

'Fargo' Boss on Appeals of Anthology Series, Cable vs. Broadcast and a Future Beyond Season 1

11:00 AM PDT 4/14/2014 by Lesley Goldberg

Noah Hawley talks with THR about revisiting the "Minnesota nice" of the movie and how to surprise viewers in a closed-ended format.



FX; AP Images

"Fargo"; Noah Hawley (inset)

FX heads to *Fargo* with showrunner **Noah Hawley**, revisiting the "Minnesota nice" made famous by the Coen brothers Oscar-winning feature film of the same name.

Hawley (*My Generation*) heads to cable for the first time with the 10-episode anthology that explores what would happen the day after **Frances McDormand**'s detective Marge Gunderson solved the case depicted in the film. (Brothers **Joel** and **Ethan Coen** won a screenwriting Oscar for the film, which was nominated for best picture.)

While FX's limited series is not an interpretation of the movie, its characters are inspired by **Steve Buscemi's** bumbling criminal and **William H. Macy's** beleaguered car salesman, with **Billy Bob Thornton** returning to TV to star as Lorne Malvo, a criminal who shakes up the life of **Martin Freeman's** Lester Nygaard. Newcomer Allison Tolman also stars as the new ace detective in completely reimagined role from McDormand's Oscar-winning character.

Here, Hawley talks with *The Hollywood Reporter* about his approach to *Fargo* as a 10-hour movie, its future beyond the closed-ended story, input from the Coens and how the series would be different if it were on broadcast.

[PHOTOS: Movies That Became TV Shows: 'About a Boy,' 'Fargo,' 'Bad Teacher' and 20 More](#)

What was the pitch process like for *Fargo*? Did you pitch it as a complete, closed-ended series and what subsequent seasons would look like?

It was interesting because it's the Coen brothers' movie so in some ways, the pitch has to be a Coen brothers experience. I had a map of the region and from the beginning and, in a suicidal gesture, I said, "It's not a television series." What made the movie great was at the end of it Marge (**Frances McDormand**) goes to bed after seeing the wood chipper and says, "Two more months." Her husband got the three-cent stamp and they go to bed and you leave knowing that tomorrow she's going to wake up and her life is going to go back to normal. I said, "If this was a TV series, every year she would catch another crazy Coen brothers case and it would stop feeling like the true crime story we want to pitch. She's not going to be the same person; she's going to end up being a character on *Criminal Minds*." I said it was a 10-hour movie. It's an anthology. If you did a second 10-hour movie, it would be a completely new story from the Coen brothers universe. Where *Fargo* is a type of case. It's a metaphor for a true crime story where truth is stranger than fiction. FX said they wanted to do *Fargo* as a series but wondered if you could do it without Marge. What they were saying to me was, "We want you to write a Coen brothers movie and set in this region." There were definitely footsteps I was walking in, but they weren't the same exact footsteps that had been walked before.

What were your conversations like with the Coen brothers? Was there anything you couldn't do?

I had zero conversations with them before I conceived the show or even wrote the first script. FX wanted a series document and from the beginning were thinking about ordering all 10 hours. But they wanted to send it to Joel and Ethan, who had signed on in theory, but would withhold judgment on whether they would put their names on it until they read a script. Those were a nerve-racking few days. They called and said very nice things and FX was thrilled because the Coens were happy to put their names on it. The Coens did ask me what I was going to do about the accents. It's iconic that it became like a caricature and I decided to downplay it, which they thought was a good idea. But otherwise they were very hands off. I didn't come into it with an agenda to make a Coen brothers movie.

[GUEST COLUMN: 'Fargo' Showrunner Calls Straight-to-Series Order the 'Holy Grail'](#)

Do you already know what a second season would look like? Will there be a new big bad every season?

It's not really constructed with that in mind. It would feel false to me if it was the continuing adventures of Molly (**Allison Tolman**) and Gus (**Colin Hanks**). What's exciting about these limited series now with *True Detective* and *Fargo* is this idea that it's you're making a 10-hour movie. In some ways, there's a backlash to series where you have to make 22 episodes a year for so long that the premise just doesn't sustain. Look at *The Killing*; they got in so much trouble for not solving it at the end. People want resolution and to come back if they love the characters, but it's almost more important to give them closure. As a writer, it's more exciting because then every single thing that happens in those 10 hours is a step toward the end. You can mix wrong choices, kill people off, make shocking things happen because those characters don't have to come back 22 times for the next five years.

How many of these characters should people anticipate seeing next season?

It's really hard to know at this point. I've started thinking about what the next 10-hour movie will be, but nothing has been set in stone. This season is a version of the movie that has none of the characters or plot points from the movie, but captures the same sense of place and storytelling. [Season two] would be a new story with new characters. It doesn't have to be contemporary. The sky's the limit as far as the history of true crime in Minnesota.

Have you given thought to how many seasons you would like *Fargo* to run?

I have a second one in mind and I'll sit down with FX and MGM sometime in May. Part of what makes this work is hopefully there's an unpredictability to the style of storytelling that comes with doing a Coen brothers movie. But like everything, that wares off after awhile. I'm excited to do another one. I could probably see my way clear in doing a third ten-hour movie, but I don't really know past that if it's worth doing or whether it's just good to move on to the next thing. It's a great new option that you have in television: to tell different stories and move around from story to story as opposed to locking into 10 seasons. **Damon Lindelof** was very articulate with the fact that *Lost* should have been a three-season show. They had a finite amount of story in them -- which is not a crime or anything to be ashamed of -- and they were forced to stretch beyond that. You can't help but lose your way at a certain point, even if you're going to find your way back again. To tell a story with a beginning, middle and end is such a relief because then you can make choices and you can say every step that I'm taking in these 10 hours is a step toward the end. So, characters can die, big things can happen, you're not treading water. In a way, *Breaking Bad* broke the ground for taking a character on a journey where he/she ends up in a completely different place in the end than where they were in the beginning. And that's really exciting.

FX's *American Horror Story* changed the landscape of TV with its complete reset every year but at the same time, those deaths that should be shocking have lost a bit of impact because viewers know it's a contained story. How will you keep audiences on their toes?

It's an interesting challenge. There's this gravitational pull toward six seasons and a movie. I had what I hope is 10 great hours of this story to tell. At a certain point, things do become

predictable; the region becomes predictable, the characters -- there's a sort of folksiness and they become precious. It's important to me that we do not devolve into melodrama or that *Picket Fences* quirk for quirky sake. The goal previously has always been how do I create something that I can milk year after year? Now it's more about let's make this 10-hour movie and if there's another one, great; if not, I'll go do something else. For me, it's not feeling like a prisoner to it.

TV REVIEW: FX's ' Fargo'

How much is the series tied to the setting of Fargo? Could other seasons be set elsewhere?

It's possible. The funny thing about the movie is that it's only the first scene of the movie that takes place in Fargo; the rest of it takes place in Minnesota. Fargo is a metaphor; it's like a state of mind. It's a word that describes a sort of frozen hinterland that makes you think of a certain type of story. Not all of the moments in this season take place in the region. Some of them take place outside, but they are all part of a larger story that is connected to this place.

This is your cable series. What's been the biggest difference about how you've approached *Fargo* vs. broadcast?

My experience on network, you fight day and night to make something good whereas with FX, I'm fighting far less to make something great because everyone agrees with the vision. In network a lot of the time, you pitch them an original idea for a show and they say, "We love how original it is; can you make it more like other things?" That was never an issue on FX. They said, "You're making a Coen brothers movie, go out and make a great Coen brothers movie." There was none of that second-guessing.

If you were to produce this show for a broadcast network like ABC, what kind of changes would you have to make?

It would be a case a of the week show and you would want a life lesson at the end of every episode (*laughs*). I had a great experience at ABC [with short-lived series *Unusuals* and *My Generation*], but at the same time I couldn't get a second season or even a third episode out of them for the second series. The word "emotionality" was thrown around a lot and I realized it's a word for a simulation of emotions. They wanted people to feel a safe emotion like the piano comes in and you know it's a sort of sad moment and then it ends. But I'm more attracted to bigger, real emotions.

Did knowing that you were getting all 10 episodes on the air with the straight to series pickup change your vision at all?

Absolutely. Because of the nature of the network, they're not going to cancel it; they're going to air all of them and so you go all in. You pace things out in a different way. You're not worried that those early episodes have to build momentum toward the bigger event. There's not a lot of razzle dazzle, and that's OK. On network TV, they require each episode to take you on a predictable roller coaster ride. [FX topper] **John Landgraf** called me after he saw the first episode and was thrilled. He said, "I'm not worried that people are going to change the channel

because it's too slow." The show has a pacing to it, but we're trying to make a movie on television and it's cut differently and it's paced differently. That's not to say that it's slow and dull; my hope is that it pulls you in. For the network president to say to me he's not worried people are going to change the channel because it's too slow -- who have you ever heard that from before? It gives me the freedom to say, I can take my time and tell this story right and then when things pay off they really pay off.

HBO's *True Detective* is going to compete as a drama instead of a mini at the Emmys. Where would you like to see *Fargo*?

It was nice of them to do that but I think the definition of a miniseries or a limited series is that it's a complete story with a beginning, middle and end. That's certainly what this is and I'm quite happy to be in that category. I have no desire to get out of that category because it's exactly where we should be.

What's the best advice you received from former NBC Entertainment chief Warren Littlefield [who is an exec producer on *Fargo*]?

This is the second show I've done with Warren and he's very pragmatic about the business. He also realizes that we are in new territory here and it's been just as much of a great surprise for him as it's been for me to realize that unlike broadcast television where they're attracted to things that are original and then they become afraid of the originality of them. At FX, their brand is about doing something different than everybody else so for both of us it's been this great journey where this is a network and studio that tells us to take risks and who embraced the fact that if you're trying to make a Coen brothers movie, you can't make it easy or predictable. His advice is always helpful and gives me a perspective, but it was nice to see him pleasantly surprised that we didn't have to fight as hard as you normally have to fight.

[STORY: FX's 'Fargo' Cast, EPs on Film Comparisons, Anthology Format, Courting Billy Bob Thornton](#)

What was your first meeting with Billy Bob Thornton like?

In my first meeting with Billy, he said, "This character seems to combine all the best parts of the best characters that I've ever played." It felt like a Hail Mary to go to him. He's an Oscar-winning actor, director, writer who doesn't have to do anything. What he responded to was the writing. Warren and I sat down with him and Billy. I was prepared to come in and tell him every single detail I knew about the journey, the character and where he went. Billy just said, "I love the script. I don't want to know all that stuff, I don't need to know all that stuff. A lot of the roles that I take, not all of them are well-written and some of them I sit down and I do a little polish on my dialogue, but I never changed a word of what Joel and Ethan wrote and I wouldn't change a word of this." He's been true to that and an incredible partner.

Allison Tolman is a real find. What did she bring to the role that helped her stand out?

She is real. I sat in a casting room in Santa Monica for however many months we were casting and I must have seen over a hundred actresses for that role. They all came in wearing a Parka when it was 85 degrees out. There were a lot of great actresses who were in contention for this role, but I saw a tape from Chicago that Allison Tolman sent in and she got every nuance and all the comedy yet she felt like a ground person. This role demands a real range because she has to be able to pull off that kind of effortless, dry comedy. The great thing about Frances McDormand's character was she wasn't the world's best detective, but she had common sense. You felt like she was always the smartest person in the room, but she was humble enough that she didn't want to embarrass one of her deputies. There's a great range of dramatic acting that's required from Allison as well without ever falling into melodrama. She walked that tightrope. Considering this is the first thing she's ever really done, her poise from day one has been astonishing. I don't think she realizes what's coming. I'm excited to see what she does from here on out; I know there are going to be big things.

You tweeted a lot about the freezing cold weather conditions. What was your worst moment on set?

It's all about the feet at the end of the day. The rest of the cold you can really manage, but there were a couple of days there where I wasn't sure I was going to come back with all my toes. It was really about trying to make sure that everyone is safe and that the actors are safe. We had to make some costume adjustments because you're sending people out there and what might look cool on screen is not necessarily the safest thing they can wear. We had to do some adapting just to keep the actors healthy and warm.

What was the coldest day you remember?

It was minus 40. It was 20 degrees warmer than Mars on that day and we couldn't shoot because propane turns into a liquid at minus 40 so you can't even turn on the heaters. That day we didn't shoot, but we shot the day before it was minus 25, we were on a frozen lake. I think you'll see it on the screen, it's not going to look like anything else on television that's for sure. We didn't get a lot of visits from the studio and network executives (*laughs*).

Fargo premieres Feb. 15 at 10 p.m. on FX.

Email: Lesley.Goldberg@THR.com

Twitter: [@Snoodit](https://twitter.com/Snoodit)