



TV Review: FX's 'Fargo' Season One Premiere

Dark, funny and a wonderful start to the highly anticipated new series



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Billy Bob Thornton in "Fargo"
Photo: FX

FX's "**Fargo**" was conceived as something of a ten-episode "movie" more than a standard television series. In this sense it shares something of a kinship with HBO's recently completed first season of "**True Detective**". And, like "True Detective", which is already developing a second season, the intent with "Fargo" is to feature one true crime story each season and, as writer/creator **Nick Hawley** [said](#), "After a season or two of the show, people who see the movie

might say that was a great episode of Fargo. Each season is a separate true crime story from that region. The movie now fits into the series as another true crime story from the region."

The movie Hawley is referring to, of course, is **Joel and Ethan Coen's** 1996 Best Picture nominee of the same name. And don't go feeling as if that comment, saying the movie could be considered just another episode, is blasphemous -- not only does the show do a wonderful job of capturing the tonal aspects of the film, but the filmmaker brothers serve as executive producers on the show.

That said, about 50 minutes or so into the first episode, "The Crocodile's Dilemma", directed by **Adam Bernstein** ("Breaking Bad"), I was already well into wondering just how they were going to turn this into a series of any sort. As soon as I made known this curiosity to my wife who was sitting next to me, watching and enjoying it as much as I was, the answer came in all its dark hilarity.

"Fargo" is steeped in the same dark comedy, murder and drama, matched with "Minnesota nice" that made the Coen's movie so entertaining. Set in Bemidji, Minnesota, each episode opens with the same "This is a True Story" lead-in that confounded audiences of the film and the innocence (and accents) of small town USA is on display. Some of which are brought to do dark deeds, all while the devil is lurking in every corner, passing on his influence.

Hawley seems to have delicately eased himself into the world developed by the Coens and he's clearly comfortable. Characters resemble those found in the feature film, but they aren't altogether the same.



Allison Tolman and Shawn Doyle in "Fargo"

Photo: FX

For instance, **Allison Tolman** is clearly this version's **Frances McDormand**, giving Bemiji police deputy Molly Solverson something of an aloof nature, but a serious eye for police work

when tested. Her kindness, however, will be put to the test and Tolman does a great job making the character her own, rather than trying to bend to any will to follow in McDormand's footsteps. Good thing because those are some big shoes to fill.

Martin Freeman ("Sherlock", *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*) plays Lester Nygaard, an insurance salesman and, essentially, this show's version of **William H. Macy's** Jerry Lundegaard from the feature film. However, while the two characters may find themselves in somewhat similar predicaments, the course of action that leads to the crimes that penetrate their lives raises a different level of moral issues.

Freeman is instantly a perfect choice for the role. Lester has been bullied all his life, his wife (**Kelly Holden Bashar**) nags him at every turn, his more successful, younger brother (**Joshua Close**) looks down on him and now the devil has come knocking on his door.

The devil, in this case, is Lorne Malvo (**Billy Bob Thornton**), perhaps the biggest deviation from the original film. Entering the snowy town of Bemiji under curious circumstances, Lorne and Lester's paths cross in a hospital waiting room. The two share what begins as an innocent chat until Lorne leans over to Lester and says, in his soft-spoken, deathly serious voice, "If that were me, in that position... I would have killed that man." I'm paraphrasing here, but it's as if Lorne has just moved the forbidden fruit into Lester's timid reach, but will he bite?

Malvo is a character written in such a way that he's scary for what he *might* do, because as the show opens we are quickly made aware of what he's capable of. He's the guy that can stare you in the face and make your knees quake, not because he's physically intimidating, but you can see the conviction in his eyes. His silence and his stare are more his weapons than anything else. For fans of **Stephen King**, the best comparison I could possibly make is to the character of Leland Gaunt from his book "Needful Things".

Characters you will also meet over the course of the season include **Bob Odenkirk** ("Breaking Bad", *Nebraska*) as Bemiji's half-witted deputy police chief Bill Oswalt, **Keith Carradine** as a quiet voice of reason playing Molly's father Lou, "Always Sunny in Philadelphia" veteran **Glenn Howerton** as a bronzed up personal trainer, **Adam Goldberg** (*Dazed and Confused*) and **Russell Harvard** as Mr. Numbers and Mr. Wrench respectively (I'll say nothing more about these two for now), **Colin Hanks** as Duluth police officer Gus Grimley, **Joey King** as Gus' daughter and, finally, there's supermarket king Stavros Milos (**Oliver Platt**) and **Kate Walsh** as the gold-digging Gina Hess.

The talent behind the camera is just as great as in front, the costumes, production design and sets are great. I couldn't help but laugh at the mere simplicity of the small town as we roll by Lou's Coffee Shop, Leroy's Motel and then The Oriental Grill as the town itself serves as a character all its own.

Cinematographer **Matthew J. Lloyd** also has a lot of fun with his camera, capturing the sparse, snowy landscape and some comical close-ups, but I was most impressed by a night shot over the hood of Gus Grimley's police cruiser as he chats with his daughter over his CB radio just before he is about to have his own run-in with Malvo.

From the director's chair, Bernstein helms the first two episodes of the limited series, getting them off to a great start. He'll be followed by **Randall Einhorn** ("Wilfred"), **Colin Bucksey** ("Breaking Bad"), **Scott Winant** ("Carnival", "Dead Like Me") and **Matt Shakman** ("Mad Men"), all directing two episodes each.

If this first episode alone is any indication, this show isn't interested in delivering belly laughs, but instead honest laughter, a quiet laughter. The jokes sink in rather than hit you all at once (well, for the most part as some moments are downright hilarious), which should make watching this series all over again just as entertaining as the first go 'round.

Laughter, however, is only half of it. Make no mistake, "Fargo" is till a dark drama and a rather grisly one at that. The threat of violence seems to be within almost every scene and when it shows its ugly face there is no holding back as FX intends to make good use of the 10 PM time slot.

As of writing this review, I'm two-and-a-half episodes into the series. I'm not sure I'll write a review for each episode as I'm thinking maybe a midway review and finale review may be the best course of action, but I can honestly say I'm hooked.

"Fargo" premieres on Tuesday, **April 15** at 10 PM PT/ET on FX. The show will have a **97 minute premiere** as the episode runs right around 71 minutes without commercials.