

The much-anticipated new season of *Succession* digs further into grotesque family dysfunction – and it doesn't disappoint.

# Warring in the shadows



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In the first season of *Succession*, Jesse Armstrong's HBO series about the grotesque misadventures of the fictional Roy media family, comedic duo and family outliers Tom Wambsgans (Matthew Macfadyen) and Greg Hirsch (Nicholas Braun) are out to dinner. They're feasting on the rare, "kind of illegal" songbird ortolan.

"Here's the thing about being rich ... it's fucking great. It's like being a superhero, only better. You get to do whatever you want and authorities can't really touch you. You get to wear a costume, but it's designed by Armani so it doesn't make you look like a prick," explains Tom, who doesn't come from money.

Despite Tom's enthusiasm, the show paints a decidedly grim picture of extreme wealth. *Succession*'s characters exist in a world of obscene, ambient luxury, but they're all too miserable to enjoy it. In the final episode of season two, breathtaking views of the Mediterranean are wasted on the fearful family members and Waystar Royco executives onboard a "superyacht" waiting for patriarch Logan (Brian Cox) to decide who to throw overboard to atone for an unseemly company scandal.

While in this instance the violence is metaphorical, it wouldn't be the first time a media mogul's seaside jaunt turned grisly.

In 1991, British media tycoon Robert Maxwell mysteriously fell to his death while relieving himself off the side of the *Lady Ghislaine*, and in 2018 Rupert Murdoch was hospitalised after falling during a night-time bathroom visit while vacationing on his son's yacht. While the Roys make it off the boat without incident, in the episode's final moments Logan's son Kendall (Jeremy Strong) goes off-script at a press conference, declaring his father unfit to lead in a mic-drop plot twist to end them all. Pandemic-related delays have left transfixed audiences waiting two years to find out what happens next.

The third season picks up in the immediate aftermath of this explosive event. Kendall has locked himself in the bathroom in a state of shock; Greg stands outside, gingerly asking him to offer a sign of life if he's okay. Logan is uncharacteristically unsure of what to do next. Like a babbling King Lear wandering through the heath after his daughters' betrayal, he's not making any sense and "keeps talking about his mother".

As season three unfolds, Kendall – jazzed up on his own corporate revolution Kool-Aid – attempts to present his power grab of Waystar Royco as a David and Goliath battle between good and evil.

"The great whites, from politics to culture, are rolling offstage. It's our time!" he insists.

"You mean us, this multi-ethnic, transgender alliance of 20-something dreamers?" his brother Roman (Kieran

Culkin) quips back, glancing around at his milky, silver spoon-fed siblings.

Try as Kendall might to co-opt the social justice parlance of our times for his own benefit, his fundamental "Royness" creeps through. When things don't go his way he mirrors his father's explosive outbursts, telling his sister Siobhan 'Shiv' Roy (Sarah Snook) that he only wants her onside for her "teats" because girls count twice in today's lean-in, corporate feminist cultural climate. And while Kendall publicly performs disgust at Logan's role in the cruise ships scandal, we don't forget his willingness to let dad dismiss his human collateral damage with the chilling phrase "no real person involved".

Throughout the new season, the space between Kendall's public virtue-signalling and private skeletons, and Waystar Royco's cynical attempts to recover from allegations of widespread sexual assault and corruption, remind us that corporations are not our friend, however warm and fuzzy their messaging.

Those of us not born into a powerful multibillion-dollar media dynasty might wonder why the kids don't just cash out and enjoy being rich somewhere far from public scrutiny and their tyrant father. But despite the material riches of their upbringing, Connor (Alan Ruck), Kendall, Shiv and Roman lack the self-knowledge necessary to define their own versions of success outside the familial kingdom. In the absence of a guiding framework beyond their father's lifelong pursuit of money and power, the question

of who will become the successor to the Roy empire gives their lives purpose and order.

Even Connor, previously happy to retreat into his desert fantasy land, has a dog in the race this season – and quite frankly, I love to see it. Whether any of the children truly want to run Waystar Royco or have a vision for what they'd do as head honcho is largely irrelevant. They battle to be Daddy's No. 1 child while he revels in the sport, testing their mettle and allegiances through a never-ending series of manipulations and humiliations.

The kids of the very powerful and very wealthy have been known to stick it out longer than is objectively good for their wellbeing in order to claim what is not at all rightfully theirs. Take Rupert Murdoch's sons, Lachlan and James, an obvious reference point for *Succession*, who until recently were locked in a decades-long rivalry for control of the Murdoch empire, which encompasses Fox Corporation and News Corp.

The Murdoch patriarch appeared to relish the conflict, installing Lachlan as James's boss in 2015 without telling him directly, and reportedly not denying it when people noted his obvious preference for Lachlan over James. While James eventually got out from under his father by severing corporate ties, Kendall's pathway to salvation is more dramatic and brutal. This season, he's publicly drawing a line between himself and Logan, refusing to atone for the sins of the father but also refusing to walk away from

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Succession’s characters exist in a world of obscene, ambient luxury, but they’re all too miserable to enjoy it.

Jeremy Strong as Kendall Roy (left) and Brian Cox as Logan Roy, with Sarah Snook as Siobhan ‘Shiv’ Roy, (right) in *Succession*. HBO



the business. As Jesse Armstrong remarked of families like the Murdochs and Roys in *The New Yorker*: “For these people to be excluded from the flame of money and power, I think, would feel a bit like death.”

In addition to the internal machinations of dynastic families, actor Jeremy Strong has cited Andre Agassi’s relationship with his father, Mike, as an inspiration for his portrayal of Kendall and Logan’s relationship. In his 2009 autobiography, *Open*, Agassi described his father as a “tyrant” and “violent by nature” and said that he hated tennis because of the force with which Mike, himself an Olympic boxer, pushed it on him as a child. Yet Agassi played professional tennis until his mid-30s, long after he could have distanced himself from his father. Like Agassi and other tortured sons, such as golfer Tiger Woods and fictional mobsters Tony Soprano and Michael Corleone, Kendall recognises that his father is dangerous but continues to allow him to set the terms of his life. Throughout *Succession*, Kendall repeatedly moves to overthrow or distance himself from Logan but is inevitably pulled back by fear or circumstance.

Perhaps Kendall will only taste freedom when his father is six feet under. This season, Logan’s health is tested in humiliating and alarming ways at crucial moments, forcing his kids to confront their seemingly infallible father’s mortality while pretending he’s okay to let him save face. The inevitable late life parent-child role reversal is coming for Logan but, like his real-world contemporaries,

there’s no way he’s going down without a fight. Late media mogul Sumner Redstone once told a journalist he “had no intention of ever retiring, or of dying”, and refused to cede control of his businesses despite being so unwell he was fed through a tube. At 90, Rupert Murdoch is only now stepping back from his day-to-day business operations. As Logan continues to evade death, Kendall’s only hope is to finish his father off through an act of corporate patricide.

In the seventh episode, after a particularly devastating night of classic Roy family high jinks, Kendall lies in the foetal position swaddled in a blanket while his girlfriend comforts him as she would a toddler. Watching this moment of middle-aged infancy, I was reminded of a line from *King Lear*, when the troubled monarch despairs, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” The Fool replies: “Lear’s shadow.”

In Shakespeare’s canonical family drama, suffering and loss are presented as pathways to self-knowledge; only once Lear loses everything except his shadow can he truly see himself and his daughters for who they are. It remains to be seen whether whatever fresh hell awaits Kendall will allow him to finally become his own man, or destroy him completely. Either way, it makes for gripping television. ●

*Season three of Succession is streaming on Binge and Foxtel from October 18.*

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