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Killers

DIRECTOR DAVID FINCHER'S OBSESSION WITH SERIAL KILLERS BROUGHT US *SEVEN* AND *ZODIAC*. NOW HE'S RETURNING TO THE SUBJECT AGAIN WITH *MINDHUNTER*, THIS TIME AIMING TO GET INSIDE THEIR MINDS LIKE NO-ONE HAS BEFORE



Inside

“I DON’T WANT WHOEVER DID THIS KILLED,” SAYS DAVID FINCHER, “BUT I DO WANT A DIGIT.”



It’s a crisp September morning in 2016 and the 54-year-old director is standing amid his crew in the lobby of a police station in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, doubling for the late ’70s Adairsville Police Department, Georgia. He’s brandishing his new show’s “sides” in his hand: the day’s script pages, which have been stapled together in the wrong order. “Okay, we’re almost ready,” he calls out, unpicking staples. “Bring in the master thespians!”

Moments later, the lead actors of *MINDHUNTER* walk across the room’s sapphire-tiled floor, past a cigarette machine and a wall plastered with “Wanted” posters. Holt McCallany wears cropped hair around a handsome pitbull face, a short-sleeved white shirt over an imposing frame and a conservative (for the ’70s) tie. He is senior FBI agent Bill Tench, based loosely on the late Robert Ressler, a pioneer of psychological profiling. And he looks like a hammer in search of a nail. But when he stops beside Fincher he’s quiet, deferential: “David, can I ask you a question?”

McCallany’s co-star Jonathan Groff strides in behind — bounds really, except that implies a lack of elegance. He wears a powder-blue shirt, trim grey trousers and a sunbeam face that suggests this isn’t just a job: it’s an adventure. He’s Holden Ford, also loosely based on a real agent, John Douglas, from whose book the Netflix series finds its inspiration: *Mindhunter: Inside The FBI’s Elite Serial Crime Unit*. Douglas was on the bleeding edge of investigation: talking to incarcerated serial killers to get insight into their instincts and then help police with live enquiries. These were G-men becoming amateur psychologists.

It was this angle that first intrigued Fincher, a director who has long been fascinated by serial killers but had never seen their psyches explored in this way. “It was the fact that this massive crime-fighting bureaucracy was engaging with this kind of criminal behaviour on the level of, ‘Let’s understand it,’” he explains. “That was interesting.”

The scene about to be shot will in a way encapsulate the thrust of the whole show. Holden is explaining to a local police officer how he intends to question a suspect in the murder of a young girl. He’s going to try to get the guy to open up, he’s going to try to understand him, he may even seem like he *sympathises* with him. The gist: things are going to get *weird*.

Cameras roll, the exchange plays and at its close the cop turns to Tench, a bit bemused: “All this an FBI thing?” The weary reply comes: “It’s *his* thing.”

“Cut!” calls Fincher. “Moving on!” There’s a pause, from shock. Then laughter, as it dawns upon cast and crew that their director — not exactly known for being shy of repeating takes — is taking the piss. As detail-orientated as any FBI profiler, Fincher is hardly going to rush through a scene as nuanced as this. Walking over to the monitor, he says, “Okay, play that back. Let me see everything that was fucked up about it.”



Above: *Seven*, *Zodiac*, and Fincher (right) on set of *Gone Girl*. **Above right:** *MINDHUNTER*’s Holden Ford (Jonathan Groff) and Bill Tench (Holt McCallany). **Here:** And with training chief Shepard (Cotter Smith).



THE LIST OF things that are “fucked up” about *MINDHUNTER* would be quite extensive. It is dealing in the most depraved and violent of human behaviour. Grubbiness is nothing new, of course, for its primary director and executive producer. But Fincher’s return to Netflix — after launching *House Of Cards* back in 2013 — could be an evolution in terms of his storytelling, as at its core it’s more rooted in character than anything he’s done before. (Fincher directed four of the ten episodes, with the others shot by Dane Tobias Lindholm (*A Hijacking*) and Brits Andrew Douglas (*U Want Me 2 Kill Him?*) and Asif Kapadia (*Senna*.) He describes it as being about “the moments between moments”, as opposed to the rat-tat-tat plot machinations of crime procedurals on screens big or small.

“It’s a much more theatrical presentation,” he reflects. “It’s a lot of sitting at a table with a guy in manacles, trying to get him to tell you what was going through his head when he did the most inhuman things to another entity you can possibly imagine.”

The time the show will take to explore behaviour — to get inside the heads of its killers — is one thing that made it different enough from Fincher’s previous sorties into the serial-killer subgenre to warrant engagement. It was Charlize Theron, acting as a producer, who

brought him the book and, after a false start with another writer, introduced him to Joe Penhall, whom she knew from *The Road*. Penhall wrote a pilot and a series bible, which took true cases but fictionalised the investigators to a degree that gave dramatic licence and shape to the show. Of course from *Seven* to *Zodiac* to *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, Fincher has dealt with more than his fair share of successive slaughters. The interest may stem from his youth. His dad was a journalist, his mum a mental-health nurse, and conversations about killers weren’t infrequent at home.

“There were a lot of serial killers in the ’70s,” he remembers. “And we probably talked about most of them. My mom would come down much more on the notion of rehabilitation and my dad would be like, ‘Once you understand what’s really going on, you probably have less empathy than you would going in.’ So that might have been what made *MINDHUNTER* appealing. Then again, whenever I can blame my parents, that’s my default.”

“I THINK PART of the intrigue of the show is watching something that we’re familiar with slowly get built and come together,” says Jonathan Groff. “You really see this spark of an idea in somebody’s brain.”

As much as we now take the idea of psychological profiling for granted, back in the ’70s it was new. In that sense, while *MINDHUNTER* is about murder, it bears some thematic comparison to Fincher’s BAFTA-winning *The Social Network*, in that it is also about invention. Fincher knew Groff from that, in fact, rather than any of his TV work (“I know this is gonna shock you,” says the director, “but I’ve never seen *Glee*”). The actor — who would go on to be a sensation as King George in Broadway smash *Hamilton*, and can currently be heard on inventive divorce-com podcast *36 Questions* — had auditioned to play entrepreneur Sean Parker (a part that eventually went to Justin Timberlake). “He could have acted the shit out of it,” says Fincher. “But he has absolutely no venality.”



It's Groff's purity — an earnest, inherent decency — that makes him right for Ford, who is hard-charging and ambitious, but for the right reasons. "At the beginning of the show he's having an existential crisis," says Groff. "He has an experience in the very first scene of the first episode that rocks his world and makes him think that perhaps all this training he has received from the FBI hasn't done enough for him to be able to do the job in the real world." With his partner, Tench, an initially reluctant accomplice, Ford sets out to interview serial killers. "Who at the time, in the late '70s, weren't even called serial killers yet," Groff explains. "That was a phrase that was created by the Behavioural Science Unit at the FBI."

THE FIRST TWO initials of the unit's name summed up the attitude of many people to the work the BSU did. Holt McCallany's character is caught between the old and new school: he has been shocked and hardened by the brutality and banality of evil, but can see the value in trying new ways to catch killers. It's deft casting. McCallany has had a know-the-face character career built on playing toughs, probably peaking as a dementia-addled boxer in FX's *Lights Out*. But Fincher has known him more than 25 years, having cast him in *Alien 3* and *Fight Club*, and sees the sensitivity and humour beneath the teak veneer — a depth that *MINDHUNTER* will exploit as the show goes on.

"My guy, Tench, doesn't have the same degree of empathy for the killers that Jonathan's character often displays, but he's got a curious mind and he's a good detective," says McCallany. The same applies to the actor himself. His question for Fincher on set was not unusual — he is a relentless inquisitor of his directors. "The serial killer will murder you and desecrate your corpse. But the serial question-asker will bore you to death over many long months of filming."

The "third leg of the tripod", in Fincher's words, is Anna Torv as Dr Wendy Carr, a psychologist who sees a huge opportunity in what Tench and Ford are doing: the chance to really understand what creates killers. "She really wants to put a fire under them to make it a legit study," says Torv, who you may recognise as an FBI agent herself, albeit investigating the paranormal in *Fringe*. For *MINDHUNTER* Torv read extensively and "kind of went down the rabbit hole — everything's so accessible on the internet", to the point where she had to consciously pull back, because the horrific nature of the crimes left her feeling "vulnerable". Still, she had to try to see the material through the eyes of her character, who has an enormous amount of empathy. "Because you look back at the history," says Torv, "and not one of [the killers] had a really beautiful childhood and then decided they were gonna go out and bludgeon someone to death."

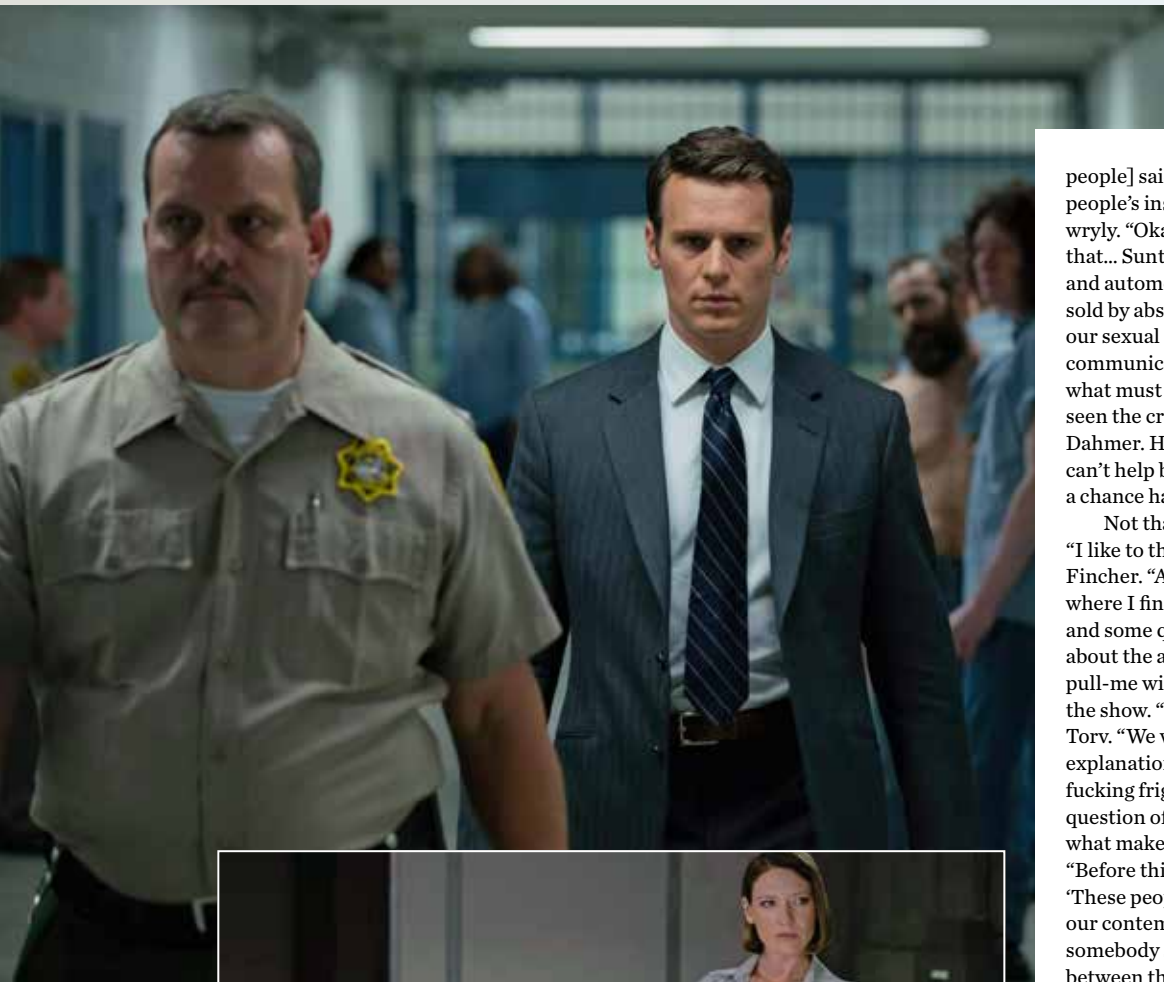
The cast have clearly been chewing over questions of morality — the nature of evil; the possibility of reformation, if not redemption. "The thing that really struck me the most is that it's so easy to write people off as good or evil," says Groff (who Fincher describes, not inaccurately, as "the



Top: Ford and Tench get to grips with Behavioural Science techniques. **Above:** Serial murderer Edmund Kemper (Cameron Britton) gets a little close for comfort with Ford.

sweetest man who ever lived"). "But after spending almost a year in Pittsburgh sitting and listening to these people's stories, you just get involved in the complexity of all of it."

McCallany, perhaps in keeping with his character, seems less ambiguous about the potential rehabilitation of these people — though it's striking how no-one involved in the show seems completely certain in their views. "I was at [FBI Academy] Quantico and I met some of the guys that are currently in the Behavioural Science Unit, what they now call the Behavioural Analysis Unit," he recalls. "If you ask the guys in law enforcement [about rehabilitation], the analogy they often give is, 'Imagine you're baking a cake. The cake has eggs and it has flour and milk and sugar and a lot of perfectly normal ingredients. But imagine just before you put the cake in the oven some motor oil spilled into the batter. Well, when that cake comes out of the oven, is it possible now to remove the motor oil? It's not.' And that's what they think." >



THERE MAY BE no cure, but perhaps there can be prevention. That's part of what drove the work of Douglas and Ressler. Visiting Quantico, Fincher walked down into a basement and came face-to-face with a life-size mannequin of Hannibal Lecter: the ultimate serial-killer icon. "*The Silence Of The Lambs* was a huge recruitment tool," says the director, who, when asked by his FBI guides what he wanted to do with *MINDHUNTER*, told them he wanted to strip away the super-villainy of serial killers.

"I feel like Dennis Rader ['The BTK Killer'] is a lot of things, Gary Ridgway ['The Green River Killer'] is a lot of things, Richard Ramirez ['The Night Stalker'] is a lot of things," he says. "But they're not gourmands. We want to show these people as they really are, which is quite sad and human. Even though the aspect of them that they're keeping hidden is this intensely subhuman part."

It's an attitude you might not expect from the man who once put Gwyneth Paltrow's head in a box. But there's empathy here. Recalls Fincher: "Jeffrey Dahmer [cannibal, necrophiliac and murderer of 17

Top: Ford walks the prison halls. **Above:** Tench is joined by Dr Wendy Carr (Anna Torv), *MINDHUNTER*'s "third leg" according to Fincher.

people] said, 'I'm sexually aroused by seeing people's insides.'" He pauses, before adding wryly. "Okay, well, there's not a lot of clubs for that... Suntan lotion and beer and bubblegum and automobiles are sold by cleavage, they're sold by abs — there's this commingling of our sexual impulse in almost every kind of communication. If that doesn't work for you, what must the world be like? I mean, I've seen the crime-scene photographs from Jeffrey Dahmer. He was a subhuman. And yet you can't help but listen to him and go, 'Was there a chance had we gotten there earlier?'"

Not that the empathy extends eternally. "I like to think of myself as a liberal," says Fincher. "And yet there are definitely moments where I find myself going, 'Give me a backhoe and some quicklime and let's stop worrying about the appeals process.'" It's this push-me, pull-me within the makers which will power the show. "We need to find justification," says Torv. "We want there to be a reasonable explanation, because if there isn't then that's fucking frightening. I think that's part of the question of the show." Fincher is interested in what makes us tick — and what makes us sick. "Before this time at the FBI the attitude was 'These people are rabid dogs, they're beneath our contempt.' I thought it was interesting that somebody said, 'Maybe, but the difference between them and rabid dogs is you can talk to them.'"

Douglas, in his book, reaches a perhaps surprising conclusion for someone who spent so much time talking to murderers and has seen such horror: "I truly believe that along with more money and police and prisons, what we most need more of is love. This is not being simplistic; it's at the very heart of the issue."

Seeing killers as broken people, rather than faceless monsters, was part of what the FBI learned to do, in a bid to stop more killing. What creates killers, how can it be stopped, what potential evils do we have inside us? *MINDHUNTER* is asking difficult questions. "It is also entirely salacious!" says Fincher. "Let's not kid ourselves. But hopefully we're going to be dealing with the things that make us similar as opposed to the things that separate us."

It's not that everyone is capable of great evil, of course — at least not on the scale of the psychosexual sadists in *MINDHUNTER*. But there's great fascination in exploring the darkness in people's hearts. And a career in it, too. Back in Pittsburgh — on a break from shooting outside a high-rise apartment block — the director is showing *Empire* how his new camera works and we're nodding and smiling and pretending to understand, when a resident comes over to say she's a fan. Fincher smiles. "It's always nice to know there are pervs out there!" She laughs. "We keep you in business!"

"That's true," says Fincher. "Without pervs I'd be nothing." ●

MINDHUNTER IS ON NETFLIX FROM 13 OCTOBER