

The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

Nero Wolfe returns to A&E

Hutton stars in, produces and occasionally directs film

The Reviews

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NEW YORK -- "You are headstrong," mutters Nero Wolfe, "and I am magisterial. Our tolerance of one another is a recurring miracle."

Miraculous indeed is the bond between this magisterial super-sleuth and Archie Goodwin, his dapper, street-wise legman. Together, in a clash of decorum and brass, they solve murders like nobody else.

Following last season's successful Nero Wolfe TV film, A&E has launched a series reuniting Maury Chaykin in the title role with Timothy Hutton as Archie. Fast-paced and stylish, there's no mystery why it's so much fun to watch.

Of course, Nero Wolfe first saw life as the hero of some 70 mysteries published by novelist Rex Stout between 1934 and 1985, a decade after Stout's death at the age of 89.

Hutton discovered the books when a friend gave him a tip: "You oughta read one of these, you'll get a kick out of 'em. It's sort of a cross between Damon Runyon and Noel Coward."

The actor laughed appreciatively. "He was right."

In the series (which airs at 7 p.m. Sundays), Archie remains in the employ of Wolfe, a mountainous figure with a volcanic temper who occupies a West 35th Street brownstone he refuses to leave. There, this fabulous recluse puzzles through each crime in his head, while Archie -- who's as good with fact-finding as he is with his mitts -- works the outside world of circa-1950s Manhattan.

Hutton has expanded his own role beyond that of playing Archie to also serving as an executive producer, occasional director and a guiding force to keep the series light on its feet. The tone of last year's film, based on the Wolfe mystery *The Golden Spiders*, was too sinister, Hutton said over meatloaf and mashed potatoes at a Broadway eatery. "Everything seemed to be dressed in shades of brown. Everything was dusty and grimy, with that detective-genre, what's-around-the-corner kind of music. "I was interested in doing the series if I could play a part in how it looked, and be completely responsible for every piece of music, and be responsible for the casting."

Swell, they said, and filming began in Toronto last August.

The series' look is bright and plushly appointed. The music swings like a night at the Stork Club.

The cast? Along with supporting regulars Bill Smitrovich, Colin Fox, Conrad Dunn and Saul Rubinek, Hutton has gathered a repertory company including Debra Monk, Ron Rifkin, Marian Seldes and George Plimpton, who reappear from tale to tale in different roles.

This week signals the concluding half of *Champagne for One*, a case that, in typical "Wolfe" fashion, takes more twists and turns than a New York cabbie -- at about the same clip.

Listen: Archie has been asked to fill in for an acquaintance, Dinky Byne, at a party for unwed mothers hosted by Dinky's hoity-toity aunt, Mrs. Robilotti. But one of the mothers at the party was poisoned by a glass of champagne. The unstable Faith carried cyanide around, so everyone assumes she is a suicide. Except Archie.

Fine. But each Nero Wolfe case takes a back seat to the "parade of oddball characters and the rhythm of the dialogue," as Hutton put it.

"We tell stories about when bad things happen, but we strip all the sentimentality out of it, with people moving through it like they're late to catch a train. That's kinda our style."

He brought out a cigarette, one of the day's allowable three. He will be off smokes by the weekend, he vowed. His incentive to quit: a baby due in August.

"We found out yesterday it's a boy," said Hutton, "we" being he and wife Aurore Giscard d'Estaing, a French children's book author he married last year. He also has a 14-year-old son with actress Debra Winger, his former wife.

At 40, Hutton is a still-boyish-looking veteran of movies and theater who remains best-known for his debut performance in the

1980 drama *Ordinary People*, which scored him an Oscar. He has stayed busy since, but in recent years has had a lower profile.

"Maybe along the way I should have thought more commercially," he conceded. "But to sit back and say, 'The script didn't make any sense to me, I didn't find it funny or smart, but it's probably going to be very successful and I should consider it' -- I can't do that. "You can't predict how a movie is going to do commercially," he said. "But you can predict, a little bit more accurately, what the experience of making the movie might be and what you might learn, regardless of how many people see it."

He took a puff and looked as self-assured as Archie, even absent the fedora. "I wouldn't want to change a thing."

Take note: Amarillo native Francie Swift appeared in the first episode and will appear in two of those remaining.