

By Stuart Miller

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AMC has a new series set in southern France in the 1960s that examines the fallout from France's colonialism in Algeria as well as the fate of World War II Nazi collaborators. Much of this drama, which moves at a languorous pace with beautiful scenery, is in French, with subtitles.

AMC has a new series reviving Dashiell Hammett's hard-boiled Sam Spade, the protagonist of the "The Maltese Falcon," one of the most influential detective novels and movies ever. Clive Owen fills Humphrey Bogart's shoes, trench coat, and fedora with the same world-weary mien and sardonic wisecracks, especially when he verbally spars with bullies or authority figures. This series shows Spade widowed and retired, but still able to disarm a gunman when the situation calls for it after he reluctantly takes on a murder case.

Those two descriptions are actually for one series, "Monsieur Spade," co-created and directed by Scott Frank, whose screenplays include "Get Shorty," "Out of Sight," "Minority Report," and "Logan" and whose two previous series were "Godless" and "The Queen's Gambit." He co-created the series with Tom Fontana ("Oz," "City on a Hill"). The six-episode series premieres Sunday on AMC and AMC+.

Frank was initially approached pre-"Queen's Gambit" by a producer who had the rights to Spade but not the "Maltese Falcon" and who knew Frank's company name, Flitcraft, derived from an important scene in Hammett's novel. Frank, who was hoping to adapt another Hammett classic, "Red Harvest" (a project still in the works), was immediately intrigued.



JEAN-CLAUDE LOTHER

## There's a new chapter for private eye Sam Spade, and Clive Owen's on the case

"Right after I hung up the phone, I thought, 'I know how to do this.' You don't just redo Sam Spade, you look at what happens when the male icon that we all wished we were gets old. It was a way to reinvent and deconstruct the old version of him," says Frank, who then invited Fontana to join him. As they invented a new story for Spade, Fontana suggested setting the series in 1963, decades after the events of "The Maltese Falcon," in order to create a suitable background for their story in France.

Owen ("The Knick," "Chil-

dren of Men") was their target even while the duo were writing, and the star accepted without even seeing a script. "They pitched me the idea, and it was quick and easy for me to say 'I'm in,'" Owen says. "I'm a huge Bogart fan and a huge fan of 'The Maltese Falcon' — I actually have an original poster of that movie — and a big fan of Scott's, who I think is one of the best writers out there."

Getting Owen to sign on early also helped lure top French talent like Denis Menochet (a "national treasure there," Frank

says), who deftly plays the police chief as both Spade's adversary and ally.

Another benefit, Frank says, was the tone the star set. "He's super prepared and shows up ready to play, which makes everyone else stay focused, which is great for me as a director who likes to go very fast."

Owen was also an ally in his role as an executive producer. "Some producers get used to actors just caring about what they're doing, but I always have an overview of the whole context," Owen says of how he push-

es for clarity and concision. "I am pretty good at logic and seeing if something tracks or if there are cheats along the way or rhythms that are off. For me, it's got to add up. I'm quite rigorous in that way."

While Frank says the writers focused more on adapting the literary Spade, Bogart's influ-

World War II and the brutal war in Algeria that helped end France's imperial era. "All these issues of identity swirl around together," Frank says.

As with "The Maltese Falcon," there are multiple bad guys, but the series is less of a mystery than a character study. In Hammett's story, a small sculpture is

"the stuff that dreams are made of," while this time it's a small boy with intriguing skills that everyone is after. And here, Frank and Fontana's femme fatale is not a love interest but a savvy

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CLIVE OWEN, star of "Monsieur Spade"

teen girl who Spade has been charged with taking care of and who is, Frank says, "a thorn in his side" as he seeks solitude.

As both a writer and the director, Frank had to "exercise discipline" to make sure the multi-layered story stayed in focus. "You have to write with an audience in mind and know how much you can torment them." Throughout our interview Frank was self-deprecating; he kept referring to the pacing and complexity of the series in an almost apologetic way. But still, he strongly believes in what they've created with "Monsieur Spade."

"I recognize that it's complicated and perhaps overly so, but I'm hoping that you're still entertained scene by scene," he says. "I'm not sure the slow pace is for everybody — if you're looking for the action to kick in and stay steady throughout, it's not for you — but I don't think it's boring. The pleasures come from the characters, dialogue, tone, and ideas. I think if you just go with it, that it delivers a lot by the end."

"Monsieur Spade" is, however, about much more than snappy dialogue in the service of a mystery. "I like the crime or detective thriller because it can encompass everything — you can have humor, romance, violence, and social commentary," Frank says.

In the new telling, Spade has settled into a comfortable identity in his French town but must contend with his past once violence encroaches. Meanwhile, the French are contending with their national identity in the aftermath of

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