

For Morgan, Matthau, third time's a charm

By Sara Bennett

Harry Morgan is pleased to be part of a trilogy of made-for-TV movies that doesn't model itself after real-life events. "Incident in a Small Town," airing Sunday, Jan. 23, on CBS, is the third film featuring Morgan as Judge Stoddard Bell and Walter Matthau as Harmon Cobb, two small-town lawyers who team up to solve a murder.

Morgan became a household name after starring in the "Dragnet" and "M*A*S*H" series. He and Matthau pick up where they left off in "Against Her Will: An Incident in Baltimore," from 1992, and before that, in "The Incident," from 1990, which won an Emmy Award.

Although the characters have undergone changes over the course of the three films, one thing remains constant: Stepping away from fact-based dramas that only bring news items to life is still the way to go.

"(The problem with fact-based movies is that) They sort of tell you about it before it commences, because it is based on real people," says Morgan. "It takes some of the charm, some of the mystery out of

the project when it unfolds."

Not so in the latest "Incident" film. There are twists and turns at every corner, making the murder ultimately more believable. The whole story, in fact, set in 1953, has an "everyday" feel to it - viewers will be able to relate to the events more easily than dramatizations.

A different side of Judge Bell is presented in the form of his daughter, Lily Bell, played by Stephanie Zimbalist. Bell's family wasn't a factor in the first two films, but in "Incident in a Small Town," his previously estranged family becomes everything.

About to get herself tangled in a legal mess, Lily, an unwed mother, asks the Judge, now a partner, to come to her home in Illinois, where she is raising her 13-year-old son, John (Nick Stahl). John's father Frank (David Erman) has waltzed back onto the scene, and he'll take whatever attention he can get out of Lily and/or John.

Lily clearly isn't interested because of the couple's turbulent past, but John, who has never met his father, is thrilled with the idea of spending time with his old man.

As expected, Frank's violent

nature resurfaces, and he attacks Lily.

Someone then kills Frank to defend Lily. She may indeed be the killer - after all, she resents the way he treated her 13 years earlier, and he certainly fails to make amends now. A series of twists, however, finds Judge Bell as the defendant in the case. But the defendants don't end there.

The third film marks Zimbalist's debut in the story, as well as her acting debut with Morgan.

"I liked particularly the relationship with Stephanie," he says. "I never had met her even. She's a wonderful girl to work with."

The changes in Judge Bell's relationship with Harmon are easy to spot. Bell is more vulnerable because the crisis concerns his own family - he's more willing to hear Cobb out.

"He sort of was leading me around, giving orders and directions, whereas in the other two I was clearly his boss," Morgan says. "When this picture ends you feel that the two guys are really very comfortable with one another, and you never really say that in the other two. We've come a long way since then. I think there's going to be a fourth film."

Off the set, Morgan and Matthau got to know each other pretty well too.

"I knew Walter rather casually," Morgan says. "I used to see him at Dick Widmark's Christmas parties, but I had never worked with him, always admired him though."

During the six weeks of filming, which took place outside Toronto, the veteran actors made the most of their time together.

"Walter and I rode out together and rode back together (from the set, about an hour outside Toronto), spent all day together out on the farm. And then when we got back to the hotel, we cleaned up, came down to the lobby and had dinner together. He's a delightful storyteller, and he never once repeated himself. He's just absolutely fascinating."

And if a fourth "Incident" film is made sometime down the road, Morgan awaits the call to do it.

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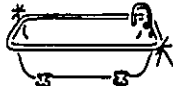
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