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'Fargo' comes to TV starring Billy Bob Thornton as psycho with sense of humour

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By Frazier Moore, *The Associated Press* / *The Canadian Press* – Mon, 14 Apr, 2014



This image released by FX shows Allison Tolman as Molly Solverson, left, and Bob Odenkirk as Bill Oswalt in a scene from "Fargo." The 10-episode season premieres Tuesday at 10 p.m. EDT on FX. (AP Photo/FX, Chris Large)

NEW YORK, N.Y. - After failed attempts and broken dreams, by golly, someone went and put "Fargo" on series TV.

The 10-episode season premieres Tuesday at 10 p.m. EDT on FX. And it mesmerizes. As a furtherance of the 1996 crime classic by Joel and Ethan Coen that starred Frances McDormand, William H. Macy and Steve Buscemi, the TV adaptation is a wonder.

Like that movie, the series is set in rural, snow-glazed Minnesota, but 20 years later (in 2006), and is stocked with new characters, deadly mischief and a bounty of stars including Allison Tolman as a bright-eyed deputy and Martin Freeman as a nebbishy insurance salesman (distant echoes of the roles played by McDormand and Macy in the film). Also on hand are Colin Hanks, Bob Odenkirk, Oliver Platt, Kate Walsh, Keith Carradine, Adam Goldberg, Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, and more.

At the core of its deliciously deranged narrative is Lorne Malvo, a sotto-voce psycho whose mysterious path brings him to the town of Bemidji, with many repercussions.

Lorne is played by Billy Bob Thornton, who radiates still menace while sporting what he calls "a haircut gone wrong."

"This was not from a salon," Thornton explains. "It was done by a friend. But looking in the mirror, I thought, 'Wow — this dark character having bangs, which you associate with innocence, would be great.' So we decided to go with it."

The man bringing " Fargo " back to life after ill-fated tries by NBC and CBS in the late 1990s is Noah Hawley, who serves as the show runner, an executive producer and the writer of all 10 episodes.

Somehow Hawley internalized the rules and deadpan tone of the Coens (who are also onboard as executive producers), then ran with their sense of twisted realism to create his own thing.

"He captured the Coen Brothers' spirit, got their vibe, and yet he didn't imitate 'em," says Thornton. "I thought, if you've done that, you've done something great."

And when he encountered Lorne Malvo in Hawley's pilot script, "I don't know why, but I just went, 'Yeah. That fits: a hand in a glove.'"

"I liked the idea of playing a guy who has no conscience," Thornton goes on. "He has this weird sense of humour. He likes to mess with people. And as we went along I started thinking, he's a loner, so messing with people is actually his social life, his recreation."

This is a guy who, when threatened on his home turf by a thug twice his size, unconcernedly steps to his bathroom, drops his trousers and takes a seat. His foe, appalled, beats a hasty retreat.

"He doesn't like weakness," Thornton adds. "He has this weird curiosity about weak people. And he sees them as people he can use."

Having drawn Freeman's jammed-up pipsqueak into his lair, Lorne shares his code on being tough: "We used to be gorillas. All we have is what we can take and defend."

Speaking with a reporter in New York last week, the 58-year-old Thornton is jauntily clad in pants with broad black-and-navy stripes, T-shirt, leather jacket, boots and knit fingerless gloves.

He is friendly, easygoing and charismatic with his soft Southern accent — like his character, a force to be reckoned with.

"The most important thing for an actor to know is who he is," Thornton says. "He's got to know, 'OK, I'm the guy for this role — or not.' Like I always tell people, 'If you're doing a movie about Charles de Gaulle, get a French man. That ain't me.'"

"People will say, 'Well, you need to stretch yourself as an actor.' But if you start trying to play people who are inherently not you, that's not going to be your strongest stuff."

No one can say Thornton hasn't stretched. He has scored in popcorn comedies like "Bad Santa" and "Mr. Woodcock" between decidedly grown-up dramas: the Coen Brothers' "The Man Who Wasn't There," "Monster's Ball," "A Simple Plan" and, of course, "Sling Blade," which he wrote, directed and starred in, winning an Oscar for best adapted screenplay and a best actor nod.

He arrived in Los Angeles as a young man from backwoods Arkansas, looking to write for Hollywood or form a rock band (music remains a lifelong passion).

This country boy with a hayseed triple name may have seemed like a long shot in Tinseltown, "but I've always believed in providence," says Thornton. "Things were really hard at first, but I always had this belief that it was going to be OK."

Then he found his way into an acting class.

"My desire was just to be a working actor," he replies when asked the scope of his career goal. His ideals: the great character actors Strother Martin and Warren Oates.

"I thought I'd always be sixth or seventh on the call sheet. I never expected much more. So I thought I'd really made it on 'Hearts Afire,'" the early '90s political sitcom starring John Ritter with Thornton in a supporting role. "But years before, I thought I'd made it when I had just one scene on 'Matlock'!"

"It was all fine," he sums up, "all along the way."

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