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Scott Haggett, Reuters

Coen brothers' Fargo gets cable TV treatment



Billy Bob Thornton sports a bad haircut for his role as hit man Lorne Malvo in the TV series Fargo.

A particularly punishing winter, even by Canadian standards, has served well the new cable tele-vision series Fargo, a reimagining of the blood-soaked black comedy film of the same name by brothers Joel and Ethan Coen.

The 10-episode single-season series, which debuts on April 15 on 21st Century Fox Inc.'s FX cable network, is a new story with different characters, but leans heavily on the frigid Minnesota setting, death, Midwestern folk-siness and deadpan humour of its Oscar-winning namesake.

The gift of Calgary's coldest and snowiest winter in years made it easy to emphasise the bone-chilling Minnesota winter that the detail-oriented Coen brothers made central to their film.

"The winter is just perfect for this," said Keith Carradine, who plays the father of rookie cop Molly Solverson (Allison Tolman), the woman who takes over law enforcement when her boss is murdered.

"It's absolutely enhanced everything we've done," Carradine added during a recent set visit when temperatures lifted enough to melt a little of the snow pack. "One of the central characters of this piece is the weather."

Along with Tolman, the series stars big-screen actors Martin Freeman as the repressed insurance salesman Lester Nygaard and Billy Bob Thornton as hit man Lorne Malvo, who takes an interest in pushing the buttons of everyone around him.

With a bad haircut and a killer's conscience, Lorne sets the action in motion by murdering one of Lester's tormenters following an off-hand remark Lester makes during idle chit-chat in the waiting area of the local emergency room.

"One of the greatest things that I like about that character is that nobody knows why he's there, who he is, where he's from," Thornton said of Lorne. "In the beginning, nobody even knows he exists outside of Lester and a couple of people."

In true Coen brothers fashion, the death of Lester's nemesis, a local trucking mogul, satisfies but complicates the hen-pecked salesman who channels his own violent streak.

"The two pivotal scenes between mine and Billy Bob's character in the first episode were amazing," said Freeman, a British actor best known for his role as Bilbo Baggins in The Hobbit film trilogy. "It made me want to do (the series)."

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Executive producer Noah Hawley agreed to handle the writing of the single-season series after being approached by studio MGM, which owns the rights to the movie, and the FX.

"They said, 'Hey, can you write a Coen brothers movie set in this region?'," Hawley said.

"It was a really interesting challenge presented to me. To say, what is a Coen Brothers movie, really?"

Hawley's answer was that his Fargo needed to steer clear from the traditional 'case of the week' cop show. He pitched a series with a single season as a complete story, much like an episodic film, a format gaining traction with the popularity of FX's American Horror Story and HBO's True Detective.

"There's huge freedom in that there's no treading water," he said. "You're telling a story with a beginning, middle and an end, which means that every step is a step towards the end of the story. You don't have to worry about how to keep a character's story alive over multiple seasons."

Hawley said he wanted to echo the dark humour of the movie and be faithful to the rural Minnesotans presented in Fargo. But in the character of Lorne, he diverges from the template.

"He is not a classic sociopath or serial killer," Hawley says. "He's an anarchic force entering into a polite society."

While giving their backing, the Coen brothers are not involved in the new version.