



# King Maker

A comedy icon returns triumphantly to TV in — yes — a drama from a previously little-known producer. The new series *Boss* — where King Lear meets modern Chicago — has insiders buzzing about Kelsey Grammer, the Starz network and the man behind the throne. BY GRAHAM FLASHNER

**He appears every inch the cultured English gentleman, but there is much more to Farhad Safinia than impeccable manners and witty repartee.**

"I wanted to focus on the dark side of human interaction," Safinia says of *Boss*, his new political drama, "and how we can do horrible things to each other to achieve certain ends."

The series, which premiered on Starz in October, stars Kelsey Grammer in a career-altering role as fictional Chicago mayor Tom Kane. Unlike the cynical Kane, trapped in a web of corruption that he helped create, the thirty-five-year-old Safinia is living a Hollywood dream. With no prior TV credits and only one produced script under his belt, the Mel Gibson film *Apocalypto*, Safinia effortlessly took the reins of his own show and has already supervised eight episodes.





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At its heart a character piece, *Boss* is a take-no-prisoners glimpse into the life of a ruthless politico whose fight to maintain his grip on power is matched only by his determination to keep a dark secret that, if discovered, would destroy his career: a rare, degenerative brain disorder that will eventually kill him.

Kane hides the truth from his constituents, staff and family, though his

troubled home life is not to be confused with the Obamas. His marriage to wife Meredith (Connie Nielsen) — a formidable power broker in her own right — is a virtual sham, and he's estranged from his daughter Emma (Hanna Ware) a former drug user who's been excommunicated from the family.

Over the course of the series, Kane employs a vast array of Machiavellian tactics to stay one step ahead of those jockeying for his throne. Running



Good Will Hunting had worked in television.

"You don't have to care about city politics to like this show," Van Sant says, who is also an executive producer along with Safinia, Brian Sher, Stella Bulochnikov, Richard Levine and Lyn Greene. "The show is really about control. Every line that's spoken is about some aspect of losing control. It's about these characters, all with strong agendas, and the sparks that fly when certain kinds of people are put together."

Safinia wanted to preserve the show's salty language, sexual frankness and, as he puts it, "unpleasant situations," which meant that selling the series to a broadcast network was out of the question. The script went out to the usual cable suspects, but the most serious offer came from Chris Albrecht, who'd been recently installed as the new president of Starz and was looking for a present-day series after dabbling in period epics *Spartacus* and *Camelot*.

"It was a tremendous script," Albrecht says. "Our brand is larger-than-life stories that feel theatrical, and this fit right in."

With a competing network dangling a potential pilot commitment — and with prodding from good friend and WME co-CEO Ari Emanuel ("He told me, 'You're the new kid on the block, and you've got to step up,'" Albrecht says) — the network stepped up in a big way, committing to an eight-episode order. Lionsgate Television (producers of *Mad Men*) came aboard as the production studio, joining Kelsey Grammer's Grammmet Productions.

The many locations and the fast pace of shooting — episodes were shot in eight days — dictated a documentary feel for the show, with low lighting and hand-held vérité.

"We had to set up a system of shooting that didn't require a lot of set-up time," Safinia explains. "Those documentaries from the '70s that captured real politics in motion, that's the look we were after."

But would viewers would accept the lovable Dr. Crane in such an oppressively dark turn? And was Grammer up to the challenge? Any lingering doubts were silenced in the pilot's memorable opening sequence. Grammer, as Kane, sits stoically in a chair in an abandoned slaughterhouse, listening to a neurologist pronounce his death sentence. The camera focuses on the actor in an unrelenting closeup as a storm of raw emotions passes over his face.

"I wanted people to know exactly who Kane is in one shot, and I wanted them to forget who Frasier Crane is in one shot," Safinia says. "It's a perfectly calibrated performance. Kelsey's a master at communicating both the things you're seeing and the things he's not letting people see."

Says Albrecht: "Kelsey is as good in this show as anybody has been in anything. He has created an iconic character."

It's no surprise that Safinia would be drawn to politics; it's embedded in his DNA. He's married to actress Laura Regan, whose father and brother are both politicians in Nova Scotia, Canada, and in his own family tree there are civil servants and politicians going back generations. Born in Tehran, Safinia grew up in England after his parents fled the 1979 Iranian revolution. He attended the prestigious Charterhouse boarding school and went on to King's College at Cambridge.

"My parents gave me an unbelievably privileged education," he says. "I got the best of everything."

Safinia flirted briefly with acting at Cambridge before deciding his path lay behind the camera. He moved to the U.S. in 1998 and attended film school in New York, but the once-flourishing indie film scene had gone dry, supplanted by the dot-com boom. "There were as many people trying to get into film in New York as there were in L.A., but there were no jobs," he recalls.

In 2003 Safinia moved to Los Angeles. An internship at Steven Soderbergh's production company, Section 8, led to a job at Icon Pictures assisting Mel Gibson while the actor was making *Passion of the Christ* — the kind of hands-on experience that a young, aspiring writer can only dream of.

Safinia had yet to write a full screenplay, but he and Gibson bonded over similar film interests. Gibson had long wanted to do a chase film, and out of that idea came *Apocalypse*, the Mayan-based action-adventure film that

the town with mobster-like efficiency, Kane is a master of backroom Chicago dealing and dirty tricks; his manipulations force viewers to confront their own moral judgments regarding the transgressions of those elected to public office.

"If the means to get to the end are really dirty, do we condone it in our leaders, or praise it? That's the story I'm trying to tell," Safinia says.

Iranian-born and London-raised, Safinia regards American politics with the fresh perspective of the émigré. "The idea of reaching power and holding on to power is so fundamental in how people behave, that notions of policy — the grand debates, the big speeches, the cultural divide — are actually the sideshow. What's going on underneath is far more interesting to explore."

If Kane's struggle with his mortality has the feel of Shakespearean tragedy, it's no accident: Safinia envisioned a contemporary update of *King Lear*, with city politics as the battlefield. "I didn't want to do Shakespeare's speeches or the intricate plots," he says. "It was about taking the notion of an aging ruler in the final furlong of his life."

For Grammer, the timing was fortuitous. The Juilliard-trained *Frasier* star, fifty-six, who recently described his sitcom career as a "lucrative twenty-two-year detour," had bounced from one TV misfire to another after *Frasier* ended in 2004; his most recent sitcom, ABC's forgettable *Hank*, lasted just five episodes. He tried to get serious in 2000, reviving *Macbeth* on Broadway, but the critically panned show closed after thirteen performances.

So when Safinia approached him with the idea of a modern-day *Lear*, Grammer, who was starring at the time in *La Cage aux Folles*, jumped at the opportunity.

"He felt like he had so much more to give as an actor," Safinia says.

With Grammer set to play the modern-day king who's losing his powers, the producer and star considered making Kane a New York real estate tycoon or a Washington power broker before settling on a combative Chicago mayor in the Richard Daley mode.

"People ask me, 'Why politics? Why Chicago?'" Safinia says. "It's more universal than that. This is about an all-powerful leader who understands the mechanism of how humans function and how to retain power. History is full of such men."

Chicago itself — described by Kane as "this most American of cities" — is as colorful a character as its protagonist. The first season was shot entirely on location in the Windy City, including the City Hall chambers, and Safinia found the town's vertical reach a perfect metaphor for the ambitions of its hard-working citizens.

"There's something in the DNA of Chicagoans, this feeling that you can continue to reach up and up and never fall," he notes.

Once Safinia wrote the pilot script, things moved quickly. In a package deal orchestrated by William Morris Endeavor, Gus Van Sant came on board to direct the pilot — the first time the acclaimed director of *Milk*, *Elephant* and



Safinia wrote with Gibson, who directed. Safinia was credited as coproducer on the feature, which was released in 2006, just around the time that Gibson's personal life became tabloid fodder.

"Even with all of his personal demons, Mel is a consummate professional and filmmaker when it comes to his craft," Safinia says. "As painful as it was for him, it never affected the work."

Upcoming for Safinia is an adaptation of Aldous Huxley's seminal 1932 novel *Brave New World*, directed by Ridley Scott and starring Leonardo DiCaprio, and an untitled Will Smith project based on a real-life modern-day

explorer. Safinia even talks excitedly about wanting to someday "make a movie from an epic poem."

And there will also be more *Boss*. Starz boldly ordered a ten-episode second season before season one had even premiered. "When I saw the last two episodes of season one, I thought, 'I want to know what happens next,' says Albrecht. "I didn't want to wait for Farhad to tell me."

Safinia, for one, is excited to chart Kane's evolution. "He flirts with redemption. It's that struggle to make amends before you leave this planet — that's what Kelsey is fascinated by, and I'm interested to see what happens." ☺

## Eminent Domain

The cast of *Boss* runs the gamut from icon to newbie, with a dash of acting eminence and foreign flair.



**Kelsey Grammer** (Tom Kane)  
A sixteen-time Primetime Emmy nominee, Grammer was named outstanding lead actor four times for his portrayal of fussy psychologist Frasier Crane, who spanned three series (*Cheers*, *Wings* and *Frasier*) over twenty years. He also won a fifth Emmy for voicing Sideshow Bob on *The Simpsons*. In 2011 he was nominated for a Tony Award for the role of Georges in *La Cage aux Folles*. His Gramnet production company has produced many series, including *Medium* for NBC and *Girlfriends* for the CW.



**Connie Nielsen** (Meredith Kane)  
The Danish-born beauty, who speaks eight languages, acted and modeled in France and Italy before moving to the U.S. She earned international acclaim as Princess Lucilla in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. Her extensive feature credits also include *Rushmore*, *Demonlover* and *Permanent Midnight* and *Perfect Sense*, which premiered at Sundance this year. On television Nielsen appeared in NBC's *Law & Order: SVU* while Mariska Hargitay was on maternity leave.



**Hannah Ware** (Emma Kane)  
Born and raised in South London, Ware was discovered by a modeling agency at age twelve. A serious student nonetheless, Ware was pursuing a career in architecture when the acting bug struck. She broke into films with a supporting role in *Cop Out*, starring Bruce Willis and Tracy Morgan, and recently completed the indie film *Shame*, directed by Steve McQueen.



**Jeff Hephner** (Ben Zajac)  
Best known from the Fox series *The O.C.*, where he played entrepreneur Matt Ramsey. Hephner now parlays his go-get-'em good looks as the state treasurer who's being groomed by Kane for the governor's race. Other TV credits for the Michigan native include the series *Easy Money*, *The Jury* and *Private Practice*. Most recently he played football coach Red Raymond on the CW's *Hellcats*.



**Kathleen Robertson** (Kitty O'Neill)  
As Kane's most trusted assistant, O'Neill plays the political game as well as anyone. The actress herself, a Canadian native, is a Hollywood triple threat: she's set to write, produce and star in a new series for Shaw Media/Global, *Your Time Is Up*, her second produced script. She's appeared in *Tin Man*, the Emmy-nominated SyFy miniseries, and her film credits include *Hollywoodland*, *XX/XY* and two films by indie director Gregg Araki, *Splendor* and *Nowhere*.



**Martin Donovan** (Ezra Stone)  
Senior advisor to Mayor Kane, the savvy Stone knows where all the bodies are buried. The discerning Donovan is a veteran film and TV actor who came aboard the second season of Showtime's *Weeds* as Mary-Louise Parker's love interest. His film credits include *Unthinkable*, *The United States of Leland*, and *Insomnia*, where he starred opposite Al Pacino. He's also appeared in several films by celebrated director Hal Hartley, including *Simple Men*, *Amateur* and *Trust*.



**Troy Garity** (Sam Miller)  
Like his character, a political journalist for the fictional Chicago Sentinel, Garity is a political activist, which makes sense given that his parents are Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda. Garity was nominated for a Golden Globe for the Showtime film *Soldier's Girl* and has amassed many film credits, including *Bandits*, *After the Sunset*, Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* and the upcoming *Gangster Squad*, with Sean Penn. He also starred this fall on NBC's *The Playboy Club*.



**Rotimi Akinosho** (Darius Morrison)  
Emma's love interest, Darius, is engaging, street-smart and looking for a better life. Like his character, Akinosho is an enterprising young man. *Boss* was his very first audition and marks his acting debut — not too shabby for a twenty-two-year-old from Jersey who graduated from Northwestern University and, at fifteen, won first place on amateur night at New York's famed Apollo Theater.



**Francis Guinan** (Governor Mac Cullen)  
He plays the Illinois governor whom Kane is preparing to oust from power, and as an Iowa native and Chicago resident, Guinan is more than familiar with the territory. He's worked closely with the Windy City's world-renowned Steppenwolf Theatre Company, appearing in nine of its productions in the past five years. He's also been seen in dozens of series, including a brief stint with Grammer in an episode of *Frasier*, playing *Opera Snob #2*.



**Karen Aldridge** (Dr. Ella Harris)  
As the neurologist guarding Kane's darkest secret, Dr. Harris is targeted by those who want information from her and those who want to keep her quiet. *Boss* is the first major TV series for this Chicago resident and theater vet. She's performed on all of the city's premier stages, including Steppenwolf, Writers' Theatre and Chicago Shakespeare Theater. She also recently appeared in the Ron Howard film *The Dilemma*, starring Vince Vaughn and Kevin James.