

Kojak has familiar Ving

Lollipop cop is back

By MICHAEL GILTZ

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THIS is NOT your father's "Kojak."

As played by the commanding Ving Rhames in the new USA series (Friday night at 9), Kojak is a cop who plays by his own rules.

Kojak twists the laws so a criminal behind bars can be reunited with his kids.

Kojak turns a blind eye to vigilante justice, but feels troubled by his decision.

He has a chaste romantic relationship, isn't ashamed to cry on the shoulder of his best friend (played by Chazz Palminteri) and — in what may well be a TV first — discretely makes the sign of the cross when leaving a gruesome crime scene.

Is it any surprise to find out that Rhames — who led a hard-scrabble childhood with an absent father — felt destined to put his stamp on this role?

Unfailingly polite, Rhames doesn't suffer fools gladly.

Although "Kojak" hasn't de-

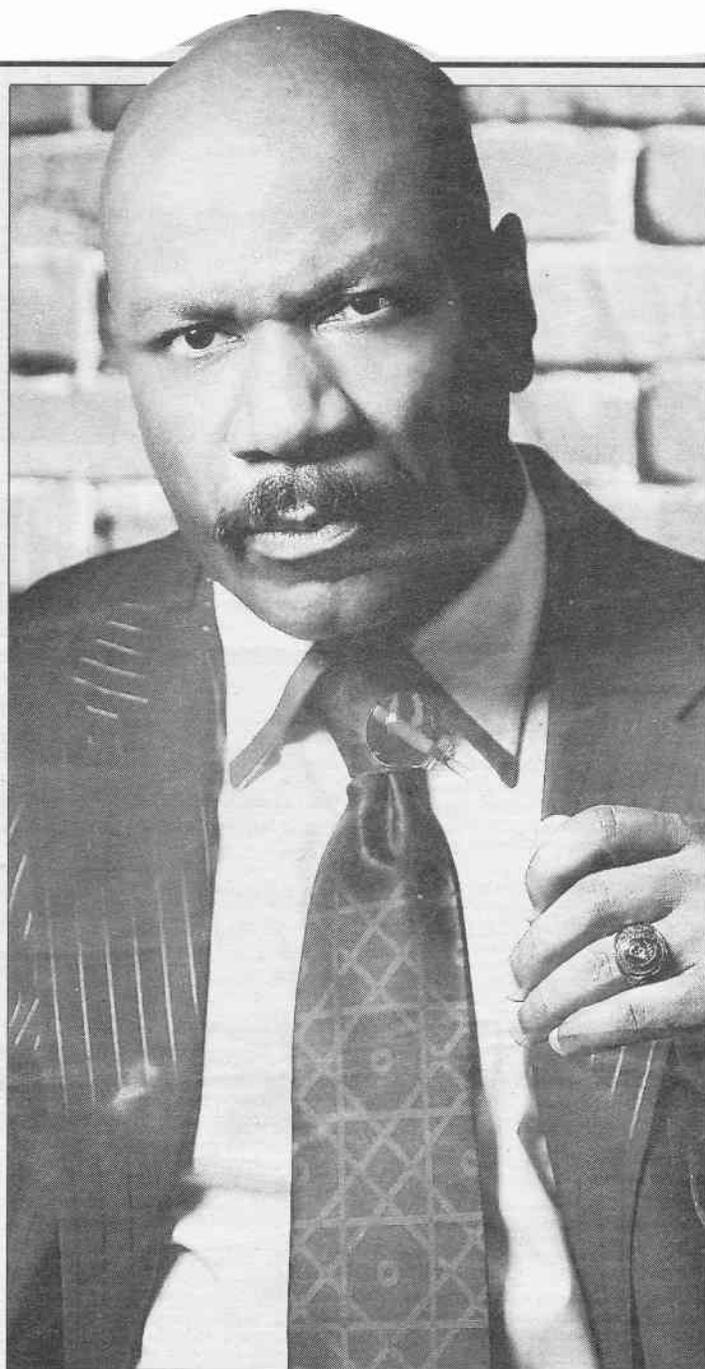
buted yet, he already seems bored by the inevitable questions about the lollipop (still there), the hat (sometimes) and the catch phrase (tweaked for a new millennium). That same seriousness extends to his faith.

"I think quite a bit of organized religion has become big business," says Rhames. "Jesus Christ never sold the word of God. He never gave a sermon and then said, 'For \$8.99, you can buy the CD.'"

"I try to base my life on the principles of Christ. I try to raise my family on the principles of Christ. I don't know if that makes me religious.

"I'm a God-fearing man and I know the only reason why I am here going from poverty to where I am now is God has His hand on my life. I tell people, I didn't choose acting; God chose me to act."

So expect Kojak to be principled but complicated, a good man making hard decisions in a world where prostitutes can be murdered, and no one cares. Expect a man who can be scary



Ving Rhames is making the tough New York detective, Kojak, his own.

questioning a criminal but a big softie around kids — just like Rhames.

"All I want and all I even ask of people in Hollywood is look, just be honest with me. Please don't lie to me. Whatever the situation is, be honest with me. I think a lot of that part of my

personality will come out in this Kojak," he says.

"He is a man who cares about the death of hookers, the death of anyone. But he's also a guy who does something that one has to question: Does the ends justify the means? He's very imperfect."