

● REALLY BIG SHOW

Line of Fire

Drama says: Let it bleed



David Paymer and Leslie Hope stand their ground on opposite sides of a turf war in ABC's "Line of Fire."

By MICHAEL GILTZ

IT'S not even Christmas and the mid-season replacements are already upon us. ABC is shelving its Tuesday-night staple, "NYPD Blue," for three months to gamble on Rod Lurie's "Line of Fire." ABC is hoping the hard-boiled crime drama can steal some of the thunder generated by such cable series as FX's "Nip/Tuck" and "The Shield." Creator Lurie plans to deliver.

"This would be my headline to you," says Lurie, a journalist turned filmmaker ("The Contender"). "We made the decision not to be coy. When people have sex, they thrust. When people get hit, they bleed. We want to be real."

The result? Scenes of sex and violence that graphically punctuate a subtle, intriguing drama about two antagonists: agents from the FBI field office in Richmond, Virginia and the Irish crime syndicate they're trying to bust.

David Paymer, usually known for playing nebbishy lawyers, gets a career makeover as Jonah Malloy, the head of the Irish crime family, a Meyer Lanskyesque syndicate boss who explodes into violence during the first episode.

"Malloy will take the crowbar and whack it over someone's head," says Pay-

mer, 49. "I really haven't done that in film or television. Rod puts me in so many different situations."

Lurie jokes about how almost everything Malloy does is a first for the actor.

"Every time David gets a script he says, 'Do I really have to kidnap a kid? Do I really have to sleep with this hooker?'" says Lurie, 41. "I tell him, 'David, you're a bad guy. Yes.' He had his first sex scene. That one, he did not complain about. I gave him a good-looking wife."

"Line of Fire" is giving another actor a chance to butch up her image. Leslie Hope, whom viewers will remember as Kiefer Sutherland's kidnapped wife on "24," will not be playing a victim this time around.

"I play Lisa Cohen, the special agent in charge of the Richmond office of the FBI," says Hope, 38. "I am excellent at my job and not particularly warm. And my personal life is completely dysfunctional."

To say the least. According to Lurie, "Lisa's a drunk and she's promiscuous. I wanted to create a female [Andy] Sipowicz without the beer gut."

Both Paymer and Hope appreciate that Lurie has colored his story in shades of gray. There's no mistaking that the mobsters here are evil, but that doesn't stop Lurie from getting you to identify with their travails à la "The Sopranos." Or

from realizing that not all law enforcement people are saints à la Elliot Ness of "The Untouchables."

To that end, Paymer points to the debut episode in which two men — one a mobster, the other an FBI agent — die.

"Each side loses a man" says Paymer. "I give a eulogy about Charlie and it's really quite emotional. Jonah is almost in tears. On the FBI side, they lose a man and the FBI director is very cold. I think that turns our expectations of the FBI and the mob on their heads a little bit."

Lurie, whose second film, "The Contender," scored several Oscar nominations, had no trouble attracting film talents like Paymer to "Line of Fire." He himself had no hesitation accepting ABC's lucrative offer.

"Touchstone convinced me I could be shooting a 13-hour movie," says Lurie.

That promise has been honored by ABC and its prime-time programmer Susan Lyne, whom Lurie worked with at Premiere magazine when he was a journalist.

"To compete with cable, you have to put your balls to the wall and roar," says Lurie. "ABC wants to be as forward-moving as it was when 'NYPD Blue' began. We want to redefine the landscape."

Line of Fire
Tuesday, 10 p.m., ABC