

Pure: How much bad does a good man have to do?

Jan 8, 2017 12:30 PM by: Andrea Nemetz



Gord Rand, left, stars as Abel Funk and Ryan Robbins is his brother, Mennonite pastor Noah Funk, who is determined to root out the drug traffickers in his community in the new CBC-TV drama Pure, premiering Monday at 9 p.m. (MICHAEL TOMPKINS)

A dusty Hants County gypsum mine is worlds away from the bucolic Southern Ontario farm country that is home to many Mennonites.

But it's the perfect setting for a climactic scene in Pure, the new CBC-TV drama about a Mennonite drug-trafficking ring that premieres on Monday, Jan. 9 at 9 p.m.

Screenwriter and series creator Michael Amo muses about his Mennonite roots as he watches stars Ryan Robbins (Arrow), A.J. Buckley (CSI:NY) and Peter Outerbridge (Orphan Black) film under clear skies on a chilly day in early November.

"My grandparents were Mennonites from Russia who came over after the Russian Revolution. They chose not to raise their kids as Mennonites and teach them the language, which is a dialect of low

German, because they thought it would stigmatize them because of the war, so the whole Mennonite culture in my family ended with my mother's generation. But for me, it was always of great interest.

"I came across a magazine article, *The Wages of Sin*, by Andrew Mitrovica and Susan Bourette, and it was all about this thing called the Mennonite mob, which had started in the '80s," he notes.

The article talked about how a specific group of Old Colony Russian Mennonites, the same ethnic background as his grandparents, were involved in the drug trade. In Mexico, where the Russian Mennonites lived, there was drought and hard times and their next-door neighbours were Mexican drug cartels. The Mennonites could cross the Mexican border unexamined, because they were Mennonites, so they started moving marijuana for the cartels across the U.S. border and expanded into cocaine and methamphetamine.

Amo, who also created the hit CTV series *The Listener*, envisioned a TV series and optioned the article.

The pilot he wrote about nine years ago on spec went nowhere until viewers made hits of *Fargo* and *True Detective*, creating an appetite for the limited-series true-crime genre. Then last spring, CBC picked up his crime thriller, which has been some have likened to a Mennonite *Breaking Bad*.



Dartmouth's Michael Amo, creator and writer of new CBC-TV drama series Pure, shares a moment with Peter Outerbridge, who plays Eli Voss, during filming at a Hants County gypsum mine. (MICHAEL TOMPKINS)

Pure tells the story of Noah Funk (Robbins), a newly ordained Mennonite pastor, who discovers the extent to which the Mennonite mob has infiltrated his community, says Amo.

Noah sees it as his God-given mission to root out the traffickers, but when he betrays a high-ranking mob member to the police, he receives an ultimatum from Eli Voss (Outerbridge), the big Mennonite boss in Mexico, that Noah must take the member's place or his family dies.

"He sees this as an invitation from God, to use his insider status to get enough evidence to take them all down at once," says Amo, who is also a series producer and showrunner.

Noah is assisted by his high school nemesis, local cop Bronco Novak (Buckley). The series also stars Gord Rand, a veteran of the Shaw Festival, as Abel Funk, Noah's brother, Alex Paxton-Beesley (Murdoch Mysteries) as Noah's wife, Anna, and Academy Award-nominee Rosie Perez as a DEA agent determined to take down Voss.

CBC commissioned the six, one-hour episodes produced by Two East Productions (Dartmouth-based Amo and Chester-based David MacLeod) and Cineflix Media. Nova Scotia stood in for Southern Ontario, Mexico and Texas. Farm scenes were filmed on the Windsor Road on the way to Martock, with the scenery reminding Amo, who grew up in Collingwood, of the Mennonite communities he recalled from his youth. The gypsum mine became the Texas badlands.

Amo describes Pure as a "spiritual thriller."

"It's all about the spiritual journey, but each hour is structured as a true crime thriller.

"I love the idea of how much bad does a good man have to do to drive evil from his community," muses Amo. "I think these issues, the desire to raise our children the right way and keep our family safe and maintain certain values is a universal story. I don't think it's specifically Mennonite."

Peter Outerbridge stars as Mennonite mob leader Eli Voss in Pure, a Nova Scotia-shot drama airing Mondays at 9 p.m. on CBC. (MICHAEL TOMPKINS)

The main characters, husband and wife Noah and Anna Funk, are inspired in some ways by Amo's grandparents and their relationship.

"My grandmother was a very strong, take-charge personality and my grandfather was more of a dreamer and a philosopher."

Amo has done a lot of research and there are two Mennonite consultants on the show, but he notes, "Old Colony Mennonites shun technology and it's a closed community so you can't go in and hang out. We're making a TV show about people who don't watch television."



Filming on the series, directed by Ken

Girotti, began on Sept. 1 and wrapped in early November. At least half of the cast is local with Cory Bowles, Gary Levert, Joanne Miller, Brian Heighton, Taylor Olson, Allister MacDonald, Jamie Bradley, Glenn Lefchak, Sebastien Labelle, Margaret Legere, Brian Downey, Mary-Colin Chisholm, Kevin Kincaid and Susan Stackhouse among those making appearances.

The "competent and cheerful" crew of more than 80, was largely local as well. The tight schedule presented a problem as so many film industry personnel had moved away after the film tax credit was cut in April 2015, and the big-budget American TV show *The Mist* employed many of those remaining.

But *Pure* was blessed with good weather with significant rain only on the weekend.

Amo is proud of the fact the show was created and produced by Nova Scotians which he points out doesn't happen very often. He hopes to get a greenlight for future seasons.

"I'd love to do more, we're just dipping our toe in the water. It's challenging to tell the story. There's a lot more to explore with the characters and their world beyond six episodes."

[Pure](#) airs Mondays at 9 p.m. on CBC-TV. Cineflix Rights has the exclusive worldwide distribution rights to *Pure*.

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Louanne Meisner

"Pure" is enticing! Thanks Michael Amo & Local Xpress for the background

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Lise Johnston

loved the 1st episode . Fascinated by the mennonites. I live near them in Ontario.

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Kathi Wilson · Ilderton, Ontario

Michael Amo obviously needs to go back to his community and do some research. This show is an insulting piece of crap to those who know the community he's pimping to make money. He has just about everything wrong.

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