looked at it. I always looked at it as getting the script

as soon as possible and then interpreting, because you had the character by that time, you knew the characters, you know, better than anybody else by that time. If you had something good going, just keep it, you know, and get in front of that camera and give it your best shot.

*Audience member #13:* I have a question for Dominic. You've worked with three great authors: Coppola, Chase, and Wolf on *Law and Order*. On *Law and Order* you were a judge.

*Chianese:* Oh yeah.

*AM #13:* It's different from Uncle Junior who was on the other side of the law, but how do these three different authors work, do you care to comment on that, and how do they affect the actors, and which – obviously I'm pretty sure it was David who was your favorite – but how did they differ in the way they worked with their actors?

*Chianese:* The craft of acting comes through text. Now, the intention of the text is where your work is. The intention of the text. King Lear is different from Jimmy Durante. [*audience laughter*] But King Lear could say, "Everybody wants to get into the act," as King Lear, and Jimmy Durante could say, "Everybody wants to get into the act," as Jimmy Durante. So basically it's the intention of the words that count, it's not about the characters outside of it, it's really the intention of the work, so the writer really holds the key. It's the intention. I could say "good morning" to you in 50 different ways, you know, it depends on my intention. Am I setting you up to murder you? Am I happy that you just came from a quadruple-by-pass, and I'm saying, "good morning." You know, it all depends on the intentions, so the question is really a craft, it's a writing craft. How do you interpret it? To be or not to be, that is the question. How do you interpret it? Anybody can interpret it. I hope that answers your question. It's about intention. You have to look at the scene, and realize, "what does this person really want in this scene?" and then go according to where the character would do it.

*Levinson:* Let me actually just ask a follow-up for a second. Let's take Wolf out of it, *Law and Order* is excellent, but I don't think it's in the same universe as either *The Sopranos* or the *Godfather* saga. So you've played two enormously important roles, and even though the obvious answer I guess would be *The Sopranos* because we're much closer to it, but in your heart of hearts, which role has brought you more satisfaction, Johnny Ola or Uncle Junior?

*Chianese:* Uncle Junior I would say. Uncle Junior because you see his life, you see his heart. As an actor he was ... you know, I miss that paycheck.

[*audience laughter*]

*Levinson:* So you made more money from *The Sopranos* than from *Godfather II*. Paramount's cheap?

*Chianese:* No, it's just that it's steady work. It was a nice character to work on. And there were three dimensions to the man that we could bring to it. Just the way that Jimmy and Edie brought three dimensions to their characters. It was a well-written piece of work. To me it's like the Shakespeare of television. I hope I'm not overstating it. To me David was an incredible writer.

*Levinson:* You're not overstating it at all because I was quoted in the *New York Post* just last week saying that I thought *The Sopranos* was on par with Shakespeare and The Beatles, and then some smart Alec on the blog said, "Isn't that a little bit of a hyperbole professor?" and I answered, "definitely, definitely, definitely not."

[*audience laughter*]

*Lavery:* I would point out that even the maid in the Soprano household was one of the best known characters. I mean, that was the genius of the show. There wasn't a character in the show, including Lilliana, who wasn't sketched out. Well sketched isn't the right word, wasn't filled out. They were all...

*Chianese*: They were real, you knew that they were real.

*Lavery*: The FBI agents, the gardener. The poor gardener I think is a tragic figure [*audience laughter*]. You know, he gets beaten up by Robert Loggia, and then even after Johnny Sack is convicted, he still had to cut his lawn.

[*audience laughter*]

*Audience member #14*: I just have a small question. Mr. Chianese, the apprentice in the pie scene. Who's the apprentice. Was he an apprentice who was handing you pies or did a stunt person get the pies in the face?

*Chianese*: I don't know if I understand the question.

*Lavery*: She was asking you to clarify about the pies. You were talking about an apprentice. He was receiving the pies?

*Chianese*: Oh I'm sorry. Yeah, the apprentice, they were trying out different pies, so that they would fall off the face in a certain way. They wouldn't stick too much, you know. And a young one of the stagehands was there and he just volunteered, so they hit him 11 times with the pies.

*AM #14*: Oh I see, they tried out the pies before you actually put the pies in...

*Chianese*: They had to try them out.

*AM #14*: Thanks very much.

*Chianese*: They had to try them out.

*Lavery*: Again just like Hitchcock, he tried about 27 different fruits to get the knife sound in *Psycho*.

*Chianese:* And Johnny Ola got strangled at least a dozen times with a coat hanger. It wasn't painful, but the actor was a little shorter than me so it made it harder on him and difficult. My neck hurt for a while there.

*Levinson:* Apropos Johnny Ola, how was it acting with Al Pacino? Let's even go this far, how would you compare Al Pacino to James Gandolfini?

*Chianese:* Well, like I said before, I was a stage actor. Basically, in *Godfather II*, I think Francis was looking for stage actors who had never been on screen, so that when you saw them on screen people would say, "Where did that face come from?" So what happened, when I got onto the set, my monologue with Pacino, who was sitting in a chair looking at me with – talking about eyes, when Al looks at you, he looks at you – and I had to give this whole speech to him, and I was prepared because I had weeks to learn the darn thing, and when I sat down in front of Al to do the speech, I got a couple of sentences out, and Francis Coppola said, "Hold it! Cut! Dominic, could you change the name of that lawyer? It's not Jim Lewis, it's Green. Change it to Jim Green would you, please?" I said, "Sure Mr. Coppola, no problem." I look at Al Pacino, his eyes again, I'm sitting there, I'm saying "Hyman Roth always makes money for his partners," and I couldn't think of the name. "Cut, Dominic it's all right, I'm sorry, go back, go back to the original script," and I'm looking at Al and Al is looking at me. "Change it to Brown." "Alright Mr. Coppola." I had no idea what he was doing to me. He was manipulating me, obviously, but I didn't know that. I had no idea. In fact, Al got up and walked away at one point, I said, "This is the end of my movie career, my first and last movie." Al came back and I said, "I'm so sorry." He said, "Dominic," he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "It's not you, it's not you, don't worry about it." He got me so nervous that the speech came out right. He made me understand that you don't act in front of the camera, and he was right. Then the Bronx came out of me [*audience laughter*] So, the next scene I'm sitting there, and this little kid with a communion suit is approaching over Al's shoulder, and he had the little white thing that we do when we receive communion, we have black suits with a ribbon, you know. It's a bar mitzvah with a ribbon, that's basically what it is. You're looking at Judeo-Christianity. All right, so I got the ribbon here.

So I see myself approaching over Al's shoulder, and folks, I must have lifted my eyebrow an eighth of a millimeter or an inch. He said, "That's too much Dominic." That was the best acting lesson I ever had. You do not act in front of a camera, folks. Remember that. Just feel it to do it. Know your intention. Don't try to indicate anything, because the camera makes you look like a jerk. I remember sitting one time with Richard Schickel, talking about a vaudevillian who said, "Give us a little eyebrow." He would go like this [*lifts eyebrow*], and I would say, "Give us some more." You know everybody used to laugh at me. But you can't do that with a camera, you know, it looks funny. That's how I felt about *The Godfather*. I'm glad you reminded me about that story. That's my favorite story about teaching people about acting in front of the camera. That's true.

*Levinson*: I just have to add, with names like Green and Brown being batted around, I wouldn't be surprised if Quentin Tarantino was hanging around there somewhere and that's how he got the idea for *Reservoir Dogs*.

[*audience laughter*]

*Audience member #15*: Bobby Bacala becomes more and more like a brother to Tony in the last seasons. I was just wondering what your thoughts were on the character and on the relationship of Junior to the character.

*Chianese*: Yeah, Bobby Bacala was always at war with Uncle Junior, which is kind of wonderful because you know that you can yell at him, [*audience laughter*] and Uncle Junior likes to yell, so that went along great. And I thought that Schirripa, Steve Schirripa was wonderful as Bobby Bacala. They put a pillow on his stomach to make him fatter than what he was. So I enjoyed working with Bobby Bacala, and it helps me because it gave me a chance to have somebody help Uncle Junior, who's getting older, and somebody I can work off, work off against, and yet Junior had a soft spot for Bobby too. He liked Bobby, even though he always ate all his food.

[*audience laughter*]

*Chianese*: There was another question down here, but...I feel like I'm talking too much.

*Levinson*: No you're not.

*Audience member #16*: I just have to ask, if Chase does decide to do a *Sopranos* film, do you have any interest in revisiting the character, or do you feel that, pretty much all that's been done with it has been done?

*Chianese*: Well it depends. I think if he's dying, and if he is dead, I don't have much interest, but if he's faking, I would be interested. [*audience laughter*] But that would be interesting. You know, I don't really miss him. I think it's finished. I personally think it's finished. We moved on. But I'll always love him.

*Levinson*: And there's also of course a chance of a prequel, and depending upon when the prequel is made, maybe just a few years before the beginning of the series, you could still play Uncle Junior.

*Chianese*: David never said he would not write anything. He never denied that he would, he never said, "I'm not going to write anymore," so you never know what's going on with his mind. You know, whatever he wants to do.

*Lavery*: He has to sign the movie deals.

*Chianese*: We haven't heard anything, and we'd be the last to know I think.

[*audience laughter*]

*Lavery*: Not for the film, not for *The Sopranos* film, he signed a movie deal to make films.

*Chianese*: He did?

*Lavery*: Yes, it was in the press last week.

*Chianese*: Is that right? I hope he casts me.

[*audience laughter*]

*Audience member #17*: The episode in the last season that really had the most of your presence in it was the one with you and the young Asian-American man who came along in the facility, and I have one or sort of two questions: first, your thoughts on the episode, but also, one of the things that's so remarkable about that is that the relationship between you and the other character seems very sort of potent and real, and it's the difficulty of doing something like that with somebody who's just in there for one episode. So if you could just talk about, give us something general, just about the difficulty or the challenge of bringing someone new in for one episode, and negotiating the kind of relationship with that character. Ken Leung plays the character who's the young Asian American man. He's in conflict with his family, he's had violence in it, in his past.

*Levinson*: He's the same actor who plays Miles in *Lost*.

*Chianese*: Yeah, well what happened in the script, it was written that Uncle Junior's holding forth in his mental institution, which I always thought, this is marvelous because maybe we can get some real comedy out of here, in this situation, but... a Chinese young man was assigned to me as a bodyguard in the script. You know when I saw that, I said, "this is interesting, I wonder where they're gonna get a big Chinese guy who's gonna be able to be my bodyguard." And when I saw Ken Leung, who's small, and short in stature and strong, I said, "Good, this kid must be a good actor." We hit it off great. We really talked about the situation, and he's an incredible young actor, and I knew that it would go well, and that's important. I remember talking to him and getting to know him, and he liked music, we talked about music, because I knew he was special. I knew he was a stage actor too, which I liked. I find that stage actors are usually more qualified in many ways to interpret characters. Kenny was wonderful. I especially like the scene where he was with his mother, and he became extremely paranoid about his own

mother, and you could see that the boy had dysfunction, and yet when we hang out together he's very normal and a very up-beat kind of guy, and he's a writer himself. I just love him, I think he's great. Ken Leung's gonna be one of the tops.

*Audience member #18:* Hi. I'd just like to ask for the people who are visiting New York, like I am for this conference, are you still singing, and can we see you sing in the near future? Are you still singing, and is there any possibility of being able to see you sing in the near future in New York?

*Chianese:* Singing? I have a band now; it's called "The New York Cycloners." I want to do more singing. I want to do a lot of singing. I want to sing in live performances. A room like this, for example ...and I can share my stories of my grandfather, my father, my growing up in New York, and that's why I called the band "The New York Cycloners." And right now I'm working on a script, maybe of a possible presentation of some ideas. I'm working with a writer on actually playing a character who has a band with four sons.

*AM #18:* Is there any chance of you giving us a few bars now?

[*audience laughter*]

*Chianese:* The only song I always sing now is "I Like to Ride the Ferry."

[*audience laughter*]

*Chianese:* It was written in 1932.

[*sings*]

I like to ride the ferry  
Where the music is so merry,  
Where the men who play the concertina  
On the moonlit upper deck arena  
Where the boys and girls are dancing  
Sweethearts are romancing  
Life is like a mardi gras

Funiculi funicula  
Happy as we sing together  
Happy as we cling together  
Happy with the ferry boat serenade.

[*applause*]

*Chianese*: Another question?

*Levinson*: We still have a little more time, and it's such a privilege to have Dominic here.

*Chianese*: I'm very happy to be here.

*Audience member #19*: There's an actor – I won't mention the name – who's a main wheel on the show, who I think over the years, this actor, you could really see some growth. I know they chose, you know, great actors who just maintained a certain quality. Maybe, would you admit that there was one, or maybe not, and you don't have to mention the name of the actor, that you thought had really grown as an actor during the nine years. You don't have to mention the name of the actor, but do you think there was one, or, that kept a professional level and was basically...

*Chianese*: I think the more we practiced, I think the definition of someone with talent who aspires, like I do, to be an artist, the more you do it, its true, practice does make perfect. And I really believe that with all my heart. And you have to be truthful. Somebody comes up to me and they say, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" You know what I tell them? "You take the "R" train and get off at 42<sup>nd</sup> street."

[*audience laughter*]

*Lavery*: I think she's asking though, if I understood it correctly, was there any particular actor in *The Sopranos* who really grew and developed over the course of the show?

AM #19: Yeah.

*Chianese*: I grew, I grew. Definitely myself. Definitely grew, because you have a chance, especially in the film media, you know, I feel, you learn more about relaxing in front of that camera. The more you relax, the more you're willing to give. Sometimes, believe it or not, you give your best work when you're extremely tired. All your defenses are down, you're just exhausted, and you can get good results on film, not on a stage, but in film you can. Just let it all hang out, and just be honest about what's going on, you know.

*Levinson*: I have a question. You often hear, at least regarding *The Godfather* movies, that there were some real mobsters who were consulted, you know in some cases it was even said that maybe they played big parts in *The Godfather* saga. Now we can't mention any names because we want to live. [audience laughter] But was there any of that in *The Sopranos*—real mobsters who either were consulted or in some way were contacted by the show, or perhaps they were even there playing good guys? I guess it was also in *Goodfellas*, it was also alleged about that. What about *The Sopranos*?

*Chianese*: Well, I don't know. Jimmy met with Carmine one time and said, "Nobody's going to say to you, 'Hello. I belong to the secret society.'"

[audience laughter]

*Chianese*: It's common sense.

*Lavery*: It is true Tony Sirico had a criminal record though, right?

*Chianese*: Who?

*Lavery*: Tony Sirico.

*Chianese*: Tony, yeah, Tony mentioned that. He said that at the beginning. Later on he said, "Maybe I should've kept my mouth shut." [audience

*laughter*] But he did say, yeah, he got caught for stealing when he was a kid. You know, some kind of, robbery of some kind.

*Levinson*: Yeah, but what Frankie Valli did to music in his later years, some might say is a crime.

*Lavery*: Yeah, but he got hits.

[*audience laughter*]

*Audience member #20*: This isn't a question, it's a comment, and it's made with 100-percent sincerity. I think you were robbed for the ending in that last season of *The Sopranos*.

*Chianese*: You think I was what?

*AM #20*: Robbed.

*Chianese*: Oh thank you so much, thank you.

[*applause*]

*Audience member #21*: One thing I've always wondered about is the difference between working on stage and working in film. On stage you're basically telling a story consecutively, whereas in film you're doing things in a fragmented way. How do you gain the emotion of a scene...the development to which point the character is reached when maybe you're later going to perform something that happens earlier? How do you perform in a fragmented way like that and capture the emotions?

*Chianese*: That's where I think it helped me to be on the show for a long time because you do find out how your own particular preparation counts. It's really about preparation, and of course the stop and the go of filming it, it's very important to prepare very, very well. When I say prepare – to know that the lines that you're going to say are really memorized and deep inside

you – because once you get in front of the camera, you're not thinking about the intention, you're just using your imagination and what you practiced, and you're hoping you'll be in the moment. When you're in the moment, then you can create. My acting teacher once said, "Dominic, a lot of acting is about focus. You do the preparation and it's like sitting down at a piano – you've done the preparation, then you're just going to start playing. You're not supposed to be thinking about technique. You work through your technique, because the technique is your practice. You've already done your homework, you've practiced it. You start to express yourself. So it's a question of almost like saying, while I'm asking for your name, you could say, "My name is Bill Smith," and while I'm answering that I say, "Well what's 7 times 4?" "Its 28," "Where do you live?" "215 Jackson Avenue," but yet, you still have to remember that your name is Bill Smith. The mind has to really be focused on an emotion that has to be expressed, and then you have words to say. It is a mystery, but it is a talent at the same time, and it's not easy. You've gotta focus, and you've gotta trust. Basically, what I'm saying, you have to trust the moment. Can you imagine playing at Carnegie Hall and having to put your fingers on all those keys for an hour, or playing a violin – the practice that it takes? It basically...it takes practice. And what makes art I think is the moment where you improvise, and something happens, but stays within the context of the craft. It's a mystery. I would suggest getting a book that was written by, I don't know if anybody knows Stephen Nachmanovitch. He teaches at, I think the University of North Carolina, brilliant. The book is called, it's a paperback book. You can buy it at Barnes and Noble. It's called *Free Play*, two words – free, play – *Improvisation in Life and in Art*, and it talks about the creative process, which involves all the arts. The man who wrote it is a violinist, but it's about music, and it's about acting, and it makes you understand that you have to be in the moment. You cannot be in the past or the future. In that moment you have to be IN the moment, and that's a mystery, and it's a mystery that I think...you know we can prepare for, but it means focusing and practicing. Practicing, it's like meditation to the nth degree. That's the only way I can answer that question. It's very deep. I really don't know the answer. Nobody does. There is a way to prepare, and it's about preparation. On the stage you've had four weeks to learn the part. It's in your body, it's in your whole body. You're

walking like the character. You have the costume. You know exactly where you're gonna sit, and even then you have to wait for inspiration. If something happens you have to be there and make it work. Sometimes you're on the stage and you knock the lamp over by accident. You have to stay in character. You know, act like it's really happening. You have to live on the stage. And that takes preparation. It's a craft and people who are really talented, they can make an art out of it, but it takes a lot of work. It does. Yes, another question.

*Audience member #22:* I was wondering about the relationship, the rapport that you had with Nancy Marchand. It seemed like the roles, the scenes that you played together, there was just a natural order. I was wondering how that just developed between you too.

*Chianese:* About Nancy, yes?

*AM #22:* Yeah

*Chianese:* Yeah, the chemistry between us was incredible. We never even had to discuss the technique or anything or... it was just complete trust. Trust is really the word, I mean, most acting teachers will tell you how important that is. You go up to somebody in the street and you're asking them directions, you're not thinking of how you're gonna do it, you just trust that he's gonna answer you, and that's basically what acting is really like, knowing exactly what you're gonna do and just trusting yourself, not being hesitant. So really it's a reenactment of real life, and depending on the text, you give it the expression it needs, and you give it the dynamics it needs, but it's basically being truthful, and trusting yourself and the person with you, you know.

*Levinson:* That's probably why men never ask for directions.

[*audience laughter*]

*Chianese:* They don't want to feel foolish maybe, who knows.

*Lavery:* This returns to a repeating theme here today about how to interpret, you know, the ending and other moments in *The Sopranos*, but did you feel, coming back to the main question about Nancy, when Livia was manipulating you into whacking Tony, or trying to whack Tony, was that read correctly, she was actively doing it? I mean it's still unclear when you watch the first season how much of it is passive aggressive and how much of it is conscious on her part.

*Chianese:* I believed everything she told me as a character. I had to believe that. First of all she's Junior's sister-in-law. I trusted her implicitly. I mean, I really trusted her. There's no reason not to trust her because I've known her, she was married to my brother, so you know I had no idea she was manipulating me. Livia's smart enough to manipulate me, and by trusting her I get myself in trouble. I really believed her when she said that it was my idea to get rid of Tony.

*Lavery:* You believed Livia.

*Chianese:* Yeah, it was all Uncle Junior's idea

*Lavery:* Or so he thought.

[*audience laughter*]

*Chianese:* Yeah, yeah.

*Lavery:* But I mean she says practically nothing about Brendan Filone, and you take that to be, Uncle Junior takes it to be, that she's saying have him whacked.

*Chianese:* No, but you know she said that Michael Imperioli, Christopher, helped her with the lamp shades or something, but the other kid didn't help. She's basically saying he deserves it. She's really the real boss in there. He's asking her opinion because she was married to his brother who he

looked up to. His brother was a lot smarter and craftier than he was, a lot more powerful, at least in Junior's eyes.

*Lavery:* What did you think of the actor who played you as a young man? What was it like to be watching someone playing your earlier self?

*Chianese:* I thought it was wonderful. Rocco Sisto is a wonderful actor. We do look alike when we put the glasses on a certain way. My own son, my own son Dominic Jr. was cast originally, but turned out he was too young for the part. He looked younger than the other character, than Joseph, so they had to let him go. He felt bad about that.

*Audience member #23:* After the attempted assassination in season one of Tony, he has a very hard time forgiving his mother, Livia, but he seems to get over the fact that Junior played a role in trying to get him whacked...

*Chianese:* You know that's really a question about the relationship that they have to each other. Why does Tony forgive his uncle? I think it's really that it is his uncle, and Tony realizes that he sometimes might have to make decisions that are according to your own moral code, I mean it's up to Tony to figure that out, why does he forgive his uncle. Of course he loves his own. He feels respectful towards his uncle, and even though he may hate him for what he did, he's gonna rationalize it, and justify it some way, which in Tony's psyche, this is one of the reasons probably why he goes to a psychiatrist, because he's got all these demons. His own uncle is trying to kill him, so that must make him feel a little bit insecure. [*audience laughter*] I'm sure if I knew that my uncle was trying to kill me I'd say, "There's something wrong here," [*audience laughter*] "either he's nuts, you know, or I'm nuts, so let me go to somebody." So I think these are the questions that made the show so wonderful. He's taking a chance. When I first auditioned for this role, I saw that I'm talking to my sister-in-law, saying, she's an Italian mother, I said, I'm going to have to bump off your son, ok. I knew that David Chase was a little ... but he's a genius. So it turns out that he's a genius because he made it work. That's Shakespearean. That's Greek mythology, that's Greek drama. That's heavy drama. Killing your own, God

forbid, your own son or your daughter, or your brother, or your uncle. That's drama. That's human passion. That's stuff that, like Oedipus, you know finding out that he's sleeping with his mother and he killed his own father. That's heavy stuff. That's basically what David was writing, and Jimmy was definitely troubled about it and Junior was troubled about it. It wasn't easy to kill his own nephew, but he really wanted to have it done. But he was nervous as a nut, and I think secretly he was happy that it didn't work, you know.

*Levinson:* Yeah we were happy too.

*Chianese:* They botched it, yeah, they botched it..

*Levinson:* Final question. We're going to wrap up now.

*Audience member #24 :* How much back story did they give you on "Johnny Boy" Soprano, Junior's brother, and the relationship before we joined the season?

*Chianese:* The back story?

*AM #24:* Yeah, from your relationship with Tony's father, your, Junior's brother?

*Chianese:* No, we didn't...We just got what everybody else got. We just read the script. We did know from watching that they had a history as young hoods in the neighborhood, you know, but we weren't given any hints. We just had to use our imaginations, which is part of talent.

*Levinson:* Well then let me just conclude, not with a question, but with a brief final comment. As I mentioned at the reception last night, two years ago I wrote an op-ed for *Newsday* that I entitled, "Only Idiots Don't Watch Television," [*audience laughter*] which actually I liked as a title, but *Newsday* told me to change it to a phrase that I had in the article, "The New Golden Age of Television," which I guess is a sweeter title. Anyway, what

both of those titles got to is the enormous increase in the quality of television that we've seen in the past ten years. So if you think about *Rome* on HBO, *The Tudors* on Showtime, *Dexter* on Showtime, the *John Adams* miniseries that concluded on HBO, you can just go on and on and on, and it's not only on cable television, it's on the networks – shows like *24*, *Lost*, but when you think about where all of that started, there's no doubt in my mind that it started in 1999, that it started with *The Sopranos*, and I think the world would also agree that one of the most important parts of that show is Dominic Chianese, who has spent this time with us today. So, thank you Dominic.

*Chianese*: Thank you.

[*applause*]