



The Buffalo News

Is it really about “Mad Men” at all? Is “Fargo” about Fargo?

By [Jeff Simon](#) | News Arts Editor | [@JeffSimonbuffnw](#) | [±](#)

on April 15, 2014 - 12:01 AM

Meanwhile, on Sunday’s premiere episode of the final season of “Mad Men” ...

Let’s talk about chronology first. The show will split its final year into two parts: six more episodes now after Sunday’s premiere, seven more after a long layoff in 2015.

As annoying as that may be, that’s how things are done these days with such huge draws among faithful fans – the ones for whom the show has long been “appointment TV” and one of the best shows on television.

I’m not one of them, but I must say I’ve been a reasonably dedicated watcher for a couple years now.

It’s the true “Mad Men” faithful, now, who are charged with the final moral questions in the continuing narrative: Did Don Draper (Jon Hamm) deserve to be a de facto exile from the advertising firm he’s still involved with on paper? Did Peggy (Elisabeth Moss) deserve to be overlooked on the job and the landlord of a crummy building in a lesser 1969 neighborhood who’s assailed, often after a bad day at the office, by tenants with clogged toilets?

Did Roger, in his continual search for life’s more sybaritic pleasures in a sexually liberated 1969 world, deserve to be rather ostentatiously forgiven over Bloody Marys for his paternal transgressions by his daughter? Did Roger deserve to come home exhausted to an already full bed (young woman, young man) in which the woman in the middle tells him everybody’s always welcome in HER bed?

And to think, all Roger wanted was a good night’s sleep.

We see and hear Richard Nixon’s first inaugural address on Don Draper’s television set so we know where the show was set on Sunday – January 1969. Clearly, it has a long way to go and a lot of stories to tell before the tales of these people are over.

We’ve known for years now that contrary to the title of the show, “Mad Men,” it’s not really about men at all, it’s about women – most especially Peggy (Moss) and Joan (Christina Hendricks), living, breathing transitional figures in a world transformed by feminism.

Commonplace speculation about the end of “Mad Men” is that Don and Peggy will have, in effect, changed places in the advertising industry by the time of the show’s finale. Frankly, I’m not all that interested at the show’s end by the fate of either one.

On the final show of its season in 2015, the fate I most want to know is Joan’s, one of the most original characters in all of television. There, truly, is a story no TV show has ever told us before – the tale of a beautiful, buxom, hugely ambitious woman capable of moral compromise to get ahead but even more capable of developing enormously in an executive job.

I’ll be there at the very end but I must tell you, as it stands now, it’s her fate in the show’s finale I care about most.

And now a few words about another major premiere this week, FX’s “ Fargo ” which begins this evening. Can’t help thinking about the Coen’s original movie from 1996? Me neither.

First, always with me, comes Carter Burwell’s incredible music – that opening theme for a snowscape secretly full of humanity. Nice people. Sweet people. Stupid people. Comic people. Wretched people.

It is magnificent film music. It is grand but as seemingly familiar as a folk song our grandparents or great grandparents might have heard in some European “ old country ,” an ocean away.

The next thing that inevitably pops into my head about the Coen Brothers’ original film “ Fargo ” is the great Frances McDormand as Marge Gunderson, the very pregnant cop, traipsing through bloody snow in heavy boots and fur ear flaps and saying “ Jeez ” all the time.

Who didn’t love Marge, one of the most original cops in movie history? An Oscar for the role proved it. I certainly loved her. The real actress, of course, is married to director Joel Coen and had an adopted son with him two years before “ Fargo ” was made. For them, a fantasy about a pregnant Minnesota cop stomping through the snow to find blood and mayhem is virtually business as usual.

For the rest of us, it was wildly original. But then, it was a Coen Brothers movie, after all, and we knew how singular their take on parenthood could be from “ Raising Arizona .”

The next thing immediately in my head about the Coen’s original “ Fargo ” is John Carroll Lynch, as the quiet, peace-loving stamp-designing husband of Marge Gunderson. He’s the one whose stamp design isn’t chosen by the Post Office for one of the major stamps, only one of the little ones that sell for pennies. But jeez, says Marge immortally, trying to cheer him up, every time they change the price they need the little ones to make up the difference for people who bought the old ones? Right? (Not anymore, with forever stamps but that’s another story.)

It’s a glorious tiny moment of uniquely Coen comedy – so true, so reminiscent of a mother trying to confront and reassure a weepy 8-year old son and so familiar in tone to the actual marital lives of Americans everywhere.

Let’s not even talk about Marge Gunderson encountering the body stuck in the backyard wood chipper.

I saw “ Fargo ” only once when the movie first came out. And yet detail after detail is lodged in my head more vividly than some movies I saw last week.

And now, this evening, we have the premiere of an idea from the FX network that I expected to deplore but don't – a weekly TV series based on the Coens' "Fargo."

Let's admit right off the bat that everything – and I do mean everything – about the first 45 minutes of Cameron Hawley's TV series "Fargo" (the Coens are listed as executive producers but then so is former NBC executive Warren Littlefield) is a little off.

The music by Jeff Russo is vaguely reminiscent of Burwell's music but not nearly as good. There is no equivalent of Marge Gunderson, even though there's a cop's pregnant wife (an entirely different point there).

No bodies are stuffed into the backyard wood chipper either. For the first 45 minutes of this evening's "Fargo" you think that the frantic and put-upon insurance salesman played by Martin Freeman is a pale imitation of what the Coens did so much better.

Stick around. Our much-bullied and mocked loser with the comically broad Minnesota accent suddenly asserts what he feels to be his "manhood" in the worst possible way and at the worst possible time.

And then, as the publicity folks might say, the fun begins.

None of it would have happened, you see, if he hadn't encountered Billy Bob Thornton playing a somewhat satanic hired killer in the great American tradition of Twain's "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg" and the like. Old Billy Bob plays a mischievous trickster who just can't keep himself from fighting the bullies of the world by playing pranks on their duller-witted victims.

That "Fargo" turns out to be a pretty good TV show was, I must say, a minor shock. But then I was just as shocked before when Hitchcock's "Psycho" turned into the weirdly compelling "Bates Motel."

Heaven help us, I think I now like the idea – classic movies turned into TV shows by clever people who are, in fact, leaving the contents of those movies alone and reinventing wholly different stories just from the atmosphere of the originals.

Call it post-modern TV and it's awfully good at times, I think. Tonight's "Fargo" is full of the Coen Brothers' favorite subjects – blood, murder, rural stupidity and violent, abusive, awful people who get just what might be coming to them.

A pleasant surprise.

email: jsimon@buffnews.com