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'The Killing': Quiet, slow, methodical and, yet, popular

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Brent Sexton, left, Michelle Forbes, Mireille Enos and Joel Kinnaman. (Carole Segal / AMC)

By Rande Dawn, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Det. Sarah Linden of the Seattle Police Department is not a talker. When she first appeared in April's pilot of AMC's crime drama "The Killing," she said very little: Standing in a field of untamed grasses, a spark of red hair amid the green, Sarah squinted into the distance as if trying to see through the landscape to find out just where missing teenager Rosie Larsen had gone.

"It was scary sometimes," recalls Mireille Enos, who plays Sarah. "I was told over and over again, 'Trust the camera. All you have to do is think, and the camera will do the work for you.' There were lots of moments where the script said, 'Camera rolls forward focusing on Sarah's ... blah blah.' I had to be really open to whatever was going on inside of me."

In a television universe in which hardened police detectives rattle off urban patois with the incessancy of a machine gun, Sarah comes as something of a relief. She's also a perfect indicator of what to expect from "The Killing" — a deliberately paced, careful examination of a single murder over a 13-episode season. Listen up, folks; it's going to be a slow ride, but the scenery is nice.

The ride "The Killing" has been on since its premiere has been an unusual experience for all involved. Show runner Veena Sud was captivated by the Danish series on which it is based (the Danish title was "Forbrydelsen," which means "the crime") and wanted to break from the typical American crime format in her version.

"On so many shows, there's a murder a week — that's a kind of pornography," she says. "I was looking to do something that examined the price of a life and the profound effect it had on a victim's family over the long term, as well as the effect it had on the detectives and the larger fallout for a city in the middle of a major election."

That's what she got, for better or for worse. Sud's first season of 13 episodes, which wraps up on Sunday, meant she could spend 13 shows on a single investigation. On the other hand, that meant by her own rules, she could cover just one day each episode. Shows like "Murder One" or

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by her own rules — she could cover just one day each episode. Shows like "Murder One" or "Twin Peaks" lasted two seasons each with a single-case formula; "24" lasted eight seasons confining its entire narrative to a single day. But getting traction with what could be seen as a gimmick is challenging. In general, American viewers tend to like their crime ugly and speedy.

"It's always harder to get people to stay with a show that unfolds more slowly, but it's been a very long time since we had a great whodunit on the air," says AMC's Joel Stillerman, in charge of original programming, production and digital content. "I thought if we were able to capture the emotional intensity and addictive nature of the Danish series, we'd be able to get people to stick with it."

Thus far, they have: "The Killing" was AMC's second-highest premiere, at 2.7 million viewers, most of whom have stuck around. These days the show averages a little less than 2 million. Compare that with the cable network's critical darling, "Mad Men," which averages 2.3 million, and it looks like the carefully calibrated pace of "The Killing" has found its niche.

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But it's not just the fans who like the slow pace. The show's actors also revel in having time to develop their characters.

"This kind of slow-burn storytelling allows me to have as much of an emotional arc or response to what's going on in the moment, as opposed to 'wrap it up quick!' or when you can't show certain transitions of emotions, the way you'd see on a network show," says Brent Sexton, who plays grieving father Stan Larsen.

"Being able to delve into side stories and get into a character's background, you can really get to the core of the personality," adds Joel Kinnaman, who plays Sarah's fidgety new partner, Stephen Holder. "I've been inspired for years by shows like 'Six Feet Under' or AMC's 'Mad Men' — those are stories that let you expand as an artist, and that's what this show does for me."

Yet, slowed-down storytelling isn't without challenges; Michelle Forbes, who plays distraught mom Mitch Larsen, spent the five months of filming in a state of paralyzed heartache

"For the first half, it was brutal," she says. "I'm no Method actor, but it had a way of seeping into my consciousness. There was just no ability to have a reprieve from this relentless grief."

Sud, meanwhile, recognized that she had to keep her writing tight and focused.

"Today there are so many ways to tell stories on TV, it feels like the canvas has expanded. People aren't falling back on old clichés. And neither are we."

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