

COVER STORY; Drugs, Bodies, Weapons And Terrorists

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Byline: By HUGH HART

Body

THERE's no stopping "Traffic." In 1989 the British "Traffik," a Channel Four production, traced heroin trade along ancient smuggling routes from the poppy fields of Pakistan to the end-user: teenage **drug** addicts in England. Then in 2000, Steven Soderbergh's equally downbeat epic, with an innovative multistrand **story** line, shifted locales to Mexico and the United States and earned four Oscars, including one for best director, and a nomination for best picture. This week, USA presents its own six-hour "Traffic" mini-series, with a new, terrifyingly human twist.

"What's happened is that there's now this huge international trade in smuggling people by using the heroin smuggling routes," said Ron Hutchinson, who wrote the screenplay for the mini-series. The **drug** routes, he said, have formed part of the infrastructure for the **terrorist** networks; their wheels are greased by **drugs**, which have become "the international underground currency."

"It's disposable; it's portable; it doesn't give you the headaches that a bundle of cash does because you don't have all the problems of getting it into the banking system and hiding it," Mr. Hutchinson said. "So there's this huge circle now and it all comes back to **drugs**."

Expanding the "Traffic" metaphor to encompass immigration and terrorism was not necessarily what USA executives had in mind when they approached Mr. Hutchinson two years ago about revisiting the subject. "What I basically said to them was that I didn't think audiences would want a retread of the same tale," recalled Mr. Hutchinson, who is also the executive producer of the mini-series. "There's this whole underground economy that's come along in the last 10 years or so since the original 'Traffik' and it's not just about **drugs** anymore."

To dramatize the nexus among **drugs**, **bodies**, **weapons** and **terrorists**, Mr. Hutchinson devised three hopscotching **story** lines. A rogue agent (Elias Koteas) cuts off contact with his handlers from the **Drug** Enforcement Administration to broker a suspicious heroin deal with an Afghan **drug** dealer (Ritchie Coster) while, in Seattle, his wife (Mary McCormack) tries to deal with their rebellious teenage son (Justin Chatwin). Elsewhere in Seattle, a taxi-driving illegal immigrant from Chechnya (Cliff Curtis) worries about the fate of his wife and child, who are supposed to be hidden in the hold of a cargo ship. Simultaneously, a Seattle businessman (Balthazar Getty) who's taken over his father's garment factory gets entangled with a shady Chinese-American "businessman" (Nelson Lee) who's interested in importing more than textiles.

Stephen Hopkins, who had demonstrated his ability to juggle parallel **story** lines as the Emmy-nominated director of "24" during its first season on Fox, was hired to braid the narrative bits together. "In the first two hours of this series, we had to do something scary, which is tell a bunch of different **stories** which you know are all going to collide later on but no one else does," said Mr. Hopkins, a producer of the mini-series.

"Mary McCormack's character is more straightforward because she's trying to protect her family, so that's the easiest to jump in and out of," Mr. Hopkins continued. "But the other ones demand being educated by a lot of

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information politically and geographically. Some of the ideas I think are foreign to most people's thinking unless you really follow global politics."

The global reach of **drug**-financed trafficking was certainly not lost on Mr. Hutchinson. "The **drug** business was the original multinational corporation," he noted. "It's extremely efficient." And ruthless. Mr. Hutchinson, who was nominated for an Emmy for his work on a previous docudrama, "The Tuskegee Airmen," made up fictional characters for "Traffic" but based much of the material on actual events, including an incident he'd heard about from a journalist friend at the BBC.

"**Bodies** had been washing up on the coast of Sicily for months, some of them with bullet holes in the back," Mr. Hutchinson said. "The **story** was, there had been a shipload of immigrants to be dropped off somewhere in Western Europe. The captain was being paid in heroin, something like a half a kilo a person. When the captain found some stow-aways, the people he was delivering them to didn't want to pay any extra so the captain basically shot a half-dozen people and threw them overboard."

Not that the creative team had to look far afield for examples of human cargo. Mr. Hopkins filmed "Traffic" in British Columbia. "The first day of shooting, a giant boat bringing refugees from Asia was picked up in Vancouver," he recalled. "There were hundreds of people who'd been in this hold for three weeks and hadn't been let out and were really ill."

Many McCormack, who recently appeared in Mr. Soderbergh's HBO series "K Street," observed fiction imitating fact on a daily basis while portraying Carole McKay, the well-meaning middle-class mom who's trying to keep her son from getting caught up in the urban **drug** scene. "I've never seen anything like it," Ms. McCormack said. "You'll be walking down the street in Vancouver and right there in an alleyway you see someone shooting up or doing crack. The people I spoke to in Vancouver were not shocked by that at all."

For Mr. Hutchinson, "Traffic" provided an opportunity to knit together seemingly unrelated predicaments into a broader tapestry of human behavior. "In a larger sense, this is more than just a **story** about **drug** taking," he said. "When you see some 17-year-old girl shooting up in an alley, that is intimately connected with this vast 2,000-year-old network, and at some point she's connected with immigrant smuggling, she's connected with moving guns and explosives and other nasty stuff around the world, because that habit pays for people who are moving things other than **drugs**, sight unseen, and they are doing this through the ongoing sale of heroin."

As Mr. Hutchinson tells the tale, "Traffic" courses to its somber destination fueled not just by the apparently incessant appetite for cheap highs but also by an equally powerful yearning for freedom. "I thought of this **story** as a way to explore immigration as much as the **drug** thing," he said. "I live in California and read all the time about people being found dead in containers coming from south of the border or being washed ashore on the Pacific Northwest. America is still this extraordinary beacon when you consider the terrifying things people will still do to get here."

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Graphic

Photos: On the **cover**: Elias Koteas as Mike McKay in "Traffic."; Elias Koteas, left, as Mike McKay, a **drug** enforcement agent. Below left: Mary McCormack as his wife, Carole. Above: Martin Donovan as Brent Delaney, McKay's partner.; Mr. Koteas, left, at the head of the caravan, and Balthazar Getty right, as Ben Edmonds, a Seattle businessman. Below: Smugglers prepared to drown the **body** of an illegal immigrant in a scene from "Traffic." (Photographs by Alan Zenuk/USA Network)

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