

TV Wednesday

'La Femme' taught '24' how to break the rules

By MICHAEL GILTZ

ON the hit drama "24," Kiefer Sutherland is put through the wringer combating terrorism, interoffice politics and split-screen technology. But anyone who thinks this distinctive, movie-like series came out of nowhere should check out its creators' first hit: the cable action-drama "La Femme Nikita."

Ask Joel Surnow — who created "24" with Robert Cochrane — about the show's inspiration, and he immediately says: "La Femme Nikita." That was our influence, honestly.

"We developed a voice on 'Nikita' which we sus-

tained in '24,' which is very terse and [has] a lot of acting done with looks and eyes. Not a lot of dialogue, and very naturalistic. Nothing lyrical. Nothing that feels written."

"24" is based on the 1990 French action flick "La Femme Nikita." The movie starred Peta Wilson as a homeless woman (albeit an extremely sexy homeless woman), who is framed for murdering a cop and is forced to choose between likely execution and working for a super-secret government organization. The organization, called Section One, combats terrorists and other bad guys by any means necessary.



Kiefer Sutherland

If you're wondering where "24" got the courage to show its hero kill in cold blood — and not simply have a nuclear bomb threaten Los Angeles but

let the darn thing actually go off — the answer is "La Femme Nikita" (which released its first season on DVD yesterday).

"We learned that you have to be outrageous to get an audience in today's world of 500 channels," says Surnow.

"You have to do something that really pokes its nose out without being ridiculous or stupid or exploitative. You have to do stuff that catches the audience off guard."

On "24," they've succeeded in spades: its third season begins shooting next week.

The next day, July 17, the Emmy nominations are announced, and Surnow will see if "24" equaled or surpassed the nine nods it got last year, including Best Drama.

By contrast, "Nikita" was part of the first wave of TV shows featuring female action heroes — along with "Xena" and "Buffy" — but it was never able to break out of the basic cable ghetto, as "The Shield" did.

However, it was a hit overseas, especially in Russia. "Peta Wilson went to have dinner with Vladimir Putin and his wife, who was obsessed with the show," says Surnow.

Like "Nikita," "24"



Peta Wilson's "La Femme Nikita" inspired makers of "24."

breaks all the rules, being a serialized drama in the era of interchangeable "Law & Order"s, not airing reruns during the summer and putting out its first season on DVD long before syndication was even a possibility.

No surprise, the first show Surnow was a huge fan of was "Batman," the goofy action comedy that loved to end episodes — just like "24" — with heart-stopping cliffhangers of Batman and Robin

in mortal danger.

"Nikita" had the same over-the-top sense of excitement.

"There's just a lot of 'Nikita' fans out there who are still very connected to the show," says Surnow. "But it's a different experience on a network, when you go from two million people watching to 13 million people watching. It affects your life a little more. Just, personally, you meet more people who've seen your show."