

TV Sunday

By MICHAEL GILTZ

'The Sopranos' is the godfather of gangster shows, but this week CBS is muscling in with 'Falcone.' They hope a blow-you-away launch will make it . . .

THE NEXT MOB HIT



Networks have always played fast and loose with the rules of primetime.

ABC aired the soap "Peyton Place" up to three times a week in the '60s and now it airs the quiz show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" three times a week.

The first, big miniseries — "Rich Man, Poor Man" — was treated like a regular show when it aired one hour a week for half a season.

Now CBS is treating its promising new drama "Falcone" like a miniseries — airing nine episodes over eight nights starting Tuesday.

It nervously delayed the show's launch last fall after the Columbine shooting made network execs leery of violence. (Though "Falcone" isn't particularly violent.) But that delay may prove a blessing.

Like Bugsy Siegel letting it all ride on his dream of Vegas, CBS is rolling the dice on "Falcone." The network publicity mill goes into high gear during the NCAA Final Four basketball tournament — giving the show its best shot at reaching young male viewers and CBS the best shot at making the most of its expensive basketball package.

"This gamble I like," says actor Jason Gedrick, who stars as undercover FBI agent Joe Pistone. "This gamble makes a lot of sense. Even going (against 'ER') in this format is great because you're asking viewers to tune out maybe one night of their usual show. Because it's an event, they can say, 'You know what? I'll give it a shot; I'll see what it's all about.'"

Executive producer Robert Singer — who directs a number of the episodes — agrees.

"Everybody is cautiously optimistic," says Singer. "It's a great way to get noticed. It doesn't feel like just another show coming on."

For all his confidence that this programming gambit is a smart way for "Falcone" to stick out from the crowd, Singer admits the "nine episodes in eight days" rush to judgment does create a feeling of "Let it ride."

Still, knowing the fate of your show in one week does have its advantages.

"Finding out all at once —

I love that," says Singer, who's lived with week-to-week ratings anxiety working on shows like "Midnight Caller" and "Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman."

Indeed, waiting every seven days for a little piece of information can be nerve-racking.

"This way you'll see: Well, we had an impact — we didn't have an impact. They didn't come to the party — they came to the party in droves. We'll know right away and plan for next year

or get on with our lives. That part's great."

According to early buzz, so is the show.

Based on the memoirs that inspired the feature film "Donnie Brasco," "Falcone" shows Joe Pistone, aka Joe Falcone, as he struggles to balance the needs of his wife and two kids with his job. (Falcone is gone for days and weeks at a time.)

Work is equally conflict: Falcone finds himself torn more and more between the demands of the FBI and the gangsters he spends most of

his time with.

It's hard to hate mobster Sonny Napoli (Titus Welliver) when Falcone sees him struggling to deal with a nephew that has autism.

It's even harder to put his life on the line for the FBI when Falcone sees other agents bungle a case.

Gedrick has his best role since "Murder One" — in which he played a self-indulgent, possibly murderous movie star.

But "Falcone" also stars Amy Carlson of "Another World" in a scintillating, no-nonsense performance

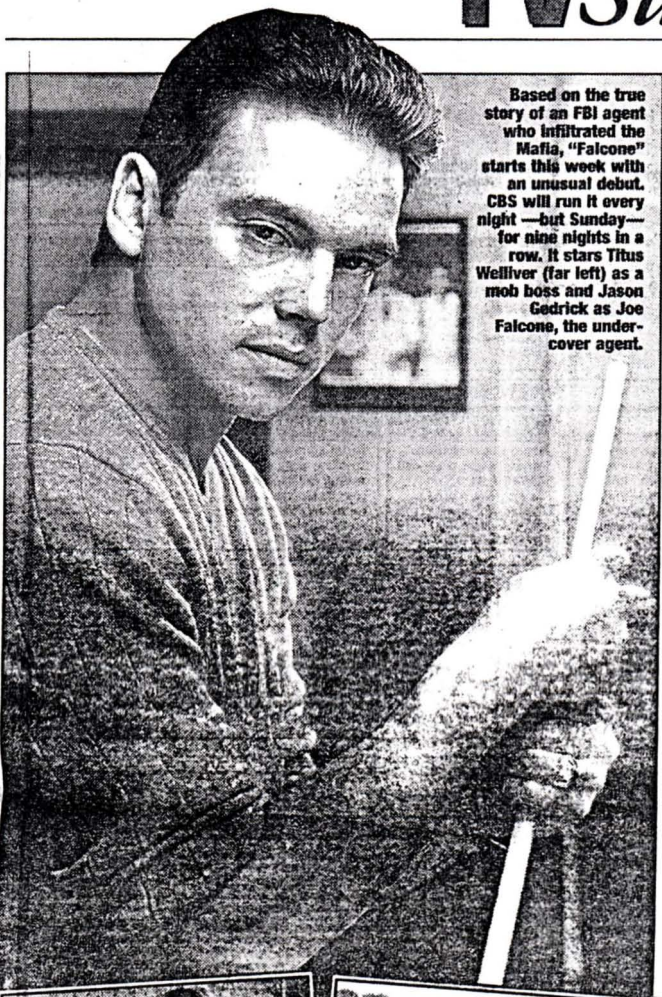
as his wife; Eric Roberts as a slightly mad crime boss; and Patti LaPore as an ambitious prosecutor who'd credit for busting up the crime family before the FBI does.

It even has a "Sopranos" connection: Lillo Broncato Jr., who plays the explosively violent Lucky on "Falcone," also had a recurring role on the HBO drama.

Not that "Falcone" wants to be linked with that very different drama.

"We're not that show," says Singer. "We don't pretend to

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Based on the true story of an FBI agent who infiltrated the Mafia, "Falcone" starts this week with an unusual debut. CBS will run it every night—but Sunday—for nine nights in a row. It stars Titus Welliver (far left) as a mob boss and Jason Gedrick as Joe Falcone, the undercover agent.

stride down the main street of town to face off with the Nielsen gang. Only one of them walks away alive and, for Singer, the outcome matters more this time.

"It's a show you really get your hopes up for," says Singer. "You want to come back and work on it a long time, so that raises the stakes."

"There are other shows you might work on that are not either that pleasant to work on or you feel somehow the concept didn't get realized and you're ready for bad things to happen," he says.

"But this show — we're all so jazzed about it. A disappointment would be a greater disappointment."

But the 35-year-old Gedrick — who's been burned by high hopes in the past — insists the programming stunt won't be nerve-wracking for him. "I know I'm going to have to find another job sooner or later anyway," he says. "It's not that big a deal to me."

"I've been down this road before with really, really well-received shows like 'EZ Streets.' I mean we could not have written better reviews ourselves. And no one saw it. So, maybe I'm a little jaded."

Another CBS drama, "EZ Streets" premiered in 1996 to very strong reviews and lots of press attention thanks to a cast that also included Ken Olin and Joe Pantoliano. After airing once in its regular time slot, the show was yanked for several months, aired a few more times and then cancelled.

"I really love working on this show," Gedrick says. "But I think if I get caught up in that, the disappointment factor... it gets to beat you up a little bit."

He's had small roles in films like "Backdraft" and "Born on the Fourth of July," as well as the lead in CBS's blockbuster miniseries "The Last Don" and its sequel.

Married with two children and based in Los Angeles, Gedrick has steadily grabbed better and better roles ever since. Now, it's come together for him.

"By the time we finished 'Falcone,' I'd learned a lot about film technique," says Gedrick, a disarming admission from someone who's starred in a number of TV shows and about a dozen movies.

"The last four episodes are sensational. We were shooting in Toronto and I was dying to get home. But I really didn't want to stop shooting. I didn't want to stop acting because I'm just starting to get out of idle here."



Falcone is caught between his strong-willed wife, played by Amy Carlson (left) and the crew of street thugs he is supposed to be spying on.



be that show and we don't want to be that show.

"That show's great and they do what they do. Ours is a really different take — Falcone's family life is certainly a lot different than

Tony Soprano's. But the attack of both shows is totally different."

In some ways, the gangster series has taken over on TV from Westerns — a world where people make their

own rules and live and die by the consequences.

"This is what the Western has become," agrees Singer. "Guys with guns."

So the next week and a half is like having "Falcone"