

● REALLY BIG SHOW

The Shield

Mackey gets a lady boss



Hard-boiled cops Wagenbach (Jay Karnes) and Wymms (C.C.H. Pounder) are cupcakes compared to Mackey (Michael Chiklis, inset).

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THE third season of "The Shield" gets off to a grisly start this Tuesday night. Members of the Armenian mob in Los Angeles are seen chopping off the feet of their enemies as they viciously track down the people who robbed them of a massive pile of cash. Rogue cop Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis) and his pals pulled off that neat heist during last season's finale.

Now Mackey and his cohorts have to keep their noses relatively clean until the heat dies down, but the dirty cop is squarely in the sightlines of his new boss — the newly promoted Detective Claudette Wymms (C.C.H. Pounder).

"Vic is trying to lay low and tame some of his more brutal cop tactics to keep off the police radar," says series creator Shawn Ryan.

Season two of "The Shield" saw Vic and Claudette clash repeatedly for the simple reason that the fierce and fiercely articulate Pounder was one of the few actors who could go head-to-head with Chiklis and not get wiped off the screen.

In "The Shield"'s new cycle of 13 episodes, viewers will see how Claudette handles power and ambition. Her promotion comes as a bit of a consolation prize as she really coveted the chief of police position. Instead, says Ryan, Claudette gets "all of the headaches, but not all of the glory."

Her first big challenge is to deal with the volatile Mackey. Rather than bring him down, Claudette decides to rein him in.

"Let's have some serious derailment,"

says Pounder, 51, who is best known for her roles in the 1987 cult film "Baghdad Café" and on "ER." As Dr. Angela Hicks, Pounder excelled at keeping Dr. Romano — that show's former resident bulldog — on a leash.

"Because I put forward a whip-smart woman, so gee, what's taking so long [to nail Vic]? But then I know it takes a long time to take someone down in one of those situations," Pounder says. "Vic's got his fingers in a lot of pies. He's covered a lot of bases and people owe him favors."

For Ryan, casting Pounder in a role that was originally written for a man was one of the luckiest days of his life.

"I just feel like an idiot for not thinking of it sooner," says Ryan. "When I wrote the pilot, there were some good things in it and there were some mistakes. And one of them was [that] I just went with the stereotype of the older male cop. I never gave it any serious thought as to why is this character a man."

"When C.C. came in and read, not only did we realize it could be a woman, we realized it had to be a woman and it *had* to be her. [The detective] became a much more interesting character with her playing it than it was on paper."

After spending four frustrating years on "ER" — a show for which Pounder received an Emmy nomination, only to watch her character languish — "The Shield" is sweet redemption.

"It's a fantastic opportunity," says the actress, whose initials stand for Carol Christine Hilaria. "She's completely uncharted waters. I don't ever want to say, 'Oh no, Claudette wouldn't do that.' I'd much rather say, 'What else can she do?'"

That's been the real fun of it. When I said, 'Why can't she have a husband and children?' then husbands and children showed up! I'm finally at a place where perhaps they do respect me as an actor and will take that leap."

Pounder is also thrilled that Claudette, whose ex-husband died in the season finale, is taking a lover, a white construction worker brought in on a sweep who keeps finding excuses to come back to the station until Claudette asks him out.

"It's about time," says Pounder, 51. "I think every 50-year-old watching TV is going to be saying, 'Yes!'"

Though she's enjoying the stability of a central role on an acclaimed drama, Pounder still finds time to pursue rewarding private interests. She and her husband Boubacar Kone are about to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the museum they founded together in Senegal (Pounder was born in Guyana).

As for series creator Ryan, he just reupped for two more years on "The Shield." He also has a development deal with FX, but promises not to even begin working on other projects until he's finished the show's next two seasons.

"This will be a very interesting year to see how the audience reacts," says Ryan. "Do they keep coming back or have they forgotten about us? I do think this is the kind of show you wouldn't want to push to seasons twelve and thirteen. With six or seven years of 13 to 15 episodes a season, we could end things pretty intact without embarrassing ourselves."

The Shield
Tuesday, 10 p.m., FX