

Underbelly

Michael Idato, reviewer

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Time: 8:30 PM

From the opening frame, Greg Haddrick's adaptation of John Silvester and Andrew Rule's book *Leadbelly* is an unstoppable tornado of personalities and situations, each more thrilling than the one before. Despite the complexity of the story as a whole - a gangland "war" that claimed 30-odd lives in the space of a decade in Melbourne - the narrative is astonishingly easy to follow.

In the opening episode we meet Alphonse Gangitano (Vince Colosimo) and his mate Jason Moran (Les Hill), scions of Melbourne's underworld, who strut and stroll like a pair of goodfellas, taking anything and anyone they want. Brothers of a sort, their relationship eventually crumbles because of Gangitano's recklessness and remorse, though the latter comes too late to save him.

The movie-length premiere of Nine's highly anticipated series is the first and second episodes (there are 13 in all) welded neatly together, concluding one story arc and setting the stage for the events that will unfold. Within its own framework, Gangitano's story is both compelling and overpowering. In the context of the series it is the tip of a richly textured iceberg in which Hill, Gyton Grantley (as drug dealer Carl Williams) and Kat Stewart (as Carl's wife, Roberta) emerge as the real stars, delivering luminous performances.

Every aspect of *Underbelly's* production is tonally perfect - director of photography Joe Pickering's dark, almost sensual images, composer Burkhard Dallwitz's rich soundtrack and taut, smooth editing by Steve Evans, Peter Carrodus and Deb Peart. The writing (Haddrick, Peter Gawler, Felicity Packard) and direction (Tony Tilse, Geoff Bennett, Peter Andrikidis, Grant Brown) are also first class.

In the annals of Australian television history, *Underbelly* will be discussed alongside the greats of the crime genre - *Blue Murder*, *Phoenix*, *Janus* and *Wildside* - and deservedly so.