

TV Close-Up: Michael Imperioli

by Eirik_Knutzen

Due to the considerable recognition and financial rewards he has garnered during the past decade as violent mob leader and insensitive Hollywood filmmaker Christopher Moltisanti on "The Sopranos," Michael Imperioli owns a fine little theater on West 39th Street in Manhattan and sometimes keeps a rooster named Dino in his nearby home.

While Imperioli worked out the financing for the three-year-old Studio Dante through really nice paychecks from the producers of "The Sopranos," his wife, Victoria, practically built the showcase with her own hands and co-produces new plays with her husband (who also acts in and directs some of them).

Their last production - "Chicken," a black comedy by playwright Mike Batistick - just wrapped a couple of weeks ahead of "The Sopranos'" announced final take. Imperioli portrays a financially strapped Bronx resident with a pregnant wife who tries to make some extra cash through illegal cockfighting.

In prepping for the role of training a killer rooster, Imperioli attended genuine cockfights in New Mexico, one of only two states where the bloody "sport" is legal.

"Dino came to live with us on weekends for a couple of months and we discovered he was a great actor who can hit his marks and crow on cue," he joked.

MICHAEL IMPERIOLI - Michael Imperioli plays corrupt Christopher Moltisanti on 'The Sopranos.'
CNS Photo courtesy of Abbot Genser.

Before the last nine episodes of "The Sopranos" sleep with the fishes, the native of Mount Vernon, N.Y., also has time to hype his current feature film. Directed by Paul Auster, he co-stars in "The Inner Life of Martin Frost" as a successful plumber/would-be writer opposite David Thewlis' title character, a successful writer/needy customer who really doesn't want to read the fine plumber's work.

Imperioli, 40, is also very much aware that it was "The Sopranos" that opened all the doors in recent memory, including for his handful of current TV and movie projects in various stages of development.

"I don't know what's going to happen down the line, but I'd like to keep working with HBO because of the freedom they give to the people they work with," he explained. "Our show broke a lot of boundaries and they took some big risks along the way."

"Before this show I was working as an actor, but was never that successful," Imperioli freely admitted, still recalling the terror while working with one line in one scene in his first movie, "Lean on Me," followed by the high-profile "Goodfellas" and "Malcolm X." "But when you get notoriety and success, it also brings more money. Absolutely. It means living in a better house, longer vacations and financial security for my wife and three kids."

If nothing else, "The Sopranos" has been a huge party for a decade of his life, according to the 2004 Emmy Award-winner for Best Supporting Actor in a Drama Series as Tony Soprano's very impulsive and extremely dangerous nephew.

"Luckily, my charter has evolved a hell of a lot over the years," he said. "Christopher started out as a kind of overgrown teenager, then gradually took on lots of responsibilities personally and as a mobster."

Sworn to secrecy or risk the wrath of "The Sopranos'" technical advisers with bulging underarms, Imperioli can only hint at where his hotheaded character is going during the last nine episodes of the final season.

"Christopher finally produced his supernatural slasher movie, 'Cleaver,' starring Daniel Baldwin as the temperamental mob boss after Ben Kingsley turned it down. Not only is he a producer, but has a 'Story By' credit."

Unfortunately, Tony (James Gandolfini) thinks he has seen this super-violent character before - in the mirror.

Although "The Sopranos" has limped through only six seasons since the pilot was shot in 1997, Imperioli thinks the series has had a wooden spike driven through its heart - no persistent rumors of producers and talent holding out for more money have panned out.

"From what I know, this really is the last season for us," said Imperioli. "The days are definitely winding down and everybody is saying goodbye; getting ready for 'The End.' If the show were to go on, I'd be shocked."

Looking back, "The Sopranos" has been the greatest (and longest) work experience that Imperioli has ever been a party to.

"The only sad thing about this show is having to say goodbye to it at long last," he said, his words fading.

"It certainly will be bittersweet, but there will be nothing but fond memories and friendships that'll last a lifetime."

Very much a family man, Imperiola also looks forward to spending more time with family - including stepdaughter Isabella, 17, plus sons Vadim, 9, and David, 5 - until the next major project pops up. All have acting talent, but only Vadim was willing to give it a try in a Studio Dante production last year.

With luck, he will have an easier time breaking into the acting business than his dad, who launched his career after six years of moving furniture, bar tending, waiting tables and phone marketing.

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