

## Dobson hopes for a long ride with CBS' 'Johnny Bago'

By Steven Alan McGaw

"It's just fun," says Peter Dobson, the star of CBS' "Johnny Bago," an adventure-comedy about a hapless, would-be mobster on the lam in a dusty recreational vehicle. "If you're home on a Friday night, you might wanna tune in. For one thing, we've got such talented writers. And everybody involved is from features — and hit ones at that."

Dobson's soft sell is characteristic of the New Jersey native's style, but the pedigree of the new CBS entry, which premiered Friday, June 25, is impressive indeed. The executive producers include Robert Zemeckis, the director of hits such as "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" and the "Back to the Future" films, and Frank Marshall, whose production credits include "E.T.," the "Extraterrestrial," the Indiana Jones movies, and last spring's "Alive." Along with Steve Starkey, Jeff Price and Peter Seaman, Zemeckis and Marshall created the zany, hourlong comedy more or less on a lark. They even made sure they had plenty of fun while trying to sell the show.

"We contacted the head of each network," Marshall recalls, "and

asked them to be at the curb of their building at 12:30 on a certain day. They asked 'Why?' and we said, 'You'll know when we get there.' So we pulled up in this Winnebago, collected them — they thought they were getting kidnapped — and just drove around Los Angeles."

Once on the freeway, the bewildered executives were served pasta and cannoli and listened to the pitch for "Johnny Bago."

Apparently, the unorthodox idea worked, at least with CBS' Jeff Sagansky. "Everybody had a good time," Zemeckis laughs.

Next came the job of casting. Zemeckis and his buddies pictured Johnny Tenuti (the 'Bago' is a last-minute alias, taken from his transportation) as a man nearing his 40th birthday, seasoned by his tumultuous marriage and a five-year prison stint for a crime he didn't commit. An actor of appropriate age was even penciled in for the role, but suddenly had to drop out.

That's when Dobson saw his chance.

"I'd read the script and I thought it was hysterical," he says, so he

contacted his agent and pleaded his case. "I said 'Listen, it doesn't matter if this guy is 27 instead of 37.'"

Dobson, a handsome former bricklayer whose experience includes the films "Plainclothes," "Sling" and "Where the Day Takes You," evidently convinced the producers. Ultimately, the actor says, the writers started drawing more on Dobson himself.

"By the third show," says Dobson, "The dialogue was stuff I'd say anyway. There's a fine line between me and that character."

Dobson explains the similarities between himself and unlucky Johnny thusly: "I'm a big kid, just like he is, like a kid in a candy store. He doesn't mean to be bad."

"And you know," Dobson adds, noting one more likeness between himself and his alter-ego, "you can get by with murder with a smile on your face."

Co-starring as Beverly Florio, Johnny's parole officer is Rose Abdoo, a veteran of Chicago's famed Second City troupe. The trouble is, Beverly is also Johnny's ex-wife.

"It's the ultimate revenge," Abdoo laughs, "to go after your ex-husband with a gun and get paid to do it."

In an unusual move, CBS has scheduled repeats of each Friday's episode of "Johnny Bago" on Wednesdays in the network's beleaguered last-night slot. Here's hoping the extra push brings the show — a fast-paced, irreverent laugh-getter that far surpasses standard summer fare — the audience it deserves. It would be nice to keep Johnny rolling for a while.



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