The Leverage of Alcohol Addiction:
A Textual Analysis of *Leverage* and the Limits of the Procedural Drama

Thomas M. Gallagher

Temple University
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Abstract

This paper confronts the question of whether messages can be diluted or even contradicted by the format in which they are delivered through a textual analysis of the TNT procedural drama Leverage, examining the portrayal of alcoholism in the program. The procedural drama, which often focuses on figures in law and order occupations, is characterized by close-ended episodes that often feature happy endings. Alcohol addiction has been a staple of many television programs, but these programs were mostly comedies or serial dramas. Leverage, a procedural drama with a light touch, is a modern day Robin Hood tale focused on five thieves led by an alcoholic protagonist. This paper finds that main character displays the expected negative effects of alcohol addiction but also displays positive qualities not often seen when the character is sober. The paper also examines the reactions of the protagonist’s closest colleagues to his addiction, and finds that these reactions, while prominent in the program’s first two seasons, are treated inconsistently in later seasons. The inconsistent treatment of this alcoholism in later seasons, the fantastical and often humorous nature of the program, and the procedural expectation of positive resolution to conflicts begun at the beginning of an episode often undercuts the program’s message about the dangers of alcoholism. This paper briefly contrasts the portrayal of substance abuse addiction in House, M.D., another program characterized by close-ended episodes and happy endings, with Leverage’s depiction of alcoholism. Leverage’s relative failure to accurately depict alcoholism raises questions about whether the procedural drama is the appropriate vehicle for portraying serious internal issues such as addiction.

Keywords: Alcoholism, addiction, Leverage, television, procedural drama
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Much communication research focused on mass media has been based on three broad categories: the production of a message, the content of the message, and audience interpretation of that message. At times, a message can make a powerful impact regardless of format, but more often, the way in which a message is delivered has just as much impact as the message itself. In some cases, the effectiveness of a message can be undermined by the format in which the message is conveyed. This paper addresses that fundamental message through a textual analysis of the procedural drama Leverage, specifically in its treatment of alcoholism.

Thousands of characters on American television have consumed alcohol since the medium’s inception, but a far lower number could be classified as alcoholics. Many of television’s alcoholics have been relegated to comedies, whether in sitcom format (Cheers, Two and a Half Men) or in animated programming (The Simpsons, Family Guy, Futurama). Serials dramas such as Grey’s Anatomy and Mad Men have also scripted alcoholic characters.

Since the early 2000s, procedural dramas have become the most popular scripted programming produced by American studios, both in the United States (Gorman 2010; Gorman, 2011) and internationally (Adler, 2011). In 2008, TNT, a basic cable channel, green lit the procedural Leverage, which follows five thieves, led by an alcoholic, who steal from the rich and help the poor. The program mostly operates in a light, breezy atmosphere but often transitions into a serious examination of alcoholism. On a narrow level, this paper examines how the
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Program balances addressing a serious physiological issue such as alcoholism and delivering the required functions of a procedural drama. On a broader level, this paper questions whether certain messages can, or should, be conveyed in a limited number of formats.

Procedural Dramas

Throughout the history of American television, dramas have mainly followed two paths: the serial drama and the procedural drama. The procedural drama mostly involves close-ended episodes, a limited narrative structure that may use flashbacks to avoid repetition, and a relatively clear moral dichotomy: the protagonists are good and the antagonists are evil (Steward, 2010). The strong majority of those close-ended episodes feature a positive resolution to the conflict that began at the beginning of the program. Procedural dramas have evolved to contain serialized elements designed to reward loyal viewers, but the self-contained nature of most episodes, as well as always expected and often delivered happy ending, allow viewers to miss episodes occasionally and not feel lost.

Some scholars have narrowly defined the procedural as pertaining to only scripted programs following the affairs of the police and crime, with the audience following along from the point of view of the authority figures (Arntfield, 2011; Broe, 2004). Others define the genre more broadly, with a variation in character and action masking the basic narrative structure (Harriss, 2008; Turnbull, 2010). The procedural drama became popular on television in the 1950s with Dragnet, but for the most part, the private lives of the characters were downplayed until the 1980s (Lane, 2004). Programs such as Hill Street Blues and NYPD Blue offered viewers detailed sketches of the personal problems the protagonists faced, which separated them from the more traditional procedural dramas such as the Law & Order franchise and the CSI franchise. Leverage, while not strictly a police program and often affecting a lighter and more fantastical
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tone than the CSIs and Law & Orders, fits more with the latter grouping. The major connection between Leverage and the former group is the program’s focus on the main protagonist’s struggles with alcoholism. Much like in the case of Andy Sipowicz, Leverage’s Nate Ford’s drinking is written to be a constant threat to the long-term stability of his team.

Alcoholism on Television

Much scholarly research about alcoholism and television has been focused on the potential influence the medium has on viewers (Tucker, 1985; Kean & Albada, 2003; Russell & Russell, 2008). Other scholars (Hanneman & McEwen, 1976; Garlington, 1977; Breed & DeFoe, 1981) have performed content analyses of multiple American television programs in general and argued that those programs, as a whole, presented alcohol consumption as a positive experience with the negative effects of alcohol rarely represented in an accurate fashion (Hansen, 1988).

Waxer (1992) studied alcohol consumption by genre across three English speaking nations and discovered that characters on crime procedural programs were the least likely to be seen consuming alcoholic beverages, with American characters less likely to drink than their British counterparts. Russell & Russell (2009), in a content analysis of American programming during the 2004-2005 television season, partially backed these findings, observing that procedural crime dramas featured the lowest amount of visual depictions of alcohol consumption. The authors argued that the narrative structure of the procedural, with its focus on work rather than the personal lives of the characters, was responsible for these findings. A program like Leverage, where the characters are independently rich and act as a private contracting team, is more likely to blur the boundaries of the personal and the professional.

While there have been many content analyses of the television landscape in general, there have been few textual analyses of individual programs, especially in the crime based procedural
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genre. Given the findings by numerous scholars about the generally positive portrayal of alcohol consumption, there have also been fewer studies about a fictional television program’s attempts to document the negative side of alcohol consumption, especially the disease of alcoholism. Scholars have generally agreed that the portrayal of alcohol consumption on television programs have had some impact on alcohol consumption in reality, but the lack of narrower research focused on the specific formats guiding the portrayals of alcohol reflects a missed opportunity.

Does alcohol consumption on a serialized drama have a different effect on audiences than alcohol consumption on a procedural drama? More relevantly for this paper, are the messages about alcohol consumption on a procedural drama, shown in a negative light, undercut in some way by the limitations of the procedural drama?

Gaining Some Leverage

Due to this, it was worth undertaking a textual analysis of Leverage. The main character, Nate Ford, was written to have a problem with alcohol intake, particularly during the program’s first season. In undertaking this textual analysis, I watched all 77 episodes of the program’s first four seasons. In revisiting the subject material, however, it became apparent that Ford’s alcoholism was not a central or even peripheral subject in every episode. Ford’s alcoholism was stressed most during the last six episodes of the first season; his sobriety was noted in a three episode arc near the beginning of the second season, and his relapse late in the second season was once again made a primary plotline. However, only a handful of episodes in the third and fourth seasons touched upon his disease. Due to this, I revisited fifteen episodes in more depth, all of which explore, whether in detail or in a few key moments, Ford’s alcoholism. After three in-depth viewings of these fifteen episodes, clear themes began to emerge that may be
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attributable to the whims of the writers and producers but also to the format of the procedural, light fantasy drama.

The major concern of this textual analysis was how the procedural drama, as a form, affected the portrayal of alcoholism. Is a cautionary message about a serious problem conveyed in an effective manner in a Robin Hood-like fantasy, or does that light tone, and the requirement to have a clean resolution to conflict at the end of the episode, blunt the impact of the message? To fully explore this, I focused on how the producers dealt with Ford’s alcoholism, which revealed not only the expected negative consequences but also some positive effects of drinking.

Two narrower research areas became necessary to examine beyond just Ford’s negative and positive attributes. First, how did the members of Ford’s team react to his alcoholism? Second, how did Ford justify his drinking, and did he make any progress or reveal any insights into his motivations?

Leverage focuses on a collection of five thieves and con artists who “pick up where the law leaves off” (“The Home Coming Job”). The main characters are listed in the opening credits of each episode as “Hitter” (Eliot Spencer), “Hacker” (Alec Hardison), “Grifter” (Sophie Devereaux), “Thief” (Parker), and “Brains” (Nate Ford), although Ford is referred to throughout the program itself as the team’s “mastermind.” Each week, the team faces off against external antagonists, most of whom are wealthy members of corporate America in positions of power who abuse that power to strike against their (mostly) middle class employees. There have been long term external antagonists over the course of the four seasons, such as Ford’s former coworker James Sterling, but over the course of the program’s first two seasons, the primary conflict was of an internal nature: Ford’s propensity for secrecy and his not-so-secret addiction to alcohol.
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Ford’s father was a notorious gangster in Boston who used to operate out of a local pub. As an adult, Ford enrolled in a seminary to become a Catholic priest but dropped out and instead became an investigator of insurance fraud. After years of good service to IYS, his insurance company, Ford was betrayed when his son was diagnosed with a deadly disease but the company refused to pay for the only treatment that could have saved the boy. After his son’s death, Ford became an alcoholic, leading to the dissolution of his marriage and the end of his insurance career. This alcoholism became a major problem for the team during the first season’s second half. The team broke up at the end of the first season, and during the interim between seasons, Ford attempted sobriety in Boston. Ford’s struggles with sobriety dominated the second season, especially considering that he had moved into an apartment directly above the bar his father operated out of. At the end of the second season, Ford was sent to prison; the third season began with Ford breaking out of prison and returning to consuming alcohol. The third and fourth seasons, however, saw the producers generally downplay Ford’s drinking in favor of focusing on external threats.

It should be noted that the producers of the program linked a distinct but interconnected storyline with Ford’s alcoholism: his evolution from honest man to criminal. In “The Zanzibar Marketplace Job,” Spencer told a teammate that Ford’s drinking was “not a problem; it’s a symptom” of his deeper emotional issues. Despite the connection between the storylines, Ford’s journey from conflicted citizen to unrepentant thief had a smoother and more believable progression than his struggles with alcoholism, and the major difference may be due to the traits of the procedural drama.

Major Themes
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A number of major themes emerged under a dominant reading of the text. Ford was both intelligent but secretive throughout the show’s run, whether sober or inebriated. The other team members rarely interacted with Ford on a personal level with the exception of Devereaux, who often acted as Ford’s conscience during his low moments. The interactions between Ford and other team members were noticeably more negative during Ford’s periods of inebriation. Ford also displayed a number of negative characteristics when inebriated, but somewhat surprisingly, Ford’s alcoholism seemed to inspire or enhance a number of positive characteristics that were rarely seen in his sobriety. One positive effect of Ford’s sobriety was a penchant for self-reflection about his alcoholism. These themes were organized into four categories: negative effects of drinking; positive effects of drinking; the team’s reaction to Ford’s drinking; and Ford’s own thoughts and justifications about his drinking. However, it is worth breaking those categories up by season to illustrate the attention to detail the show’s writers and producers gave the subject early on, which contrasted with the treatment of Ford’s alcoholism later on.

The First Two Seasons

Negative Effects of Drinking

Ford exhibited the classic signs of alcohol addiction throughout the first season and during his recovery in the first episode of the second season. Ford kept his alcoholism secret at first, self-medicating with alcohol while alone in the series pilot, “The Nigerian Job,” but not drinking to excess in front of his team. Ford drank a moderate amount of alcohol in front of the team during “The Two Horse Job,” but the only person to acknowledge that the problem was more extensive than publicly revealed was Ford’s bête noir, James Sterling. Ford’s alcoholism only became a team issue in the season’s seventh episode, “The Snow Job.” From that episode on, a shot glass or a flask of hard liquor was never far from Ford’s hands, even when interacting
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with team members of antagonists, and for much of the season’s second half, Ford had volatile mood swings. In “The 12-Step Job,” Ford was forced into an addiction treatment facility as part of a con, and forced to go without alcohol for an extended period, Ford perspired profusely, experienced insomnia, and suffered from hallucinations. In “The Beantown Bailout Job,” a newly sober Ford, heartbroken at Devereaux’s romantic rejection of him, ordered a shot of whiskey and sniffed it; he eventually departed the bar without taking a sip of the drink.

Ford’s alcoholism led him to be reckless, both in his personal life and with the team. In “The Snow Job,” Ford drank out of a flask while driving and was pulled over by a federal agent. In “The Second David Job,” Ford confronted his former employer at the insurance agency and told him that he was going to rob him. In “The Three Strikes Job,” Ford, after an assassination attempt on his friend, agreed to meet the antagonist at an abandoned warehouse; this was the same situation that led to the assassination attempt, but Ford, fueled by rage and alcohol, disregarded the warning signs and was almost killed. This reckless behavior also manifested on the larger level; while intoxicated, Ford often committed the team to more difficult operations, often without their consent. In both “The Snow Job” and “The Bottle Job,” Ford changed the con on the fly, leading team members to question his judgment. In “The Bottle Job,” right after Ford’s relapse, Spencer asked Ford, “Would you be doing this if you were sober?” In “The Snow Job,” Ford dismissed Parker’s concerns, even after Ford had given the antagonist $10,000 of Parker’s money to set up the scam.

Positive Effects of Drinking

Ford’s alcoholism did bring out positive attributes, including a sense for the theatrical. In “The Snow Job,” the team stole from unethical foreclosure specialists and Ford, at the depths of his alcoholism, made his most theatrical move: he transferred ownership of the villains’ mansion
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to his client. Ford occasionally continued this trend in the third and fourth seasons: in both “The Boost Job” and “The Underground Job,” Ford not only fulfilled his clients’ request to bring justice to corrupt businessmen but also transferred those businesses to his client. In “The Three Card Monte Job,” Ford made life untenable for his father in the Boston underworld but provided him a way out: after recalling a conversation he had with his father about his father’s love of Ireland, Ford booked him a passage to Ireland under his wife’s maiden name and with enough money to retire on.

Ford’s alcoholism also dulled the vicious side of his personality, which was prominently displayed in episodes during Ford’s initial attempt at sobriety in the second season but also revealed itself in later seasons. In “The Three Days of the Hunter Job,” Ford forced a tabloid newscaster to destroy her career on national television. In “The Order 23 Job,” Ford convinced the villain that the villain has contracted a deadly infection, causing the villain to bleed from the nose and cry for mercy. Team members noticed the change. In “The Beantown Bailout Job,” Parker remarked, “You know, when you’re sober, your metaphors get creepier.” In “The Order 23 Job,” Parker asked Devereaux, “Is it just me, or has Nate gotten a little sadistic since he quit drinking?” Devereaux, who was always portrayed as a bit crazy, responded, “Is it just me or does that make him even more attractive?” Now, it is true that at his most intoxicated, in “The Snow Job,” Ford’s hook for the villain was a scam involving the terminally ill, but this was because Ford had sensed that the villain had a vicious streak; the terminally ill hook was more likely to make the villain invest.

Most relevantly, Ford’s alcoholic influenced stubbornness led to riskier cons, as stated earlier, but in each of these, Ford’s scope was not on the micro but on the macro level. In “The Bottle Job,” the team’s wire con saved the owner of a local bar from a loan shark, but a drunken
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Ford correctly surmised that the loan shark would still be able to extort hundreds of other residents in the Boston area. In “The Snow Job,” Ford chose the riskier con, risking resolution for his client and investing hundreds of thousands of dollars of the team’s own money, to stop the foreclosure specialists permanently.

*Team Reaction*

This leads into the reactions of the team members to Ford’s alcoholism. Although Spencer revealed that he and possibly the other team members knew details of Ford’s family trauma in “The Nigerian Job,” the early reactions to Ford’s alcoholism came primarily from Devereaux. In “The Home Coming Job,” Devereaux takes a bottle of scotch away from Ford as he attempts to drink from it. In “The 12-Step Job,” Devereaux almost jeopardized the con by focusing more on Ford’s alcoholism than the addictions of the episode’s antagonist. Other team members did speak out, however. Devereaux warned Ford at the end of “The Snow Job” that the team would not hesitate to abandon him if he continued his reckless behavior. Yet other members did occasionally speak up, particularly the team’s hitter, Eliot Spencer. Earlier in “The Snow Job”, Spencer told Ford that while, on principle, he did not care if Ford drank himself to death, he would not tolerate Ford’s alcoholism so long as the rest of the team were put at risk. Parker and Hardison also bemoaned Ford’s risky behavior in “The Snow Job,” though not to the extent that Spencer did. In “The First David Job,” the team staged an intervention for Ford, but realized that the only thing that would stop Ford’s alcoholism was to get revenge on Ford’s former employer, the man responsible for the death of Ford’s son.

In the second season, the team reunited and was mostly content with Ford’s newfound sobriety, although, as mentioned earlier, Parker occasionally commented on Ford’s sadistic streak. In “The Beantown Bailout Job,” Spencer noted the contradiction between Ford’s sobriety
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and his living above an Irish pub, quipping, “That’s very Catholic.” Devereaux, however, became increasingly concerned with Ford’s newfound appreciation for working and a complete evasion of a social life. She mentioned her attraction to Ford in “The Order 23 Job” but lamented to Spencer in “The Top Hat Job” that Ford was “trading one addiction for another” and said:

The problem [is that] he keeps winning, and every time he wins he believes a little bit more that he can control life. […] What happens when he loses? The last time he lost, it broke him. If he loses again, I don’t think even we could pick up the pieces.

Devereaux took a leave of absence shortly after, and Ford returned to drinking. When Ford took his first drink in “The Bottle Job,” the camera focused on a close-up of a disappointed Spencer, Parker, and Hardison. Later in the episode, Spencer asked Ford if he would have approved the riskier con in a sober state. The presence of Tara Cole, Devereaux’s handpicked replacement, did not help Ford during his relapse. During “The Zanzibar Marketplace Job,” when Ford found out that his ex-wife was dating the villain, Ford took a shot of whiskey; Cole told Ford, “I’m not Sophie. If you want to drink, go ahead; I’d drink, too, if I were you,” and teased him by comparing him unfavorably to the villain. Despite that, the team, including Cole, became increasingly unnerved by Ford’s relapse during “The Three Strikes Job” and “The Maltese Falcon Job.” Devereaux returned at the behest of Cole, who was told to contact Devereaux if Ford had gotten “out of control,” but even the combined aid of Devereaux and Cole could not save Ford from being sent to prison.

Though not a team member, Ford’s ex-wife, Maggie, deserves special mention. Ford, of course, drank his way out of their marriage after their son’s death, but in the rare times Ford was around her during the program’s run, Ford attempted to keep his alcoholism a relative secret from her and make it seem as if he had reformed himself after the divorce. Ford did self-
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medicate with alcohol during “The First David Job” and “The Second David Job” in her presence, but the writers and producers mostly focused on Ford’s ongoing transformation from honest man to thief during these episodes. In the latter episode, Maggie noticed Ford’s transformation and said, “I don’t love him, but I might like him a little more.” In her next appearance, late in the second season, Ford had attempted sobriety but relapsed, and in her presence, he unsuccessfully tried to hide his relapse. At the conclusion of “The Zanzibar Marketplace Job,” Ford’s ex-wife noticed this secrecy and commented: “It’s not the liquor that worries me; it’s the fact that you’re having it in your coffee cup. Nate, I meant what I said before: I really like the man you’ve become. Too bad you don’t.”

Ford’s Reaction

During these seasons, Ford brushed off concerns with his drinking by claiming that he knew what he was doing and was in control even as he alienated his comrades. In “The Snow Job,” Ford told the team that they could trust him; when Spencer responded, “Not when you’re drunk,” Ford snapped, “You know, you talk too much,” and almost instigated a fight with the team’s fighting expert. At the end of that episode, when Devereaux warned Ford about possibly driving away his colleagues, Ford ignored that answer and asked specifically about her intentions. In the first season’s “The First David Job,” Ford rebuffed the team’s attempt at an intervention by describing himself as a “functioning alcoholic.” After returning to drinking in “The Bottle Job,” Ford told Tara Cole: “Before, I used to think I was okay when I was drunk, […] and now – now I know I’m not okay.”

It was far more likely for Ford to be honest about his motivations for drinking when he was sober. In “The Second David Job,” Ford confessed to his ex-wife that his alcoholism was a form of self-medication due to his self-loathing. Ford had never told his ex-wife about the
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insurance company denying his son coverage, choosing instead to shoulder the burdens of his guilt himself. In “The Beantown Bailout Job,” Ford acknowledged his former alcoholism to the team and stressed how relieved he was to be sober and in control of his life again. He also emphasized his struggles with the criminal lifestyle and how relieved he was not to be in charge of the team, although his attempt earlier in the episode to enroll in a non-criminal occupation left him bored, terrified of interacting socially with coworkers, and generally unsatisfied.

When he did return to the team, Ford eventually spun out of control, and he blamed Devereaux’s absence for his relapse. In the second season’s penultimate episode, “The Three Strikes Job,” Ford left a voicemail on Devereaux’s voicemail that, while castigating her for her journey of self-discovery, revealed a more self-aware mindset, saying:

Nobody knows who they are […] You think you do, and then life, it just – it tears it out of you, and you live with that. […] Look, there is no answer.

In the next episode, “The Maltese Falcon Job,” Ford confessed that Devereaux was a moral compass for him and that “I don’t know who I am anymore […] I need you tell me when I’m going too far […] and it gets out of control.”

The actress who plays Devereaux, Gina Bellman, missed the second half of the second season due to maternity leave; one might wonder whether the writers would scripted Ford’s relapse if the Devereaux character did not need to be written out temporarily.

The Third and Fourth Seasons

In “The Jailhouse Job,” Ford returns to drinking at the end of the episode after months in prison. Despite this fact, the attitude of the show’s producers changed: Ford’s alcoholism slipped into the background except when needed, with a focus on external threats and Ford’s continued penchant for secrecy in dealing with ambiguous underworld figures. Ford consumed alcohol in
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almost every episode of these seasons, but the producers downplayed the alcoholism unless they needed an easy plot device. Camera cues in the first and second seasons used to illustrate Ford’s loneliness and descent into drink were absent from many episodes, but appeared on rare occasions.

Positive and Negative Effects

The positive and negative effects of Ford’s drinking remained intact from the first two seasons when the producers felt it necessary to focus on it. Physically, Ford was impaired in certain situations: in “The Long Way Down Job,” Ford struggled to breathe the thin mountain air due to his alcoholism, and in “The Boys’ Night Out Job,” Ford quickly lost his breath after running from a pair of assassins.

Ford also continued to be highly theatrical, as mentioned earlier, but he also continued to be moody and sometimes abrasive and nasty towards team members. In “The Scheherazade Job,” Alec Hardison, who told Ford earlier in the episode that he wanted to be a mastermind like Ford in the future, was forced by Ford to play a violin solo during a concert as part of a con. After the success of the con, Hardison was ebullient, but after Ford drank a shot of whiskey, he revealed that he had placed Hardison under hypnosis to achieve his success during the concert and that Hardison could never be a mastermind because he lacked Ford’s skills of manipulation. Ford also drunkenly dismissed Spencer from the team temporarily during “The 15 Minutes Job,” although Spencer reappeared at a crucial moment in a manner suggesting that Ford had either quickly mended fences with the team’s fighter or that the dismissal was part of his plan all along.

Once again, Ford’s struggles coincided with cases that imitated his demons. In “The 10 Li’l Grifters Job,” Ford drank heavily after his teammates suspected him of murdering the mark. Ford also descended into a whiskey-fueled depression during “The Double Blind Job,” where the
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team’s enemy was a pharmaceutical company’s CEO who was determined to sell a faulty drug that would kill thousands. When told by his teammates that the last person who challenged the episode’s villain ended up dead, Ford said, “Let him take his best shot; we’ll see who walks away this time,” before committing to a perilous situation. In addition to these episodes, Ford struggled during “The 15 Minutes Job,” where his client was a close friend. He drank heavily during the initial meeting with his friend and became moody and curt with team members when the con was not going well.

And just like in the first two seasons, Ford’s alcoholism dulled his darker urges. In “The Cross My Heart Job,” a sober Ford phoned the episode’s villain, who had arranged to steal a heart transplant destined for a teenage boy, and threatened to ruin him: “I will bring down everything you have ever touched, and when I am done, I will hunt you down and I will kill you myself.” At the end of the episode, Ford, again sober, called the villain to reveal that he was watching the villain; when the villain said that Ford had killed him, Ford responded, “God killed you; I just made sure it took.” In “The Last Dam Job,” Ford refused to drink in the aftermath of his father’s murder; his sole focus was on killing the men responsible for his father’s death.

Team Reaction

After Ford’s reemergence from prison, Ford returned to the bottle, but the team’s reactions to that development changed. Devereaux shared a drink with him in “The Jailhouse Job” and told him that his drinking was his problem from that point forward. Episodes in the third and fourth seasons often ended with the team sharing a celebratory round of drinks at the local pub; “The Rashomon Job” featured Ford and the team spending a late night in the bar drinking and reminiscing about a time in their distant pasts in which they unwittingly interacted with each other.
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In fact, Ford’s alcoholism ended up becoming an occasional joke for the team. In “The 15 Minutes Job,” when the team is matched up against an enemy similar to Ford, Ford asked the team to imagine how he would destroy himself. Parker’s sarcastic reply referenced the first two seasons: “Yeah, and you can’t say booze.” In “The Long Way Down Job,” Ford counseled his client to avoid participating in the con because she was “emotionally involved; it leads to bad decisions.” Hardison interrupted the conversation by saying, “I’m sorry, did you just say that – with a straight face?” This trend also manifested in Ford’s reactions to his own drinking and his interactions with the team. In “The Office Job,” Ford once again referred to himself as “a functioning alcoholic” and degraded Devereaux’s acting career publicly in “The Office Job,” but did so in a lovers’ quarrel sequence designed to provoke laughter from the audience.

Devereaux and the team continued to question Ford’s mental state and his increased intake of alcohol, but only during cases that reminded Ford of his son’s death, such as “The Double Blind Job,” or cases that reminded Ford of his own demons. After Ford’s insulting of Hardison at the end of the “The Scheherazade Job,” Devereaux told Ford, “Alone again; if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you prefer it that way.” At the end of “The Double Blind Job,” Devereaux hinted to Ford that he was hoping to get himself killed with his reckless attempt at bravery during the episode. Earlier in the episode, Devereaux threatened to quit the team if Ford became too reckless and reiterated her belief from the first season’s “The Snow Job” that “I’m the only one that actually likes you.” In “The 15 Minutes Job,” when the other team members left the room, Devereaux suggested that Ford was trying to drive himself into ruin. Devereaux expressed disappointment with Ford for drinking at the end of “The 10 Li’l Grifters Job;” before leaving him to revel in his misery, Devereaux suggested to Ford that motivation for binging was his realization that, while he did not commit that specific murder, he was certainly capable of it.
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Other team members mostly stayed silent on Ford’s drinking, even when confronted, although Hardison maintained some resentment towards Ford in “The Jailhouse Job” for the actions that got Ford sent to prison (and almost got the team killed). In “The 10 Li’l Grifters Job,” members of the team, but most often Spencer, referred to Ford as the murderer, leaving Ford exasperated in attempting to plead his innocence. Part of their lack of faith in Ford was inspired by Ford’s unrepentant drinking and lack of a social life. In “The Boys’ Night Out Job,” Devereaux set up a poker game for Ford, Hardison, and Spencer which Ford initially resisted. Spencer confronted him, claiming, “Living inside your own head, Nate; only having conversations with your crew: that ain’t right.” Hardison followed up with, “Name one person you can have a conversation with that’s not on this team,” and the whole team punctuated his question with, “And don’t say Maggie!” When Ford protested, Devereaux whispered to Spencer, “Do not let him go off and sulk.” Later, during the poker game, Ford did leave to drink and sulk, leading Hardison to tell Spencer and a friend not on the team, “He’s worse than he was before he went to prison.”

Otherwise, the team generally, and Devereaux specifically, otherwise accepted and even encouraged his drinking. In the last few moments of “The San Lorenzo Job,” Ford and Devereaux shared drinks before consummating their long-standing flirtatious but, to that point, platonic relationship. In “The 15 Minutes Job,” Devereaux and the other team members actually praised Ford for his determination and big picture vision, even though he drunkenly antagonized them during the operation and changed the con multiple times. Finally, in “The Cross My Heart Job,” Devereaux urged Ford to drink, saying, “We don’t like it when you drink, but we trust you when you do.” This marked a complete reversal from the first season’s “The Snow Job,” where Spencer interrupted Ford’s assertion that the team could trust him with, “Not when you’re drunk!”
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*Ford’s Reaction*

When Ford reemerged from prison in “The Jailhouse Job” and consumed his first shot of whiskey in months, he declared to Devereaux, “I’ve tried being a drunk honest man, and a sober thief, so I’m going to try being a drunk thief.” Other than that statement, Ford did not attempt to justify or defend his drinking, but this is partially due to his drinking being pushed to the background of the stories. The only episode in which his drinking took precedence but was not spurred on by tragedy was the fourth season’s “The Boys’ Night Out Job.” During a poker game at the beginning, Ford left Spencer and Hardison in the middle of a discussion about Hardison’s love life by saying, “I just don’t want to have this conversation right now. I’m going to get a bottle of scotch downstairs.” Later in the episode, Ford, while running from assassins, initially preferred to face the assassins than hide in, and interact with, an addiction support group. Ford, speaking before the group in an attempt to borrow a cell phone, said, “I drink too much; I mean, who can say how much drinking is too much?” and laughed in disbelief when everyone else raised their hands. In the middle of his speech, Ford claimed that he was not drunk; when his client said, “He’s a little drunk,” Ford stopped for a moment and smirked.

When the program’s producers wanted to show Ford’s mindset during these seasons, they did so using nonverbal cues. A longing camera shot on Ford’s rueful facial expression at the end of “The 10 Li'l Grifters Job” left the viewer to believe that Ford agreed with Devereaux’s assertion that he knew that he was capable of murder, and his sober sadistic streak, displayed later in that season in “The Cross My Heart Job” and “The Last Dam Job,” confirmed his need to drink to dull that side of his personality. At the end of “The Boys’ Night Out Job,” everyone shuffled out of the bar with someone except for Ford; the last camera shot of the episode was a satisfied Ford sitting alone drinking scotch.
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At rare moments, Ford opened up, in his own way, about his alcoholism, and unlike in the first two seasons, his primary raison d’être was not the death of his son or his relationship with Devereaux. The producers used camera shots and subtle cues during the second season to hint that Ford’s return as team leader made his relapse inevitable, and Ford confirmed this to Hardison during the fourth season’s “The Gold Job:”

The only thing success teaches you in this job is: next time, make it a little tougher. Tougher means more risk, more danger, more pressure on yourself, and that pressure begins to take a toll. You begin to see the absolute worst in people: their sins; their weakness; things you take advantage of. And after awhile you realize this job has changed you, and not always for the better.

Ford’s sober and honest interaction with Hardison in this episode neatly contrasted with his drunken belligerence towards him at the end of “The Scheherazade Job.” That interaction also conflicted with Ford’s “out of control” drunken behavior during “The Double Blind Job.” He responded to Devereaux’s concern about his reckless behavior by rationalizing, “I just wanted you to see that I would never put any of you at risk if I wasn’t willing to take the same chances myself;” Devereaux saw through his justification and responded, “I love how you think that’s comforting.”

Following Procedure

Ford’s alcohol-fueled self-loathing does not make him a unique protagonist in the procedural drama genre, but the levity that marks much of the program’s construction makes his case standout. Of the 77 episodes that comprised the program’s first four seasons, only three episodes ended without some positive resolution to the conflict introduced at the beginning of the episode: “The First David Job,” “The Maltese Falcon Job,” and “The Radio Job.” Even at Ford’s
alcoholic nadir, in episodes like “The Snow Job” and “The Bottle Job,” episodes ended on a triumphant note, although the producers often let a melancholy shot or musical note end it to suggest that trouble caused by Ford’s alcoholism was on the horizon. In those episodes, Ford’s alcoholism helped save the day, because it kept Ford focused on the macro level. Too often, Ford’s alcoholism led him to have a ruinous personal life but success as a thief, and his periods of sobriety displayed other problematic traits. However, the procedural nature of the program, while leading viewers to care about the characters, downplays the personal in favor of the professional.

On *NYPD Blue*, Detective Andy Sipowicz began the program as an alcoholic, but the dark nature of the program, characterized by the constant extramarital affairs between characters and the somewhat realistic depiction of how cases are solved, allowed Sipowicz’s drinking to fit comfortably in place. A better comparison for Nate Ford would be the titular protagonist of *House, M.D.*, in which Hugh Laurie’s character was addicted to Vicodin but episodes generally ended in an uplifting manner. Both programs featured fantastical solutions to problems; both programs featured a healthy dosage of humor; and both programs contained at least one episode in which the main character hallucinated as a result of their addictions. Yet even that comparison does not hold, for a number of reasons. First, even though both protagonists appeared to have unhealthy social lives, House routinely attempted to avoid working (DuBose, 2010). Ford, by contrast, threw himself into his work, both during his alcoholism and during his sobriety. Ford’s work was the only thing keeping him alive, even during the deepest depths of his alcoholism during the program’s run.

Second, and more importantly, the treatment of addiction by the program differed on the two programs. Early on, House’s addiction to Vicodin did not significantly affect his work
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(House, 2008). In later seasons, however, House’s addiction became a serious threat to his mental stability, and his attempts to rehabilitate were given significant air time (Vin Zant, 2011). On Leverage, however, Ford’s addiction was treated haphazardly by the program’s writers and producers. While Ford’s addiction was initially written to threaten team stability, his constant victories, as well as the positive qualities that emerged from his intoxication and the negative qualities he displayed even whilst sober, undercut that message. Ford never received any official treatment for his alcoholism during the interim period between the first and second seasons but successfully avoided consuming alcohol, even while operating out of an Irish pub, until he was forced to drink by the antagonist in “The Bottle Job.” In the third and fourth seasons, the producers and writers had the program swing violently between downplaying or even celebrating Ford’s drinking and heralding it as a serious problem. Some of the later declarations by characters, such as Devereaux’s declaring her trust in Ford’s drinking during “The Cross My Heart Job,” seemed extremely out of character and, as I mentioned earlier, contrasted with prior character statements. This tendency might make a loyal viewer question whether the producers eventually grew tired of dealing with Ford’s addictions.

Of course, one could argue that the producers’ treatment of Ford’s alcoholism, particularly in the reactions of the characters, would represent realistic depictions of those suffering around alcoholics. When finding out about the problem in the first season, team members only reacted when it threatened their own fortunes; when Ford’s alcoholism threatened to hurt them, the team members (in their own, fantastical way) staged an intervention and attempted to get Ford treatment. During Ford’s sobriety, Parker, Spencer, and Hardison supported Ford (although they did consume alcohol in Ford’s presence) while Devereaux worried about what addictions Ford was using to replace alcohol; during Ford’s relapse, team
members expressed their disappointment and secretly breathed a sigh of relief over Ford’s prison sentence, which would finally clean the alcohol out of his system. When Ford resumed drinking after getting out of prison, the team members basically stopped fighting his urges and let him be himself, while occasionally prodding him to change his life for the better.

This interpretation is flawed, because while Devereaux sporadically threatened Ford with the team’s mass departure, the team never acted on those threats. In fact, Ford was content with not leading the team at the opening of “The Beantown Bailout Job,” while the team members, adrift after learning the benefits of helping people from Ford in the first seasons, begged Ford to reunite the team. Ford told the team that it was fun but he was drunk, but the team protested, saying that they worked well together. In “The Jailhouse Job,” the team members broke Ford out of prison twice (the first time, Ford refused to leave, claiming that he earned his sentence and should serve it). After Ford’s return to drinking, the team continued to work with him, even during his violent mood swings. After giving an alcoholic so many chances, only to be rebuffed each time, some people might be tempted to cut their losses altogether, especially in the case of a misanthropic loner like Ford; the team’s unwillingness to do, and their willingness to drink with Ford, could be argued as an unrealistic response that suggests that the producers had tired of the storyline, although they kept it alive for when they needed an easy fix.

Outside of his extended courtship of Devereaux and his complicated relation with ex-wife Maggie, Ford never suffered from his alcoholism to such an extent that he might make a drastic life change. His reckless behavior was often rewarded; he never attempted to make friends outside of the team and generally avoided social interaction; and he mostly kept his emotional distance from Parker, Spencer, and Hardison. Other than the physical limitations accrued through years of drinking, Ford seemed content with his life and his drinking; his sober period coincided
with a break from the team, but the opening minutes of the “The Beantown Bailout Job” revealed a man who could not fit in or adjust to normal life, particularly working with others.

The major question behind this exercise concerns the procedural drama as an appropriate format for confronting serious internal issues such as alcoholism. With *Leverage*, the show’s light touch markedly contrasts with Ford’s internal demons. The premise of the program was fantastical to begin with, and the team’s flirtations with disaster and eventual escapes were meant to be taken with a grain of salt (in the fourth season’s “The Queen’s Gambit Job,” Parker jumped off what was supposed to be the Burj Dubai skyscraper and landed without suffering any injury), yet in many episodes, the program awkwardly attempted a pivot to serious issues such as Ford’s drinking (as another example, “The Order 23 Job” included a side plot in which Spencer dealt with child abuse). With almost every case that began an episode being solved by the end of it, the viewer was often sharply transported from levity to darkness; from humor to brooding; from external threats to internal complications. Without some consistency in a program, or at least a smooth transition between two extremes, a viewer will either reject both approaches or enjoy the dominant tone. For *Leverage*, the fantasy element took precedence, and the serious examinations of Ford’s internal demons did not reach their full potential.

Serious examinations of issues such as alcoholism may not be the role of television, particularly the procedural fantasy, but if that is the case, then that issue should not be a focal point of the procedural drama. If a program such as *Leverage* commits to chronicling the trials and tribulations of an alcoholic, then that alcoholism should be portrayed in a somewhat realistic, and certainly in a consistent, manner. The message of the producers in illustrating a full picture of alcoholism was diluted by pushing that message in a fantastical world where negative consequences rarely affected the heroes.
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Conclusion

Since Dragnet premiered on television in the early 1950s, the procedural drama has showcased the triumph of good over evil. In the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of the long term storyline and external threat allowed the procedural to both juggle the immediate concerns of the episode and reward viewers for continuous viewing. In the 1980s, the combination of traditional serialized dramatic elements with the police procedural led to a focus on the personal lives of the heroes. Finally, programs such as House, M.D. and Leverage applied the procedural format to heroes not associated with the government and law enforcement.

Successful procedural dramas that focused on immediate gratification and maintained a relatively light tone featured external threats to the hero and the population the hero must serve and protect. Characters may grow, progress, and evolve over the course of the program. While many of these profitable programs have developed the character of the heroes and written the heroes to confront difficult moral dilemmas, these moral dilemmas were often resolved over a handful of episodes, instead of stretched out throughout the course of the series, or made a secondary or tertiary characteristic. For its first two seasons, and occasional episodes in later years, Leverage was fairly unique among the mostly light-hearted procedural drama in making the major long term threat to the primary hero an internal threat. The vast mood swings in each episode devoted to this threat, the way this threat was downplayed in later seasons except for in special cases, and the few occasions where the producers and writers contradicted established continuity, may explain why the program is unique: because it is not quite successful in one of its primary aims, portraying alcoholism as a damaging influence.

That is not to say that the program is a failure; on the contrary, the program is a prime example of the escapist entertainment provided by basic cable channels in the 21st century. The
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humor is well written, the plots are enjoyable, and the characters are well crafted, even in serious moments. The program has done a tremendous job in advancing an interracial romance between the geeky Hardison and the socially inept Parker, and Spencer’s interactions with the rest of the team have been well written. This positive development is not limited to the supporting characters: the long term evolution of Ford from an honest man chasing thieves to a committed thief and liar himself has largely succeeded, even when occasionally intertwined with the long-term storyline involving his alcoholism. The story of Ford’s alcoholism was not as successful because of the inconsistencies of its presentation. These inconsistencies can partially be attributed to the need to provide positive closure at the end of almost every episode, and the success of Nate Ford at his job, while suffering almost no long-term negative consequences from his continued alcoholism, was preordained by the procedural format.

The failure of the program when dealing with Ford’s alcoholism raises important questions about the procedural drama in general. The procedural drama is an enjoyable form of escapist entertainment, but the transmission of messages related to non-escapist fare, such as alcoholism, are diluted and ultimately not as effective as those messages would be in another format. The long-term alcoholism of a protagonist cannot be appropriately relayed in a procedural drama based on fantasy elements, because the format itself is based on positive resolution to short-term conflict. Serialized elements have been injected into the procedural drama, but these elements cannot dominate the program. The combination of the fairy tale ending and fantastical turns of event in almost every episode and the darkness inherent in alcoholism is as perilous a mix as two shots of whiskey poured into a glass of beer.
References


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