

● REALLY BIG SHOW

'Dragnet'

Ed O'Neill channels Sgt. Friday

By Michael Giltz

IT wasn't looking good for actor Ed O'Neill.

Best known as the loutish Al Bundy from the long-running sitcom "Married... With Children," the 56-year-old O'Neill had been struggling to escape the shadow of that character.

He thought he'd found the right project with "Big Apple," a tough cop show from David Milch ("NYPD Blue" and "Brooklyn South") that aired — briefly — in 2001.

"That was one I had real high hopes for," admits O'Neill. "I think it was one of the best things I ever did."

Despite solid reviews, it was quickly dropped. But Milch, one of TV's sought-after talents, believed in O'Neill and crafted another project just for him: the Western "Deadwood" for HBO.

"It's a fantastic project," says O'Neill. "In fact, David wrote the lead role for me. But it was one of the guys at HBO — Chris Albrecht, I think — who didn't want me in it. That was the end of that."

Milch had to call O'Neill to tell him the show was picked up — without him.

"It was a tremendous low point. But a half hour later Dick Wolf called with 'Dragnet.'

"I actually wasn't that excited when I first heard about it. But I knew Dick Wolf was someone I shouldn't take lightly. And then they sent the scripts over and they were good. They had a hell of a team."

Now O'Neill — who got his first break trying to follow in the footsteps of Gene Hackman on the TV show "Popeye Doyle" — is now carrying the badge of Jack Webb's Sgt. Joe Friday.

An out-of-the-box hit on Sunday nights at 10 on ABC, "Dragnet" faced down NBC's highly touted "Kingpin" and looks ready to settle in for a long run.

He's paired with Ethan Embry of "Sweet Home Alabama" as Friday's partner, Frank Smith. Embry's an excitable boy at the best of times, but they've worked out a system.

"Yes, he's very hyper," laughs O'Neill. "We have kind of a shorthand. The code word is bedbug. If he starts going off, I say, 'bedbug, bedbug.'"

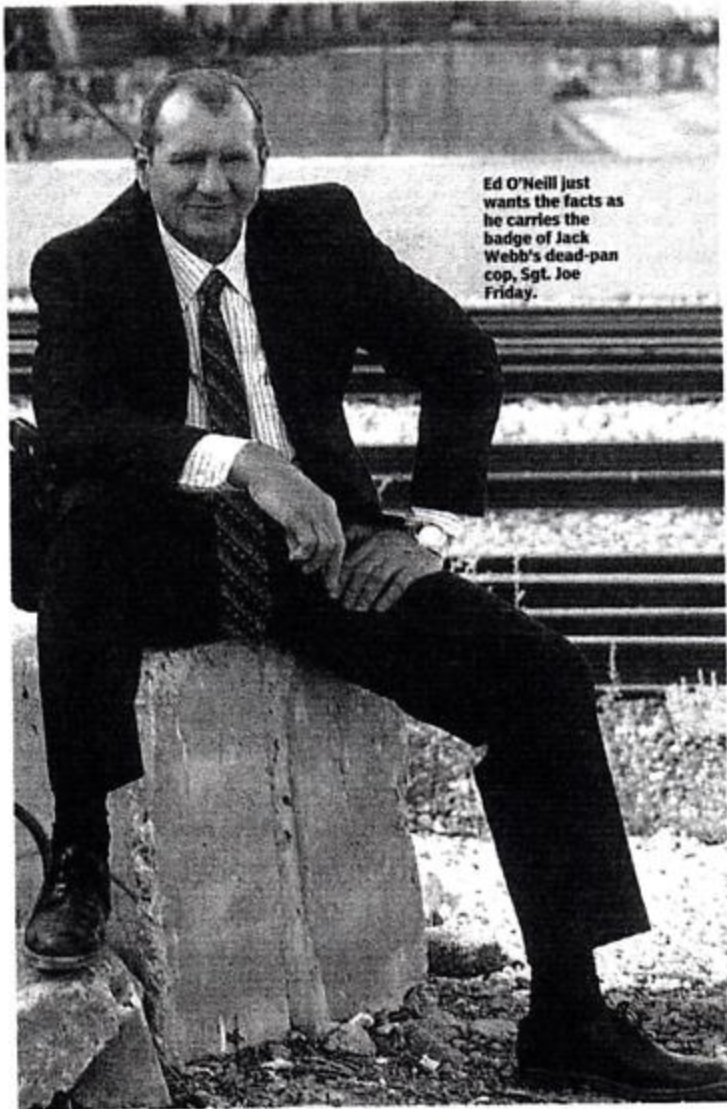
The success of "Dragnet" makes the fact that FOX is celebrating "Married..." in a special on Sunday, Feb. 16, a lot more fun for O'Neill and Katey Sagal (who has her own hit with ABC's "8 Simple Rules") than it might have been even six months ago.

"It makes it a lot nicer; it really does," admits O'Neill.

That leering comedy helped put FOX on the map. But since "Married..." took three years to build into a hit and never had the cachet of "The Simpsons," "Married..." was always the red-headed stepchild of the network.

As Sagal remembers it, the show was canceled without anyone from the network even bothering to call them.

"It was pretty wild," says Sagal. "We didn't know that was the last episode. We



Ed O'Neill just wants the facts as he carries the badge of Jack Webb's dead-pan cop, Sgt. Joe Friday.

went into our hiatus. Then, in a couple of weeks, somebody called me because they'd heard on the radio we'd been canceled. Nobody told us. Crissy [Christina Applegate] heard it when she was on an exercise bike. Ed was in some other city walking out of a mall. That was actually kind of upsetting at the time. There was no big, "Thanks for starting the network." That was pretty upsetting. It's all business. You've got to not take it personal. But it's hard."

O'Neill felt the same at the time. "But looking back I prefer that because it's a funnier story than if you got a call from a network executive."

The actor can be magnanimous now with "Dragnet" falling into his lap.

"For me, it's some sort of a vindication that I can do something besides Al Bundy," says O'Neill.

"I'm capable of these things."

"Maybe I should send Chris Albrecht my reviews," he laughs.

DRAGNET
Sunday, 10 p.m., ABC

MARRIED... WITH CHILDREN
SPECIAL
Sunday, 9 p.m., FOX