



'Bridge' over troubled water

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As the demand increases for edgy and innovative suspense dramas, television producers have turned to series created for overseas markets for their inspiration. Showtime's "Homeland" is based on an Israeli series "Hatufim," which translates to "Prisoners of War," and AMC's "The Killing" was inspired by the Danish crime series "Forbrydelsen." This summer, FX gives us "The Bridge," a tantalizing murder mystery based on a hit Danish crime series, "Bron" set between the borders of Denmark and Sweden.

The series stars Diane Kruger and Demian Bichir, film actors so intrigued by the material that they didn't mind the six-month production commitment. They play two detectives on either side of the contentious and dangerous US-Mexican Border, each with a stake in the crime.

The German-born Kruger, familiar to audiences from the 2009 Quentin Tarantino film "Inglourious Basterds," plays Sonya Cross of the El Paso PD. Bichir, a Best Actor nominee for the 2011 film "A Better Life," plays Marco Ruiz of the Chihuahua State Police. Their first encounter takes place on the Bridge of the Americas, which connects Juarez with El Paso. The corpse of a judge sympathetic to immigration reform has been found in the middle of the bridge. In the chaos, an ambulance with a man having a heart attack is trying to get over the bridge. Cross, blond and blunt, flat-out says, "No." Ruiz, dark and sympathetic, lets them through.

The stories of all these characters are explored over the course of the series, the first basic cable drama with an immigration theme. The killer here has a political agenda, apparent when the EMS workers attempt to remove the judge's body from the bridge: The corpse breaks in two. The upper half is the judge. The lower half belongs to a Mexican woman.

“It’s sort of like ‘No Country For Old Men’ meets ‘Girl With the Dragon Tattoo,’” says executive producer Elwood Reid.

The dramatic possibilities for exploring the cultural and political tensions between America and Mexico while the detectives are trying to catch a killer are so rich that it’s hard to believe that “The Bridge” was first set between the US-Canadian border.

Reid thought Niagara Falls didn’t offer much in the way of long-term storylines. “I couldn’t get past Canada,” he says. “What do you do in Seasons 3 and 4? A scandal with the Canadian Mounties? I thought maybe we should do the complete opposite. So you’re not looking at tracing another show.”

Moving the show to the Southwest offers, he says, “immigration issues, drug wars, free trade issues. A lot of fuel for stories.”

Bringing new faces to the already expanding universe of cable television was an important part of Elwood’s plan, but he says getting film actors to sign on for a cable series “is not something agents jump up and down about.” For Cross, who, it is revealed, has Asperger’s syndrome, he immediately thought of Kruger.

“She looks very American, even though she’s a German actress. She has a distant quality that would help in her depiction of Asperger’s,” he says. “It’s easy to cast a disheveled-looking weirdo, but she looks put together.”

As for the Juarez detective, Ruiz, Reid wanted a Mexican actor and says, “There are not as many in Hollywood as you think.” Even though Bichir had been nominated for an Oscar, Reid says, “I feel I found an undiscovered gem.”

When the show went on location in Tijuana, however, Bichir, 49, was very much a celebrity. “The whole border shut down when he walked through,” Reid says.

Born into a famous Mexican theatrical family, Bichir has been a draw on his side of the border for years and some viewers may remember him from his role as a drug lord opposite Mary Louise Parker on “Weeds.” He is so enthusiastic about playing Ruiz that he says he’s ready to stay on “The Bridge” for “214 seasons.”

Reid and his fellow writers Meredith Stiehm (“Homeland”) gave Ruiz a medical quirk to match Cross’s Asperger’s. The detective, who already has several children, has just undergone a vasectomy.

“When I read the pilot script, that was one of the things I loved,” he says. “They were

seeing Marco's private life in such detail. When you read a script, you usually want to find that a character's heroic and macho and doing a lot of stunts. Well, Marco can do all that with a vasectomy."

Bichir, 49, splits his time between Mexico City and LA and lives with his girlfriend, actress Stephanie Sherk. Kruger also lives in LA, but keeps an apartment in Paris where she stays when making French-language movies. The actress, who is also fluent in English and German, signed on to the show after watching eight episodes of the original.

In the original "Bron" series, the female detective also has Asberger's. Kruger, 36, has the more demanding role of the two leads and consults with Alex Plank, a man who has Asberger's, for fine-tuning her role.

"It was a really daunting undertaking for me," says Kruger, who lives with former "Fringe" star Joshua Jackson. "I really had to try to live that life. I spent hours and days trying to get into Alex's head, to see where his challenges are, whether it's keeping eye contact. A simple question like 'How are you?' is a challenge. His insight is invaluable."

Kruger also went to Juarez when the production was shooting there and in El Paso to get the feel of the place.

"We did walk the bridge to see the border towns. I talked with people in El Paso who used to back and forth but haven't been to Juarez in 10 years. I went to Juarez and I have to say it was pretty nice. "

Kruger has been living on-and-off in the United States for the past years and has a green card. But she shies away from sharing her own views on immigration reform.

"I don't there's space for to express those views. We're making television, not trying to use personal, political views to sell the show. We're really trying top make a show that's not rooting for either side."

THE BRIDGE

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