

1/25/04

● REALLY BIG SHOW

Traffic

Sex, drugs & rogue cops

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

It began as a landmark 1989 British miniseries. Then director Steven Soderbergh turned it into an Oscar-winning feature film in 2000. So the first question that inevitably greets the new, USA network miniseries "Traffic" is: Why?

Don't think screenwriter Ron Hutchinson, who penned the gritty, six-hour drama, which airs three consecutive nights beginning Monday on the USA network, hadn't already asked himself that question.

"How many times will they put that piece of pork in the grinder and make another sausage out of it?" he jokes.

Given the worldwide success of the previous incarnations of "Traffic," Hutchinson, who also wrote the HBO TV-movie "The Josephine Baker Story," points out that another version was almost inevitable.

"There was a period after Soderbergh's movie came out that every time you went to a meeting, people said, 'We want another 'Traffic.' We want that layered story with three different ideas,'" says the screenwriter.

"You haven't seen too many of them because they're fiendishly hard to write, especially for television where you've got all those act breaks. You're telling three or four stories; you've got 46 pages for a full hour to do it in. So it's really hard to come up with stories that will sustain that kind of complicated narrative."

His inspiration came when he heard about a real-life Italian case where bodies were washing up on shore with bullets in their heads. The answer to that mystery fuels the drama, which expands the idea of trafficking beyond the drug trade to include illegal aliens and terrorism.

Among the most prominent storylines, Elias Koteas ("Crash") plays a rogue DEA agent missing in Afghanistan. His partner, played by Martin Donovan ("The Opposite of Sex"), is back in the United States, doing his job and comforting his partner's wife (Mary McCormack). Balthazar Getty ("Natural Born Killers") shows up as a businessman who joins the traffickers because he's "tired of flying coach."

These criss-crossing stories are all tied together by the tale of Adam Kadyrov (Cliff Curtis of "Whale Rider"), an illegal immigrant whose wife and daughter die in a mysterious accident while being smuggled into the United States. Kadyrov pushes to find out what happened and punish those responsible.

Once the screenplay was set in motion, the cast was assembled. Actress Mary McCormack, best known for playing Howard Stern's wife in "Private Parts" and for her recent work in the experimental HBO series "K Street," signed on to play the wife of a DEA agent who may have gone AWOL before the final script was ready. She trusted director Stephen Hopkins, acclaimed for his work on the Fox series "24."

"He's really laid back, but he also knows what he's doing," says McCormack. "You feel like he's — and he is — a thousand times smarter than you are. If I mess up, he'll know and he'll fix it."

McCormack knew how high the bar was set going into the project. "I'd seen the British miniseries and the American movie and both are really good, so that's a little bit scary," says McCormack, 34. "I



always thought, 'Oh, they'll re-title it! And they didn't!'"

In her conversations with Hopkins, she became convinced that this "Traffic" could say something fresh. "When I talked to Stephen, I felt convinced that [the story] was new. It feels that way to me. Though of course you can see exactly where it came from."

What will fascinate viewers about this new miniseries is how the trafficking isn't just linked for plot purposes.

"We started digging into the role that heroin plays in this underground world," says Hutchinson. "If you want to pay somebody off, money is kind of inconvenient. Large sums of money are quite bulky. You've got to carry the cash around or turn it into the banking system and there are so many ways you can trace that these days. Far better to give the bad guys a bag of heroin. It's very portable. You can dispose of it quickly if you get

into trouble. You can shoot it up yourself if you like it!"

The currency in the underground may be heroin, but in Hollywood, it's relationships.

"I don't think I got the job just because Jeff Wachtel, one of the heads of USA, was my best man, but we did have a very intimate experience," says Hutchinson. "I broke both my wrists — I got attacked by German shepherds 10 days before my wedding and I literally could not zip my own pants when I went to the bathroom. Maybe that forged a relationship that is deeper than most, even in Hollywood. I think it took him 20 years to get over it. Actually, he said there were 20 people they'd spoken to about 'Traffic' and I just happened to be the 21st."

Traffic
Monday - Wednesday, 9 p.m., USA