

Annie Leibovitz's wild take on HBO's *The Sopranos* depends on perfect posing.



# WHACKED

HOW PHOTOGRAPHER ANNIE LEIBOVITZ CREATED



**T**he *Sopranos* had just debuted when Annie Leibovitz photographed the cast of the hit HBO television show for *Vanity Fair's* December 1999 Hall of Fame issue. In that memorable shot she posed cast members as figures in the *Last Supper*—with Tony Soprano as Jesus, surrounded by his mob-connected disciples, one of whom will soon betray him. Underboss Big Pussy turned out to be Judas in the gospel according to HBO, but it's he, not Tony, who ends up getting whacked.

The provocative wit and brilliant execution of that photograph made HBO go straight to Leibovitz when it needed to promote last fall's season of *Sopranos* episodes. The network's idea was less blasphemous: To photograph the entire cast at a "family" gathering in a small restaurant. HBO wanted Leibovitz to recreate the painterly feeling she had achieved in the first shot. But the result, with its strange distortions and forced perspective, is really post-Renaissance—the photographic equivalent of art history's Mannerism.

The picture's elaborate positioning might lead you to think that it was digitally composed, but in this case, the entire *Sopranos* cast was booked for a single day, and everybody showed up. The hard part was done a few weeks earlier, when the scene's elaborate posing was worked out using stand-ins for each character. One of the show's executive producers was present at those sessions to make sure nothing about the setup conflicted with future story lines, though the meaning of the figures' positions and gestures was the subject of much speculation and prognostication by *Sopranos* fans.

Polaroids were shot of two setups, circulated at HBO for approvals, then used as a template for positioning the cast members on the day of the actual shoot. Postproduction, which included digital enhancement, remains the photographer's secret. Next season, how about Rococo?—RUSSELL HART