

The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

A Joy to Watch Wolfe Work

The Reviews

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He says "phooey" to "flummery" and can't abide small talk or small minds.

He drinks beer, dines lavishly and has the waistline to prove it. He is an obsessive cultivator of orchids. He dresses in three-piece suits, invariably with yellow shirts.

He insults elegantly -- "as an intrigant you are maladroit," he informs one plotter.

He "skedaddled" from a woman decades ago in distant Montenegro and has been on the run from the fair sex ever since.

He is Nero Wolfe, and you can't help but love the guy.

The misogynistic, reclusive New York private eye created by mystery novelist Rex Stout in the 1930s, comes alive in all his grumpy glory in the Nero Wolfe series produced for the A&E cable channel. The first season is now out in a set of three DVDs.

Timothy Hutton, who co-produced the series with Michael Jaffe and directs many of the episodes, stars as Archie Goodwin, Wolfe's milk-sipping, wisecracking assistant, who narrates the stories and undertakes most of the action that doesn't involve sitting behind a desk, eating or staging confrontations in Wolfe's ornate Manhattan brownstone.

Maury Chaykin is an ideal Wolfe, filling a voluminous wardrobe and embracing the character's volatile personality, with its mixtures of wisdom and childishness, cold calculation and reluctant warmheartedness.

Colin Fox is featured as Fritz, Wolfe's long-suffering butler and chef, and Bill Smitrovich as Cramer, the chief of homicide detectives, whose cork is constantly about to pop in frustration over being outsmarted by Wolfe.

They're joined by an ensemble cast of veteran New York character actors George Plimpton, Ron Rifkin, James Tolkan, Kari Matchett, Francie Swift rotating through a variety of supporting roles. Their reappearance from one tale to the next lends continuity but can cause a bit of confusion if you watch too many episodes too close together.

Which you'll be tempted to do, for network television has rarely seen such a combination of eye candy and brain food.

For all the mayhem there's at least one corpse per story, usually more comic personalities and situations propel these mysteries.

The arch bumptiousness of the household of Wolfe, Archie and Fritz and the bumbling intrusions of Cramer and fellow cops are running jokes, amplified by wildly overdrawn sketches of seductresses, crooked lawyers and businessmen, ineptly scheming underlings and dashing but dubious foreigners.

The bulk of Stout's Wolfe mysteries were produced from the late '30s through the mid-'50s. This TV series, possibly for reasons of economy, settles into a wintry early and mid-'50s time frame that fits the plots of most stories.

(One glaring exception is *Over My Dead Body*, in which an exiled Serbo-Croatian prince negotiates Bosnian forestry concessions an impossible scenario in Yugoslavia under Tito's socialist regime.)

The series' writers craft convincing but not too obvious New York-ese period patois. Its designers go the extra mile in wardrobes, sets, vehicles and locations. The soundtracks are inspired collages of swing and light classical.

On all counts, Nero Wolfe is a class act.