

The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

Nero Wolfe joins A&E cast of characters

TV series promises to be full of colour, wit and charm

The Reviews

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He weighs a seventh of a ton, almost never leaves his book-bound brownstone and operates in a world before computers, faxes or answer machines. What kind of detective could this be?

One of the best, it turns out. Nero Wolfe was the rotund hero of 74 classic mystery stories written by Rex Stout. He has been the scrupulous subject of three radio shows and two films, played by Edward Arnold and Walter Connolly. Thayer David portrayed him in a '70s TV movie and William Conrad did the honours in a one-season series on NBC in 1981.

Now A&E is resuscitating Wolfe, who starred on the network a year ago in a two-hour movie, *The Golden Spiders*.

The idea of creating a period TV series with a cast of well-known and beloved characters is a bit risky. "We know there is an audience out there for adult, sophisticated, intelligent, quality television," says Allen Sabinson, senior vice-president of programming for A&E.

"We've started with some great British movies and we've expanded into American movies. This is the next logical step.

"There's an audience out there who wants to see shows like Nero Wolfe, which will not be like anything else," Sabinson says. "They're fun, they're smart, they're literate, they're beautifully made. It's a no-brainer."

On April 22, A&E kicks off the series with a two-hour thriller entitled *The Doorbell Rang*, starring Maury Chaykin as the redoubtable Wolfe, Timothy Hutton as his sassy sidekick Archie, and Bill Smitrovich as Inspector Cramer.

The show will be unique, says Michael Jaffe, executive producer and a longtime lover of Stout's work.

"This is actually, as far as I can tell, the first and only series in the history of dramatic programming that has had no non-author written material. We only use the books and where the book requires two hours, we have Episode 1 and 2. And where it's a shorter novella, and we can do it as one hour, we do."

The novels will permit 120 hours of programming, says Jaffe.

"I have actually imagined that when we get to the end of it, it's so strong that we could start over and do them all over again."

Hutton not only serves as an executive producer and plays sidekick Archie Goodwin, but directs several of the episodes, including *The Doorbell Rang*.

"I was familiar with the books by Rex Stout prior to *Golden Spiders* and I'm a big fan of Preston Sturges and the *Thin Man* movies. There's something about these books that the writing is just incredible. The characters are great. It's New York City. It goes from some very serious issues into issues of family relationships, loyalty and everything's in these books."

Though Stout wrote from the mid-'30s into the '70s, the period of the series will be set in the '50s, replete with cars with towering tailfins, men in snappy fedoras and women in peplums and pointy-toed pumps.

When NBC cobbled up their series two decades ago, they did it all wrong, says Jaffe. "The production design was awful. The actors were wrong. They tried to update it and make it

contemporary and make it hip. ... And it's not. It's a period piece. And it's very stylized."

Smitrovich says he enjoys playing a character of that era. "The language is rich. The characters are colourful. And I think it's evident, it jumps out at you. I mean, this is a wonderfully colourful, sexy, smart, intelligent (show). The words are sometimes challenging, not only for the actors but, I think, for the people who will watch them."

Lindsay Hermer-Bell, who designed the sets, drew an entire floor plan of Wolfe's lair. She was helped, she says, by the books. "There are so many specific indications of how he lives, how he proceeds through the day, what his house is like, what his office is like, down to the paintings on the wall," she says.

Costumer Chris Hargadon unearthed much of the costumes in vintage stores. On April 29, *Champagne for One*, the first of a two-parter, airs. Again directed by Hutton with a sly look at high society and Wolfe's intrepid network of operatives.

Nero Wolfe also features a Rogue's Gallery of famous faces, many of which will turn up in a variety of roles -- playing a policeman one week and an exotic financier the next. "The ideas of this repertory company, I think it's to have some of the best actors come down from New York," says Smitrovich. "We've had George Plimpton, we've had Ron Rifkin, we've had Debra Monk, Marian Seldes."

In spite of its innovative nature, Jaffe says they're not going to compromise on the show. "These novels are what they are," he says. "And if it succeeds on that basis, that's great. If it doesn't, I'll regret it. But that's what we're doing. We're doing Rex Stout ..."