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HEADLINE: Rob Morrow's New Exposure;
THE DRAMA IS GRITTY AND GRIM IN '**STREET TIME**'

BYLINE: Alan James Frutkin, Special to The Washington Post

BODY:

Fans of "Northern Exposure," beware. If you think Rob Morrow is returning to series television in a role as warm and fuzzy as that of Dr. Joel Fleischman, think again.

In the grim new drama "**Street Time**," premiering Sunday at 10 p.m. on **Showtime**, Morrow plays Kevin Hunter, a convicted marijuana smuggler. Following five years in a federal penitentiary, he is on parole, and hoping to go straight.

It's tougher than it seems. His past life tempts him back, while a mistrustful parole officer watches his every move. But life for Officer James Liberti (Scott Cohen) isn't all it's cracked up to be either. In fact, he and Hunter often mirror each other, leaving viewers to decide who and what is right or wrong.

Morrow said his character's moral ambiguity initially drew him to the role. "For all intents and purposes, Kevin's a good guy," the actor said. "It just so happens he smuggled pot."

Morrow further argued that Hunter might be even nicer than "Northern Exposure's" Fleischman. "He's not as limited in his scope as Joel was," he said. "He's a more worldly, open person."

Perhaps what makes Morrow's portrayal so convincing is the suggestion that there is still a character like Fleischman underneath Hunter's tough facade. Such complexity isn't all that surprising, given that Morrow's preparation for the role led him to the real-life ex-con on

whom Hunter is based: the show's creator, Richard Stratton.

Stratton, 55, an ex-convict himself, having spent eight years in prison, from 1982 to 1990, for smuggling marijuana.

Describing his upbringing as "upper-middle class," Stratton said he first got involved in smuggling drugs while attending Arizona State University in the late 1960s. By the end of his freshman year in college, Stratton added, he was making so much money that he quit school.

But his illicit behavior wasn't based solely on any sort of financial goals. "You be-come addicted to the life," he said. "It's an adrenaline rush, and I was an action junkie."

Arrested for conspiracy, Stratton said it was as a parolee that he first got the idea for "**Street Time**." Parolees ostensibly are forbidden from associating with known criminals. But Stratton said it was while sitting in the report room, where parolees wait for their parole officers, that he noticed mobsters, gangsters, and other like-minded folks meeting up with old friends. "I said to myself, 'This is a TV show.' "

Stratton said he doesn't regret going to prison. In fact, prior to his arrest, he said he had read G. Gordon Liddy's 1980 autobiography "Will," in which Liddy recounts his own prison experience following his conviction in the Watergate scandal.

Stratton said Liddy talked of his incarceration as "an experience that will make or break you, in which you have to come to terms with yourself as a person, and come to grow and change or it will destroy you."

Stratton said his own prison term was "a profound experience. It wasn't enjoyable, but it was a real test of character."

While Morrow looked to Stratton for inspiration, Scott Cohen took his cues from U.S. parole officer Larry Goldman. Cohen said Goldman taught him that a parole officer must learn to think like a criminal.

"He has to have a criminal mind himself in order to anticipate what his parolee's next move will be," Cohen added.

In the role of "**Street Time's**" Liberti, however, that criminal-thinking pushes Cohen's character to the edge, where he finds himself

struggling with an overpowering gambling addiction.

As both characters fight against their natures, Cohen said, Hunter and Liberti are "two sides of the same coin." And that parallel imagery resonated not only for the actors, but for **Showtime's** executives as well.

"There's no black or white in '**Street Time**,' " said Jerry Offsay, president of programming at **Showtime**. "Just shades of gray."

In many ways, "**Street Time**" represents a departure for **Showtime**. Last year, the pay cable network launched three dramatic series: "Queer as Folk," "Resurrection Blvd." and "Soul Food." The programs targeted gays and lesbians, Latino Americans, and African Americans--viewers whom the major broadcast networks traditionally have ignored.

If Offsay is hoping that "**Street Time**" is more broad in its appeal, he said it's because last year's mission was so successful.

"It's partly said in jest, but some have suggested that we've run out of under-served minorities," Offsay joked.

Kidding aside, Offsay said "**Street Time**" shares a great deal in common with last year's programs. "We're always looking for things that are unlikely to be seen on the broadcast networks," he added, noting that the show's overwhelming grimness underscores that approach.

While Offsay may take his cue from what the broadcast networks aren't doing, he also seems to be tracking what his primary competition, HBO, is doing. And doing so well. The success of HBO's "The Sopranos" has sent the broadcast networks running for cover, and it also has inspired other cable networks to offer viewers more non-traditional programming, such as FX's edgy drama "The Shield."

Offsay traced the origins of "**Street Time**" to an unseen cop drama he had developed as an ABC programming executive in the early '90s, but he tipped his hat to "The Soprano's" groundbreaking introduction of what he called a "morally compromised hero," in mob boss Tony Soprano.

"People have been dancing around that idea for a long time," Offsay said, adding that "The Soprano's" success proved that "audiences are

willing to go places that the networks didn't think they would."

While Morrow said his character's complexity is what drew him to the role, the creative freedom he has experienced in the filming of the series is what is keeping him there. It's a freedom he suggested could only exist outside the traditional network system. "This is the most collaborative thing that I've ever worked on," he added. "It feels fresh and new."

Clearly, a great deal of that freshness stems from Stratton's vision. But Stratton isn't all that new to television. Following his incarceration, he founded Prison Life magazine. Although he joked that it received little support from advertisers, its impact led to Stratton having a role in producing a series of HBO documentaries, including the 1999 Emmy Award-winning "Thug Life in D.C."

During production on those documentaries, Stratton says HBO began developing its gritty prison drama "Oz," for which Stratton was hired as a consultant. With director Marc **Levin**, who also directed the pilot episode of "**Street Time**," Stratton co-wrote and produced the 1998 Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize winning film "Slam."

Along with Stephen Kronish ("Wiseguy"), Stratton serves as executive producer on "**Street Time**." The series also stars Erika Alexander ("Living Single") as a parole officer, Christopher Bolton as the ex-con's brother and features Red Buttons in a recurring role as a Jewish crime boss.

As crime shows enjoy continued popularity with viewers, Stratton said he hopes to shed light on an unexplored aspect of the justice system. "There's a fascinating relationship between the criminal and the law enforcement agent," he said. "Parole officers function like police, but they're not cops. In, fact, they're as much like therapists."

Stratton suggested that whether such therapy can succeed seems a relevant topic for viewers in or out of prison.

"The question is, can we change and become better people?" he asked rhetorically. "Or are we doomed to keep making the same mistakes over and over again?"

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