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WEEKLY

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100 DAYS ON THE JOB WITH OLIVER CHI, IRVINE'S NEW CITY MANAGER

AS THE FORMER CITY MANAGER OF HUNTINGTON BEACH, CHI WAS HIRED IN DECEMBER. WITH PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT, CHI SPOKE WITH IRVINE WEEKLY ABOUT HIS BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSED HIS VISION FOR HIS NEW POSITION IN IRVINE.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

As a father to Ian and Avery, and a husband to Bobby Jo, Oliver Chi, Irvine's newest city manager, enjoys the simple things in life – family, golf, black coffee and the satisfaction of helping others.

While Chi says his professional life and fatherhood have increased his caffeine intake and decreased his golfing activity, being the resourceful person he is, he has a solution – an in-office putting green.

"I take my coffee black, and I drink a lot of it every single day. For me, my family, my home, my profession – those are the things that are most important to me," Chi said during a phone interview with Irvine Weekly. "I don't get to play golf very often anymore, but I've got a putting green in my office. I'll hit a couple of putts when I'm thinking about different things."

It is not all fun and games for Chi. From his perspective, the health of the team is the most important aspect of any organization.

With previous local government experience as the city manager of Huntington Beach, this will be Chi's second local government position in Orange County. Prior to his arrival, Chi spent time working for the cities of Arcadia and Monrovia.

Yet, while his trajectory within the ranks of local policymakers may seem calculated, Chi did not originally intend



to work for the public sector in this capacity. A graduate of the University of California, Los Angeles, and later University of Southern California, Chi originally had aspirations to study law.

"I actually fell into the local government profession totally by accident. I had gone to UCLA for my undergraduate degree, and I was thinking I wanted to go to law school," he said. "Initially I had very little perspective of what a city actually did, but the chance to work for the city of Arcadia opened my eyes to this public sector agency that was focused to help shape and create a community – in the way the community wants their city to look, feel and operate."

Less than a week later, Chi said he knew local government would be a perfect fit.

Hired by the city of Irvine on December 2, Chi is approaching his first 100 days on the job. Over the course of the last first three months, Chi said he has spent the majority of his time team building, adding that there is a deep sense of responsibility with the position he is now entrusted with.

For Chi, organizational functionality is the key to success. He says he's always looking for creative ways to help institute that mindset for his colleagues. For Chi, quotes have become an easy anecdotal way of showcasing that message, and help "articulate what's happening

in the moment."

"What I've seen in organizations is, as much as projects are important, what's most important is how an operation functions internally. From an operational perspective, an intense focus on people and values, those two things will drive an organization's culture – but it has to be deliberately designed and developed. We've spent a lot of time exploring our mission, values – what's most important culturally here in Irvine," he said. "There's certainly things that folks want to see some progress made on – what are we going to do at the Great Park, how are we going to address issues related to All American Asphalt, what are some of the trends that will happen with the new housing elements that were recently approved? All those tangible project-based things we need to do, I found that you're more effective in executing if you start with internally what's most important."

As Chi's work begins in Irvine, he recalled using a quote during a recent meeting with the Irvine executive team that he overheard while his son was watching the show *Troll Hunters*:

"Destiny is a gift. Some go their entire lives living existences of quiet desperation, never learning the truth that what feels as though a burden pushing down upon our shoulders is actually a sense of purpose, lifting us to greater heights."

Chi said that quote made him think about the significance of his current opportunity, and how while he feels the weight of responsibility, he is grateful to be in a position to help others.

"I think that perspective is important and hopefully folks have a sense that the work we do is meaningful – and as hard as it can be at times – we should be looking at it from a lens that we are privileged to have the chance to do this," he said. "I've spent a lot of time, the last couple of weeks, since I've started, taking every meeting that I can, asking questions, listening – I think over and over, what I continue to see is this incredible desire in Irvine to maintain our ability to serve as this organization in this city that is serving the community, and helping to shape the city into a place where a premiere quality of life is possible."

CULTURE

SHOWCASING SHELBY

WITH MORE THAN 80 DIFFERENT CARROLL SHELBY AUTOMOBILES, THE SEGERSTROM SHELBY EVENT CENTER AND MUSEUM IN IRVINE HAS BUILT SOME PERMANENT PARKING SPACE FOR SOME OF THE MOST HISTORIC RACE CARS BUILT IN AMERICA.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAE AND TED SEGERSTROM

Featuring a collection of some of the rarest Carroll Shelby cars on the planet, the Segerstrom Shelby Event Center and Museum in Irvine has created some pristine parking space for a fleet of more than 60 historic Shelby-designed automobiles, including the first 1968 Shelby Mustang GT500 ever made.

For context, Carroll Shelby was an American automotive designer and race car driver, best known for his work with the British automotive company AC Cobra, and for his work on the legendary Shelby Mustang he created with Ford Motors.

Recently opened to the public in January, the Shelby Event Center and Museum is owned by well-known Orange County residents Rae and Ted Segerstrom, who have spent their lives tinkering with cars, and years pouring

over countless details of classic Shelby-designed AC Cobra and Mustang restoration projects.

Construction on the new facility started in January 2020 and was abruptly interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We looked at several places and we found this one, and we thought we were just going to move in. We're still doing little things, but it took until October of last year until we could finally open the doors," Rae Segerstrom tells us during a phone call with Irvine Weekly.

Prior to the new location, the Segerstrom's historic collection was located in Irvine, but they decided to sell and relocate, prior to the pandemic.

"We originally had a building, it was a moving and storage building in Irvine, right by John Wayne Airport, but we needed another space to park our cars," Rae explains. "Before, it was kind of like

a used car lot, the cars were just lined up. This one, there's a lot of information, there are time capsules all around – one wall dedicated to the military for all they've done for us."

Working closely with her husband Ted, Rae Segerstrom shared the details behind this impressive collection of rare cars and spoke about how the husband and wife team hopes the new Shelby Event Center and Museum will benefit the community at large.

"We want people to come enjoy it. We want people to come and learn from it. But we would also like people to come and make their memories – have their family reunion, have their wedding there," she says.

Thursday, Jan. 20, marked the official grand opening for the Segerstrom Shelby Event Center. During the event, the Segerstroms announced an official



partnership with the National Pediatric Cancer Foundation.

Both husband and wife learned to appreciate cars on their own, with Rae adding that she worked on cars with her father, leaving behind traditional tasks.

"It's just something we enjoy – since a Mustang was his first car, my husband is a Mustang guy," she says. "My dad, his first job was a gas station attendant. I grew up around working on cars with my dad. I learned how to do that instead of cook!"

Today, the husband and wife's attention to detail has led them to own close to 100 Shelby designs. They are now hoping to share their modest collection of automotive history with the community.

"As far as collecting goes, my husband's very first car was a hand-me-down from his sister – a 1966 Mustang. Then in 1973, he got a 1972 Mach 1 [Mustang]," she explains. "Then, he got his first Shelby, a '67, a GT 500, then his second was a GT500KR, which we found out was a one-of-one because of the color combination of it. So, we started looking for another one, and we found one back east."

This has become a consistent trend for the Segerstroms over their multi-decade stint in collecting and restoring relics of American automotive history. However, through their search, the Segerstroms have uncovered revered pieces of American automotive engineering, including a set of identical twin Shelby GT500 KR.

"While the [1968 GT500 KR] was being restored, a gentleman found another one from Nevada, and just happened to bring it back to the same restoration guy," she explains. "Well, they had consecutive serial numbers. They looked farther and they had consecutive Shelby ID numbers, and they pulled



the build sheet on them and they were identical twins.”

However, the trend became somewhat problematic for the Segerstroms, as the value would outweigh the vehicle’s utility.

“OK, now we have two more that we can’t drive,” she added. “That’s kind of how the collection started. We were looking for a car that he really liked to drive. We kept finding these, and looking for things that were really rare.”

In terms of rarity, Irvine’s Shelby Center and Museum has the first of every AC Cobra model ever created – except for the 2000 model, which is currently parked inside an AC Cobra Museum in Colorado.

The rarest car in the building? A 1966 Paxton GT350, with a supercharged engine, which had a special owner.

“They made 11 Paxton in 1966 – only one of them was white and only one was an automatic – and that was Carroll Shelby’s. We know for sure that it’s his because a friend of ours used to work for Shelby, and when he walked in and saw that car the first thing he said was, ‘I know that car,’” Rae says.

The Segerstrom Shelby Event Center is located at 5 Whatney, Irvine, CA 92618

*Hours of operation
Thursday - Sunday
10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.*

For more information on visit www.segerstromshelbyeventcenter.com



KYODONG NOODLES

IRVINE’S NEW JAJANGMYEON RESTAURANT

BY AUDREY FONG

Located in Stonecreek Plaza next to Layer Cake Bakery, Kyodong Noodles is one of the newest Korean restaurants in Irvine. Unlike other Korean restaurants, however, the menu leans more towards Korean Chinese food with its focus on jajangmyeon and selection of fried rice dishes.

Jajangmyeon is a sweet and savory black bean noodle and has become one of the most popular Korean Chinese dishes worldwide. First introduced to Korea in 1905 by a Chinese restaurant in Incheon’s Chinatown, the dish is based on a Northern Chinese ground pork and noodle dish called zha jiang mian. Even though the noodles have Chinese origins, Yong Chen, professor of history at UC Irvine and an expert on Chinese food history, explained to Lubbock Avalanche Journal that the dish is now distinctly Korean.

What differentiates jajangmyeon from zha jiang mian is that jajangmyeon is made with a sweet black bean paste called chunjang and is almost always served with chewy, wheat noodles. And instead of ground pork, it often has chunks of pork, onion, zucchini, and other vegetables mixed into it.

Kyodong Noodles serves up several varieties of jajangmyeon including traditional, seafood, spicy, mangu, and veggie. I opted for the seafood jajangmyeon and spicy jajangmyeon.

What initially hit me about each dish was the large serving size. One bowl of noodles and an appetizer would easily be enough for two people to split. Between the two dishes, I preferred the seafood jajangmyeon, which came with a variety of seafood like shrimp, squid and clams. The sweetness of the black bean paste

Seafood jajangmyeon



and the savory soy sauce flavor were much more easily detectable in these noodles than the spicy one. The spicy jajangmyeon tasted almost exclusively of spiciness other than the few sweet bites of onion, skipping over the sweet black bean flavor you look for in jajangmyeon. Since the sauce on both dishes was very thick, it clung to the noodles ensuring that every bite of noodles was flavorful once properly mixed. I also appreciated the chewiness of the noodles, which made the dish feel hearty and filling.

The meal overall was quite tasty and makes it easy for jajangmyeon lovers to get their fill. One downside to this spot though is the wait. I came close to opening with only one customer in front of me and only ordered two dishes to-go. Despite the fairly low number of customers, it took over 20 minutes for them to prepare my food. This means that the food most likely will not be prepared quickly enough for the many office workers who frequent Stonecreek Plaza for lunch. It is a spot one should either call ahead at or reserve for when one has more time.

Kyodong Noodles is open daily for dine-in, takeout, and delivery from 11:00 a.m. – 8:15 p.m.

MUSIC

THE UKULELE ORCHESTRA OF GREAT BRITAIN

PERFORMING DELIGHTFUL AND SOMETIMES HAUNTING VERSIONS OF VARIOUS MUSICAL SELECTIONS.

BY LIZ GOLDNER



PHOTO BY ALLISON BURKE



George Hinchiffe

PHOTO BY GRAHAM HARDY

One of the most unusual musical groups to grace the Irvine Barclay stage is the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain (UOGB) performing unusual renditions of rock, folk classical and movie themes. They will spread their special magic at the Barclay on March 27.

UOGB Musical Director/Founder George Hinchiffe provided detailed, often humorous responses to questions, from his home in the UK: "The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain is looking forward to bringing its magisterially depraved view of the culture of popular music to the Irvine Barclay Theatre," he said. "Appearing in Southern California with crowd-pleasing,

stomping, poignant, rocking, thought-provoking, swinging music; groovy plucking, heartfelt singing, virtuosic whistling, and an irreverent deflation of pomposity all served up in the Orchestra's fine-tuned and integrated entertainment will surely be a complete hoot for performers and audiences whatever their ages or individual musical tastes. Can't wait to be there!"

IRVINE WEEKLY: When was the Ukulele Orchestra first created?

Hinchiffe: The group first got together in 1985 shortly after the founders moved from Leeds to London. The Orchestra's roots are in theatre, music, performance, rock, art, soul and punk scenes in Leeds in the 1970s.

Who created the group?

The idea was George Hinchiffe's though the initial founders (Kitty Lux, Andy Astle, Jo Brindley and George) spent some time debating whether they should be called the Ukulele Orchestra of Westminster, Bermondsey, London, South London, Kent, England, Britain, Europe, the world, the known universe. Great Britain seemed to strike the right balance between hubris and irony.

What is the concept behind unusual performances?

The concept was intended as the antidote to existing conventions of popular music, celebrity, genre specialization and business practice. The ukulele was chosen because it was not widely used or easily

obtainable in the UK. Early rehearsals established key elements of performance: quasi formal dress, specially designed music stands, and everyone had to sing. Humor or at least a light-hearted approach was preferred, though overt jokes were avoided. Critics have however often opined that the whole darned enterprise is a joke.

What musical groups inspired you?

The Orchestra was influenced by The Mound City Blue Blowers, The Velvet Underground, Spike Jones, Flanders and Swan, The Portsmouth Sinfonia, Victor Borge, Los Lobos, The Quintette du Hot Club de France, Cornelius Cardew, Wild Man Fischer and Skiffle.

Where did your group first perform?

Our first live appearance was at the Roebuck, Trinity Church Square, London. Within a year, we played several gigs, including in Belgium, were on national radio and TV in the UK. Our first album and concerts in USA and Canada followed quickly.

How was your first performance received?

The venue was crowded and well received, and it was decided that what might have been a "one off" performance should become an ongoing enterprise.

Please list a few other venues you have performed in.

The Orchestra has played at major rock festivals, private parties for royal families and in the smallest pub in Britain. Venues include St David's Cathedral, Windsor Castle, Glastonbury Festival, Carnegie Hall, Sidney Opera House, Buckingham Palace, Filthy McNasty's Bar, Salisbury Cathedral, Sixpenny Handley Village Hall, The Quattro Club, Hiroshima, Vienna Opera House, Shanghai Symphony Hall and Althorp House. Theatres and rock festivals are some of the most congenial locations for performance, though we have performed at folk, literary, comedy, classical, pop, and beer festivals. All venues have their own magic and constraints. But the key element is engagement with the audience.

In your early years, what kind of music did you play?

We played music from established genres on what were thought to be the wrong instruments. To take a cue from the title of our latest album, we only play

MUSIC

PHOTO BY DAVE SUICH



ukuleles, and thus we give the audience "One Plucking Thing After Another."

How do you choose the popular music, jazz, film tunes and classical music selections?

Musical merit has to be present in the composition, be it an interesting chord sequence, a lovely melody or a relentlessly boring and hypnotic tonal monotony, which can have an appeal all its own. The UOGB avoids comic, parody or kitsch songs; these can sound "over-egged" when given the band's treatment. Some hit songs are already parodies of certain genres and thus are best avoided. A ukulele reworking could make them too rich, arch, camp, mannered, or knowing. Though sometimes going over the top has its merits.

To what do you attribute your stunning, ongoing success?

When the Orchestra first started performing, the style and choice of repertoire seemed unusual to most audiences. It was deemed thought-provoking, eccentric and surprising. Since then, a number of things have changed, including the fact that it is now something of a trend to play a range of genres, including rock music and classical music on ukuleles, a concept originated by the UOGB.

The more rigid notions of genre distinction and focus on "new" music, prevalent in the pre-Internet era, have given way to a more eclectic acceptance of music, from the history of pop music and a willingness to accept material from what were once more partisan genres. At first, the Orchestra seemed strange, ridiculous, and even note-

worthy, and thus attracted some attention as well as criticism. As time went on, the Orchestra became more accepted and known in theatres all over the world. We hold our hands out to the audience and say: "Join us, meet us half-way, let's have a good time together."

Please list some of your favored compositions.

Saint-Saëns' "Danse Macabre," Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight," Elmer Bernstein's "The Magnificent Seven," Lou Reed's "I'm Waiting For My Man," and Syd Barrett's "Baby Lemonade."

Audiences also like us playing "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly" theme by Ennio Morricone, "Wuthering Heights" by Kate Bush, "Heroes" by David Bowie, "Gimme All Your Loving" by ZZ Top, and "Psycho Killer" by David Byrne.

We first prepared "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly" years ago. The theme is well known, memorable and has interesting orchestrations, which are amusing with ukulele versions. The peculiar vocal noises and the whistling are challenges.

As musical culture is represented in our repertoire, we include cartoon music, film music, nursery rhymes, cliched rock songs, old country tunes, classical music and examples of "light music." There is a rich vein of western themes such as the "Bonanza" theme. We also include the "The Ballad of Jed Clampett," Tchaikovsky's Sugar Plum Fairy" and Aretha Franklin's "Respect."

Sometimes there is humor in delivering a successful version of a composition, as laughter comes from joy, not just from satire or slapstick. A good composition, a good melody or a good musical sequence can be revealed in fresh ways via a ukulele orchestration. The economy of instrumental resources and timbres of the instrument throws the quality of the composition into relief, revealing its integrity in ways that a symphonic interpretation might obscure with a richer palette of timbre and sonic color.

The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain will perform at the Irvine Barclay Theatre on Sunday, March 27 at 3 PM. To order tickets for this and other upcoming performances, check out its Get Ready It's Showtime brochure. Or go to: www.thebarclay.org. Contact the Box Office, 949-854-4646. 4242 Campus Dr, Irvine, CA 92612.

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ARTS

BRADFORD SALAMON: AN EVOLVING AND MAGNANIMOUS VISION

**EXHIBIT ON DISPLAY AT THE HILBERT MUSEUM
SHOWCASES SALAMON'S VIVID, EMPATHETIC
RENDERINGS OF PEOPLE AND OBJECTS.**

BY LIZ GOLDNER



ings. Soon after the exhibition opened in late January, many visitors went there to check it out. Most were so enchanted by the narrative artwork on display, with the vivid, empathetic renderings of people and objects, that they spent long periods gazing at the works.

Salamon uses “expressive lines, colors, shapes, slight exaggerations and focal points to create a statement about the sitters that is more than the sum of its parts and more telling and true than a photograph,” explained Mike McGee, formerly Cal State Fullerton art department chairman.

As a visual storyteller, Salamon revels in creating portraits, scenes and renditions of objects, such as vintage toys and clocks. He explains in the accompanying catalog, “I wanted to do more than just draw everything; along with regular journaling, I was recording my life through drawings and paintings.” He adds, “Staring at a person for several hours a day while painting their portrait gives me an opportunity to really think compassionately about the person and to appreciate another human being on a very deep level. ... I also want to give the viewer of the finished work a chance to appreciate the person I have chosen to draw or paint in a more profound way.”

Enhancing Salamon’s work on display



Mark Hilbert, co-founder (with his wife Jan) of the Hilbert Museum of California Art on the Chapman University campus in Orange, told me that when he visits a museum, he looks at the visitors there as much as at the art. He observes

their reactions to the work on the walls and pedestals, ascertaining how long they spend with individual pieces. Hilbert added that as a museum founder, one of his goals is to encourage visitors to engage deeply with the artwork displayed, to learn about the art movements represented

and even about the California history depicted.

It is not surprising that Hilbert, along with curator Gordon McClelland and Hilbert Museum Director Mary Platt, recently installed the exhibition, “Bradford J. Salamon: Forging Ahead,” featuring 47 paintings and draw-



are his detailed narratives of his pieces, with many descriptions hearkening back to his childhood – a time that helped form him into a creative, empathetic individual and artist. About his oil, "Betty Boop," an iconic figure dressed in a hula costume, he wrote, "I find it interesting how our brains select certain experiences to retain as a memory and other experiences we forget. ... I don't know why I painted this of Betty Boop, but I guess it would be because of something I experienced as a child watching cartoons." About his finely wrought figurative "R2-D2," he recounted, "'Star Wars' was such a phenomenon in the late 1970s that it changed the movie industry and our culture in profound and lasting ways."

Walking through this exhibition becomes a visual and descriptive tour de force, almost like a movie of the artist's life. The viewer witnesses the work and reads about stories of Salamon's childhood and teenage years, growing up near the beach, engaging in a variety of adventures, many of which affect his art practice today. His narrative accompanying the expressive, detailed oil, "Notes from a Memory" of three teenagers relaxing against a pool on a summer day reads, "All of us kids

back then were free-range kids, largely on our own in the wild. Nicole's house had this above-ground pool and for a couple of summers it was one of the best spots for us to hang out."

Several paintings have lighter, humorous aspects, the most notable being "Dude Descending a Staircase." This hilarious, realistic portrayal of Jeff Bridges from the film "The Big Lebowski" depicts him as "The Dude" descending a staircase wearing his rumpled hair and attire. The title is a play on words of Marcel Duchamp's 1912 salacious painting "Nude Descending a Staircase," adding a double entendre to Salamon's work.

Another charmer is "Animal Style," a succulent close-up of one of In-N-Out Burger's most popular items. While observing the illustration of burgers with melting cheese, mustard and other mouth-watering accoutrements, the hungry museum visitor might want to visit the famous fast-food joint. Here is also "What, Me Worry?" a detailed three-dimensional illustration of Alfred E. Neuman, Mad Magazine's mascot. Salamon revealed his interest in current events when he wrote about it, "I can't help but wonder what Neuman would say about our current political and

societal circumstances."

One style that Salamon excels at is detailed, figurative domestic scenes, often of people he knows posing as themselves. Several such examples include the 2009 "Expectations" of David Michael Lee, a Coastline College educator, relaxing while gazing admiringly at his pregnant wife, Julie Perlin Lee (now executive director, Laguna Art Museum). Also displayed is "White Rabbit" of the artist's daughter, Lauren, wedged in a doorframe, surrounded by his daughter Sarah, wife Kathy in the kitchen and mother-in-law at the piano. He wrote about this piece, "I included the white rabbit as a reference to procreation."

Among Salamon's personal favorites are his portraits of artist friends – paintings that he has been engaged in for several decades. While his books and catalogs contain many dozen examples of these gems, six of Jodi Bonassi, Alex Couwenberg, Tony DeLap, Lynn Foulkes, Mark Ryden and Don Bachardy are included in this exhibition. The latter of the Santa Monica-based artist relaxing after painting all day is resonant with Salamon, as Bachardy is also a major portrait artist who has portrayed Salamon 23 times. He wrote about Bachardy in his narratives, "He's a great friend,

but he remains also a great hero."

Salamon's two most recent portraits, representing his departure in technique, created since the start of the lockdown, are eight-foot-high drawings done with drafting pencil on vellum paper. "Clare V-V #16" is of Clare Dowling, the beautiful daughter of good friend and artist Tom Dowling. "Holly V-V #6" lives in Salamon's Monrovia neighborhood. "I drew her," he told me, "because she is an innocent, vulnerable, beautiful girl. And with the Black Lives Matter movement on my mind (Holly is African American), I feel that she represents the future." I asked him why he creates these new portraits on a larger scale than previously. "Large suggests power," he said. "And women today need more power."

Powerful sentiments indeed from an artist who continues to evolve in technique and perspective, for whom portraiture is more than just likeness, and who one day may become as significant and well-known as is David Hockney!

"Bradford J. Salamon: Forging Ahead" is on view through May 7, 2022. Hilbert Museum of California Art, 167 N. Atchison Street, Orange, CA. Tue.-Sat., 11 am-5 pm. 714-516-5880. Free. www.hilbert-museum.org

ENTERTAINMENT

THE GILDED AGE, MRS. MAISEL AND VIKINGS PROFFER PERIOD DRAMA PLEASURE

WE TIME TRAVEL WITH A TRIO OF NEW PERIOD PIECES PULLING FROM HISTORY AND BYGONE ERAS TO CREATE NEW NARRATIVES - FROM THE VIKING AGE TO THE GILDED AGE ALL THE WAY TO THE MODERN GOLDEN AGE.

BY ERIN MAXWELL

The Gilded Age / HBO

Welcome to the Gilded Age of New York, where the exquisite mansions of high society are filled with women in fancy frocks and gents who buy, sell, and destroy their fellow men. Created by Downton Abbey mastermind Julian Fellowes, HBO's *The Gilded Age* delves into the upper echelons of the Upper East Side back when Park Ave. was overrun with horse carriages. It is here that the drama is high and the stakes are higher, especially for HBO as they place their bets on this lavish period piece about the Big Apple in the 19th century.

The series follows recently-orphaned Marian Brook (Louisa Jacobson) as she takes up residence with her aunts Agnes (Christine Baranski) and Ada (Cynthia Nixon). The duo guides the Pennsylvania ragamuffin through "fashionable society," showing both her and the audience the ropes while delivering exposition with poise and grace.

Much like *Downton*, wealth is at the center of the story. The central theme of the nouveau riche colliding with old money is represented by the Russell family, who aim to take their place in the gleaming beau monde at any cost while the upper crust attempt to keep a stranglehold on the traditional ways.

Like Fellowes' other period pieces, interest and intrigue emerge from the exploration of societal norms of the time, a forgotten culture whose ways will seem completely foreign to viewers. And though its British cousin *Downton* was also filled with showy set pieces and elaborate costumes, *The Gilded Age* is a bit more brash, a tad more opulent, and just a smidge more ostentatious than its predecessor. This is a show that hemorrhages money and it shows. It's a feast for the eyes and the ears, giving exquisite detail to those who populate its story, marked by remarkable

turns from Branski, Nixon, and Carrie Coons, who plays the social-climbing Bertha Russell.

The Gilded Age is a beguiling soap opera masquerading as a period piece that plays on societal norms for drama. Those who prefer conflict with higher stakes than that of a dinner snub or a discarded invite might feel like something's missing, but the HBO series will please those who loved *Downton* and have a deep appreciation for the finer things in life. (New episodes air every Monday thru March 21st).

Vikings: Valhalla / Netflix

Vikings: Valhalla is the spin-off from the History Channel's *Vikings* and it continues to follow the adventures of heroic heroes whose antics put Scandinavia on the map (at least prior to their illustrious legacy of DIY furniture and meatballs). Guaranteed to raise testosterone levels, the show is an intriguing blend of faux history, impressive action, and absorbing drama.

Created by Jeb Stuart, best known for scripting action outings such as *The Fugitive* and *Die Hard*, the show reeks of machismo, mead, and sea water. Set 100 years from the events of the first *Vikings* series, it's a tawdry tale set in the annals of history, though very little of the interpersonal stories are actually based on real life.

The show begins just as legendary explorer Leif Eriksson (Sam Corlett) and his sister Freydis (Frida Gustavsson) arrive in Kattegat. It's an inauspicious time, just as other Norsemen gather following the St. Brice's Day Massacre, ordered by King Æthelred. Though the groups are there for different reasons, both have a common goal: revenge. Soon, Eriksson finds his life intertwined with these strange Norsemen who are similar yet oh-so-different, particu-

larly those they call Christians.

The show follows a familiar formula used in most modern "historical" epics: take a familiar name from the past, build him/her up as the hero, add an interesting supporting cast that have little or no issues with nudity and/or violence, and let history take its course. *Valhalla* takes a page from the *Game of Thrones* playbook which states: As long as the adventure is exciting, the nudity is commonplace, and the violence is gratuitous, a show can get away with pretty much anything.

Valhalla's biography and butchery is good enough to hold the interest of folks who don't mind more fiction than facts in their historical dramas, and prefer bloody beatdowns, bodice rippings and unwashed romps to accuracy or reality. (Season 1 is available to binge in its entirety now.)

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel (Season 4) / Amazon Prime

The marvelous, mischievous, and sometimes misguided Mrs. Maisel has returned



after a long absence, but was she worth the wait?

Picking up right where we left off, Miriam "Midge" Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan) returns home to New York after being thrown out on her tuchus from Shy Baldwin's tour after she

alluded to his "illicit" lifestyle in her act. She returns home to deal with her fractured family, including her homeless parents, her ex-husband Joel, her son Ethan, and a daughter who is only mentioned in the series when it is convenient to the plot. This season, we watch the further evolution of Midge from ditched housewife to budding comic as she struggles with more mishaps of her own making.

After four seasons, it's difficult to know where to stand with the Mrs. Maisel character. Yes, she is paving the way for every headstrong, mouthy, size 2 housewife with an ax to grind, but she's also, at times, just not a very pleasant human being. For example, when Shy shared a very personal part of himself to her, it was a touching moment between the two entertainers. Only to be ruined later when Midge worked it into her act with no regard to Shy. And while she attempts to make good on her prior bad acts by helping her manager Susie (Alex Borstein) find a "friend" – with the help of John Waters, no less – she comes off self-centered, with a lack of consideration for her cohort's desire to even "come out" or the implications of what could mean.

It's a common theme with these Amy Sherman-Palladino women. They can be charming and adorable with mouths that run a mile a minute, but you never know when they are going to turn on you like a Benedict Arnold in a French heel. Regardless, the whip smart writing that audiences have come to expect from hat enthusiast Sherman-Palladino is still there and still as sharp as ever. And while the cringe factor on Midge might grow slightly, her supporting players including Borstein, Tony Shalhoub as father Abe (now a writer at our sister paper *The Village Voice!*) and Marin Hinkle as mom Rose (a full-fledged matchmaker this season) are still a friggin' joy to watch.

As this season continues, it looks like the character of Miriam Maisel is still learning and maybe even morphing into something new. That might not be an entirely good thing, at least for those who prefer their main characters to be made of lollipops and sunshine, but it is entirely appropriate. What she becomes might not be so marvelous, but change is to be expected in an industry known to transform people from nice gals to assholes overnight. Welcome to showbiz, baby. (Two episodes are released every Friday for four weeks.)