

It's Not About the Copious Fake Sex. Really.



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By JOE RHODES

CULVER CITY, Calif. -- The scene, being filmed on a stuffy and intermittently noisy soundstage, involved lots of talking and lots of groping, as many of them do on the new soon-to-be-controversial Showtime series called "Californication."

David Duchovny, as creatively-blocked novelist Hank Moody, the occasionally unpleasant anti-hero star of the show, was fully committed to the moment, in spite of a real-life cold and a lozenge-coated throat. He and actress Amy Price-Francis, playing one of the many wrong-for-him sexual diversions that populate the storylines, were going at it in a

full-on lip-locking kitchen-sink clinch.

"I love women," Mr. Duchovny's character, congenitally flippant, said after being accused of just using female partners to distract himself from his ongoing writer's block. "I have all their albums."

"Cut," said director Bart Freundlich, one of Mr. Duchovny's closest friends, instructing the couple to disengage and start over. "There was a shadow on her head."

This is how it goes in the premium-cable love scene business, supposedly sexy encounters drained of their ardor by the tedious mechanics of lighting and sound and hovering crew members waiting to rearrange props and hairdos the second the cameras stop. It's not much fun to watch, at least not while it's being filmed.

Mr. Duchovny's been doing a lot of this lately, choreographed crotch wrestling with an assortment of actresses in varying states of undress, because "Californication," as the title suggests, is chock full of sex, so much so that he already dreads the awful headlines that will surely precede the series' August 13 premiere.

"It reminded me of movies that I love from the 70's like 'Shampoo' or 'Blume In Love' where they are adult sex comedies," he said, in his trailer between scenes, decongestants and tissues at the ready. "I hate to say that because I'm already going to combat that kind of very easy tag people will have for the

show. I'm sure there's gonna be people calling it "Sex Files" and "Triple X Files" and all that crap

"But when I say adult, I mean more like a grown-up view of life, family and the kind of stuff that I haven't seen, not in movies and definitely not on network television for a long, long time."

There are plenty of naked bodies (five, including Mr. Duchovny's, in the pilot episode alone) and dirty words in "Californication" but almost all of them lead to punchlines (one of them quite literally, when Hank Moody gets socked in the face by a one-night bedmate at a most unexpected moment). Sex may be the early selling point, but Mr. Duchovny says it's not what the show is about.

"In this world of trying to get a foothold with the audience in 10 seconds, I think it's a calling card, a way to establish how this show is different" he said of the early emphasis on graphic language and undulating torsos. "But to me, it was never necessary, it was never part of what I felt was funny."

Instead, Mr. Duchovny sees "Californication" as a portrait, sad and funny, of a man wrestling with the realization that he screwed up the best relationship he's ever had – with his ex-fiancée (played by Natasha McElhone) and their 12-year old daughter (Madeleine Martin) – and, in the process, sabotaged his ability to write. Hank Moody's one and only successful novel, "God Hates Us All" has been pappified into a sappy and successful

movie renamed "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" and starring "Tom and Katie," no last names necessary. He hates the movie, hates himself and seems well on the way to having everyone he cares about hate him, too. But, no, really, it's a comedy.

"I had this discussion with my wife," said Mr. Duchovny, who has been married to the actress Tea Leoni for 10 years, "and she said, 'I don't know. I don't like this guy.' And I said, 'I have a feeling that I know how to play this. I can make this guy somebody that you're gonna pull for.'"

"Because I think you can like anybody if you understand why they're doing what they're doing, even if what they're doing is reprehensible. If I get it, if I get his pain and where he's coming from, then I'll go, okay. And that's what was interesting to me about Hank. Besides being a guy who appears not to care so much about women, the heart of the show is that he really wants to get his family back. And this guy, who appears to be amoral, will end up being the most moral person in the particular universe. To me, that was intriguing."

"I have sympathy for Hank in the sense of a guy knowing exactly what he should be doing and being unable to do it," Mr. Duchovny said. "From a human standpoint of just doing the wrong thing, just being unable not to do the right thing."

"Californication" began as an independent screenplay, written by for Dawson's Creek writer Tom Kapinos, partly to purge himself of

the demons left over from writing for four years on that prime-time teen soap opera, a period Mr. Kapinos calls, “both miserable and lucrative.”

“I’d spent four years on a show where the characters bore no resemblance to anybody I knew,” Mr. Kapinos said. “No one seemed real. And I came off of that and just wanted to create a guy that felt more like a romantic 70’s anti-hero. To me, it’s a cautionary tales, that there people out there who get it right the first time but somewhere along the way, they screw it up.”

The script, after several revisions and a re-tooling to make it a pilot for a one-hour dramatic series, found its way to Showtime where Robert Greenblatt, the network’s president for entertainment, suggested it would work better as a half-hour comedy.

“Flawed main characters is one of our hallmarks and this seem like another great flawed character that hopefully isn’t so flawed as to be hopeless,” said Mr. Greenblatt, who will be pairing “Californication” with Showtime’s other high-profile dark comedy “Weeds”, starring Mary-Louise Parker as a pot-dealing suburban mom, in an attempt to establish the network as an identifiable comedy brand.

“It’s not like “Weeds” exactly,” he said, “but its similar in that its sophisticated and adult and about a very dysfunctional, fractured family. I think they work together.”

It has been five years since Mr. Duchovny’s last television series,

“The X Files” with a large and loyal sci-fi based audience. ended its nine-season run. That series, in which he played Fox Mulder, a FBI agent investigating paranormal activities, made him a household name, cemented Fox as a viable broadcast network and led to a big-budget “X-Files” feature film in 1993, the sequel to which is in preproduction, with series creator Chris Carter as co-writer and director and Mr. Duchovny and Gillian Anderson set to reprise their roles as agents Mulder and Scully..

But in the years between, Mr. Duchovny, who turns 47 in early August, has sometimes appeared to be struggling with his career, not quite sure how to follow up the X Files enormous success. He never seemed comfortable with the adulation that accompanied the show or aspired to the kind of safe leading-man roles that were inevitably offered to him.

Instead, he appeared in independent films and quirky comedies, and in 2004 wrote and directed a small feature called “The House of D” which was neither a critical or commercial success. “Californication,” he says, is a way to return to television without tarnishing his X Files legacy and, as opposed to the grind of a broadcast series, allows him to make 12 episodes a season, leaving plenty of time for other projects.

“I wasn’t looking to do another television show, necessarily. This just happened to come my way,” he said. “I came out of the X Files with a certain pride where I felt,

rightly or wrongly, like we'd done a terrific show for a large number of years, maybe one of the handful of best hour shows that's ever been on tv. Aside from maybe the Sopranos, I wouldn't have wanted to trade it on for an other television show. And the thought of doing another television show that would be in the same realm – not necessarily science fiction, but a drama, or a crime show – it just seemed empty to me. It just felt like if I was going to do television it would have to be completely different from what I'd done before. “

So far, he's happy with the results, at least on most days. He has scripts that he's written, other projects he'd like to direct. “I just think at some point, temperamentally, I've become more suited to being a director than being an actor,” he said. “At some point, waking up at 6 in the morning and sitting n a makeup chair for a half hour getting your hair done doesn't suit my temperament. Actors are wonderful people and I like being one of them. But sometimes I'll sit there and go, ‘What the F--- am I doing here?’”

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