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Netflix's First Original. Lilyhammer

Tod Hardin · Wednesday, February 19th, 2014

It's one part *Fargo*, a dash of *Sopranos* and a full serving of pure Scandinavian charm

There is no question that over the past two years Netflix has made quite a splash in the arena of original series programming. With a new long-term deal inked with Disney/Marvel, another with Harvey Weinstein to tell the story of Marco Polo, and a lineup of 10 original series slated for this year, they have indeed become a major player within the entertainment industry ... and one that appears to be here to stay.

That's a far cry from the downward spiral they were experiencing in 2011, when they attempted to spin off their popular DVD rental service into a new company called Qwikster. It was a public relations debacle, but the jump into original programming soon followed and it has certainly changed their fortunes and improved their image.

But what show started it all? *Arrested Development*? *House of Cards*? *Orange is the New Black*? Answer: None of the above.

Those are all great shows and I'm pretty darn sure that the average Joe or Jane would certainly pick one of them if asked the question: What was Netflix's original original series?



Norwegian key art for season 2

However, the correct answer begins some several thousand miles away from the comfort of the Netflix HQ in Los Gatos, CA. It takes us to the chilly environs of Oslo, Norway, home to the husband and wife creative duo of Anne Bjørnstad and Eilif Skodvin. It is there that, several years ago, they came up with the idea for a quirky little show called *Lilyhammer*, which has been most frequently referred to as a dark comedy or by some as a "dramedy."

Bjørnstad and Skodvin always thought of it as a novel or maybe a movie. However, after the wave of American character-driven high-concept TV series – like *Weeds* (a suburban housewife who goes into drug dealing), *Breaking Bad* (a chemistry teacher who starts making drugs), and *Hung* (PE teacher turns into a gigolo), they realized that the idea of a right wing American gangster who has to start over in Scandinavia could work just fine as a TV series and offer a great deal of comedic encounters.

For me it is an odd, yet delightful show that is one part *Fargo*, a dash of *Sopranos* and a full

serving of pure Scandinavian charm. It stars Steven Van Zandt, of *Sopranos* and E Street Band fame, as New York City gangster Frank Tagliano, who enters the federal witness protection program and picks Lillehammer, Norway, as his destination of choice – and is given the new ID of Johnny Henriksen. Oh, and did I mention that he opens up a nightclub and becomes the father of twis Let’s just say that that Frank/Johnny wasn’t quite ready for Lillehammer, nor it for him.

It debuted via Netflix with very little fanfare in February of 2012 and did so under a model never before seen for an original series. Instead of releasing a new episode each week, Netflix made the bold decision to make the entire first season (eight episodes) available all at once – basing that decision on the marathon viewing practices that they were seeing from their subscribers watching past seasons of old shows.

“If you love the first episode, there is no need to wait until next week, or to set a DVR, to catch the next one,” Netflix’s chief content officer, Ted Sarandos, said in a statement when the show debuted. “We have over 23 million streaming members and they’ll have the opportunity to discover *Lilyhammer* not just yesterday, today or this week, but over the course of several years.”

Since Netflix does not release viewing data, we have no way of knowing just how many of its subscribers have in fact discovered *Lilyhammer*, but given that the streaming service recently announced a third season, one can only assume that the show has performed quite well.

Speaking of doing well, the numbers in Norway are of proportions not seen in decades. Through it’s first two seasons (the second was released by Netflix on December 13, 2013), about one-fifth of Norway’s population has been tuning in to each episode, which is available there on traditional broadcast television. That’s 50% of the television viewing audience, which is unheard of in today’s over saturated world of media offerings.

“We were extremely surprised by the success,” said show co-creator and executive producer, Anne Bjørnstad. “We felt it was a high risk idea and a daring move for the Norwegian broadcaster to make a series where the main character speaks a foreign language.”

The bilingual aspect of the show is one that further sets it apart and offers yet another reason to give it a try. Van Zandt’s character understands Norwegian, but only speaks English, while the Norwegian characters understand English and primarily speak Norwegian, with some English here and there. My first reaction was that it was going to make the show too much of an effort to enjoy, but it doesn’t take long to adjust and quickly appreciate the cast’s ability to navigate the obstacle with ease.



Season 2, ep6 – Steinar Sagen and Trond Fausa Aurvåg

“That’s actually a quite common way to communicate with English-speaking foreigners,” said Steiner Sagen, who portrays Roar Lien on the show, one of the many highly likable supporting characters that surround Van Zandt’s. “People who have lived in Norway for a longer period of time tend to understand Norwegian, but choose to answer in English. So the communication between the characters in both languages is not a problem at all, and reflects how it would be in real life.”

Bjørnstad agrees and adds that she and Skodvin thought the bilingual thing would be a major problem for the rest of the world, and especially the US. But they found their prejudice of the

American audience as subtitle-phobic proved to be false.

Of the show's popularity in Norway, Sagen adds this:

“Norwegians really enjoy watching what's typically Norwegian, and laughing at our own stupidity, bureaucracy and our “different” way of life. I think the show also shows that Norwegians live in a protected bubble and our naivety about how the rest of the world works. Tagliano represents the frightening world outside Norway.”

The series was conceived with Van Zandt always in mind as the main character. Because of his long-standing ties to Norway's music scene, the creators thought that Van Zandt might be more likely to find the role appealing, despite having portrayed a similar character on the Sopranos for 10 years.

“Luckily, we were right,” said Bjørnstad. “The collaboration with Steven has been a very lucky one. He is passionate, very involved and funny.”

Involved he is. Van Zandt not only portrays the main character, but he is also a co-writer, executive producer and music director on the show – in addition to being an inspiration for his fellow cast members.



How can you resist these guys? L to R: Trond Fausa Aurvåg, Tommy Karlsen, Steven Van Zandt and Robert Skjærstad

“Steven is the perfect actor for the Frank Tagliano character,” says Trond Fausa Aurvåg, who portrays Johnny Hennrikson's right hand man, Torgeir Lien. “I learn a lot just by listening to him solve a scene that's not working properly. He has a different kind of American approach to it, compared to the Norwegian mindset.”

Aurvåg, in my opinion, is quite simply the biggest treat to be had on *Lilyhammer* – no offense to Mr. Van Zandt. His portrayal of Torgeir is priceless and I must admit that I have on several occasions re-watched his scenes in order to admire his efforts at every level. His character is charming, endearing, silly, vulnerable and one that quite simply makes me laugh my ass off ... over and over.

“Trond is an actor who always puts a lot of extra elements into the scenes,” says Bjørnstad about her actor. “It is a thrill to see him do them. The nervous energy, the constant self-doubt and the vulnerability that makes Torgeir so lovable have a lot to do with Trond. Many of Torgeir's mannerisms are Trond's invention. And I think the fact that he is also a writer and director himself makes him understand what is at the core of our ideas, what he should not mess with in the scenes, and where he should channel his creativity.”

And the creativity worthy of notice certainly extends to the rest of the supporting Norwegian cast. There is Steinar's character, Roar; the creepily hilarious Jan, portrayed by Fridtjov Såheim; Tommy Karlsen Sandum's lovable Arnie; Roy 'Fingern' Aass, played by Robert Skjærstad; Anne Krigsvol's Police Chief turned novelist, Laila Hovland; powerhouse attorney, Julius Backe, played by Sven Nordin; and Sigrid, Van Zandt's love interest in season one, gracefully portrayed by Marian Saastad Ottesen.



Irresistible shot of Roy 'Fingern' Aass, played by Robert Skjærstad

Many of these actors have worked together in the past and you can tell there is a true chemistry there. There is no question that the show is Van Zandt's, but this amazing supporting cast of characters is the special sauce that gives it zest and takes it well beyond the status of being average.

Lilyhammer is an obvious fish-out-of-water tale. Is it one that is going to win awards? Perhaps not, but it is pulled off quite well and offers that quirky cast of characters worthy of any Wes Anderson, Farrelly brothers, or Coen brothers film. Let's put it this way, any show that turns the rape of a domesticated farm animal into a comedic work of genius is worth your time. Give it a shot and let us know what you think.

For a taste of *Lilyhammer*, enjoy this Netflix official trailer for season two:

[embedvideo id="W4B3gAkb1fg" website="youtube"]

NOTE: Next week we offer an in-depth interview with *Lilyhammer* star, Trond Fausa Aurvåg.

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