ROBERT HALMI SR. TALKS ABOUT BRINGING DOSTOEVSKY’S ‘CRIME AND PUNISHMENT’ TO TELEVISION

NBC World Premiere Movie Starring Patrick Dempsey, Ben Kingsley and Julie Delpy to be Telecast Sunday, October 11.

Robert Halmi Sr., who produced some of NBC’s most highly rated and critically praised miniseries events, has taken on the challenge of bringing one of the greatest novels ever written to television. Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment” will be telecast Sunday, October 11 (9-11 p.m. ET).

Here, the Hungarian-born producer of “Gulliver’s Travels,” “The Odyssey” and “Merlin” talks about “Crime and Punishment.”

QUESTION: Can you give us some background on Dostoevsky’s novel, “Crime and Punishment?”

ROBERT HALMI SR: Dostoevsky wrote it in 1866 after he was jailed in the Siberian gulag. He’d been a revolutionary and had worked for the underground. The papers he wrote and the interviews he gave while he was in the underground eventually ended up in the novel “Crime and Punishment.” I can sympathize with and understand exactly what Dostoevsky wrote.

Q: Is there a Hungarian connection to “Crime and Punishment?”

RH: When Dostoevsky wrote the novel 130 years ago, the situation in Hungary was pretty similar to that of Russia. Russia was a land of oppression and feudal landlords. Hungary also languished under totalitarian rule. “Crime and Punishment” could have taken place in Hungary.

Q: How did filming in Budapest affect the actors?

RD: Patrick Dempsey and Ben Kingsley told me that as they walked the streets of Budapest, it helped them get into the role and to register the right emotions. Some of the buildings we filmed in are four or five hundred years old. These buildings existed even before Dostoevsky’s time.

Q: Tell us a little bit about your involvement in the resistance.

RH: Like Raskolnikov, I was a student. He fought against a regime he didn’t think was right for the people, just as I did. I was in university when the Germans tried to occupy us and I joined the underground against the Germans. We fought for the independence of my country. Then the Soviets became the oppressors. When it became hopeless, I left for America.

Q: What makes this story relevant today?

RH: Dostoevsky is not the easiest writer to read or the easiest one to portray in film. He is all about soul, feelings and philosophy. It’s very deep. It’s very emotional and very, very dark. It’s exactly what American television is not about. I congratulate NBC because they had the guts to do this project. “Crime and Punishment” is forever and for everybody. If a person decides to sit down and read it, you’ll discover the genesis of today’s headlines in our newspapers.

Q: Tell us, please, about the love story.

RH: It’s an incredible love story because Sonia decides to wait for Raskolnikov no matter how long he is going to be imprisoned in Siberia. She’ll be there for him. The detective (Ben Kingsley) is remarkable because he’s a father figure. He is the one who makes Raskolnikov confess. Dostoevsky’s incredible insight into the human mind and the human heart is remarkable and that’s what we’re trying to portray.

Q: What do each of the cast members bring to their role?

RH: Ben Kingsley is a master of character. Even before “Gandhi” he was a great Shakespearean actor. He did a remarkable “Hamlet.” He brings a vibrant presence to his role. Patrick Dempsey is a unique young actor. He almost is Raskolnikov. Patrick’s a young American who has the look of an angry, deprived young man. Julie Delpy is Sonia. She’s brilliant, beautiful and melancholy. We have an incredible ensemble directed by Joe Sargent. We’re trying to do something completely new on American television. And we’re doing it with a Russian accent. It’s a brave new experience in television.

Q: What is the guiding factor in choosing your projects?

RH: Literature. It’s the basis of everything good entertainment is based on. I’m hoping that we put back in children’s hands the books that television took away. Literature provides so much varied and rich entertainment. There’s a reason why books like “Crime & Punishment” have been around for so long. It’s brilliantly written and addresses issues that are both universal and always timely. They’re also great sources for making entertaining movies!

Q: For a long time, there was little classic material on TV but now, all of a sudden, you have all these classics in various stages of production. When did you start to see the tide turn?

RH: The tide started to turn with “Gulliver’s Travels.” I did classics before “Gulliver’s,” of course -- pieces like “Lonesome Dove” -- but the success of “Gulliver’s” made the difference and changed everybody’s attitudes. Now we’re tackling something more challenging than “Gulliver’s” and I believe audiences will come to see something this dramatic and this entertaining.

FOUR-TIME EMMY-WINNER DIRECTOR JOE SARGENT ADDS ‘CRIME AND PUNISHMENT’ TO HIS LIST OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

NBC World Premiere Movie Starring Patrick Dempsey, Ben Kingsley and Julie Delpy Will Be Telecast Sunday, October 11

Four-time Emmy winner Joe Sargent (“Miss Evers’ Boys,” “Love is Never Silent”) has directed some of the most important television movies of the last decade. To this list he now adds the NBC world premiere movie adaptation of Dostoevsky’s classic novel “Crime and Punishment.” It stars Patrick Dempsey (“Can’t Buy Me Love”), Academy Award winner Ben Kingsley (“Gandhi”) and Julie Delpy (“Before Sunrise”). It will be telecast on Sunday, October 11 (9- 11:00 p.m. ET) on NBC.

Joe Sargent talks about “Crime and Punishment.”

QUESTION: Why did you choose to direct “Crime and Punishment?”

JOE SARGENT: If somebody came up to you and said, NBC, the major network in the United States and probably the world, is ready to do a classic like Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment,” would you turn it down? Of course not! I was stunned that a work of this kind of substance and quality was now being considered seriously by an American television network.

Q: Did you read the book?

JS: I read the book AND the Cliffs Notes.

Q: When you read the book, did it strike you that a lot of what happens is cerebral?

JS: Very interior, and that was one of the big challenges that screenwriter David Stevens had to contend with. How does one translate all of that incredible subjective interior monologue material and the emotional agonies that Raskolnikov goes through into drama, into a film mode? And the beautiful thing about film is that you can do anything. David Stevens didn’t take the easy way, which was to make everything voice-over, because that can become a bore. Instead, Raskolnikov, our hero, talks it out exactly like a man who is going through tremendous inner turmoil might do. He talks in public, he talks to himself, and if you were to pass him on the street, you’d think this guy is hovering on the edge of madness and that’s precisely where he is. He is ready to go over the edge.

Q: Isn’t it very difficult, when directing for the medium of film, to stage a scene that is a verbal sparring of ideas and still make it visually interesting?

JS: Well, when one has actors like Ben Kingsley and Patrick Dempsey, a director can make this material sparkle because we approached it with humor, which is exactly what Dostoevsky did, surprisingly. The humor is mainly from Ben Kingsley’s character - - Porfiry. He is playing a cat-and-mouse game with our hero, trying to trap him into saying things, and his technique is very much like the classic movie detective -- he’s a bit of a bumbler and a clown. In other words, the detective disarms his adversary, his prey, into revealing things he wants him to reveal. He’s seductive with his charm, his humor, his seeming ineffectualism. In reality, he is very sharp, shrewd and a killer.

Q: Describe the story.

JS: Basically “Crime and Punishment” is about an inner struggle between a human being’s intellect and emotions. His almost arrogant certainties of philosophy are in direct opposition to moral scriptures. He thinks he has found the superior answer to man and crime but intellectually, he didn’t count on the fact that morally, he would have an incredible battle with his conscience.

Q: Why do you think this is one of the greatest novels ever written?

JS: Dostoevsky broke a lot of rules with this one. He was the first writer to break through the objective/subjective technique of writing. He wanted to find a way to get into the interior anguish that was going on with Raskolnikov. At the same time, it was necessary for Dostoevsky to be able to break away from too much of the protagonist’s subjective point of view so that he could deal with other characters and their stories. Had he written everything from the main character’s point of view, he couldn’t have left Raskolnikov’s mind in order to describe things around him or other characters. Dostoevsky was able to travel back and forth from inside the main character’s mind and then outside to objectively describe other characters and other events -- an amazing writing technique for his time.

Q: Is there a large sense of responsibility, some nervous baggage that comes with taking on the direction of one of the greatest novels ever written?

JS: It’s a challenge but it’s a lovely and welcome challenge. It’s an exciting challenge. I’d rather be challenged with an important work like this as opposed to making a soap opera look important.

Q: Is there a certain look or presentation that you strived for?

JS: We dealt with the dark days of Tsarist Russia, which Dostoevsky wrote about, and the gothic darkness of a man struggling with his conscience. The film has a very interesting dynamic in its light and shadow, so that there is a very stunning photographic look to the production. It will have the look of black-and-white film, but in color. It has that kind of strength to it simply because it belongs to the times, the environment. There is the feeling in this piece of being on the streets and in the tenements of St. Petersburg, and that requires the kind of low-key lighting, because most lighting in the 1850s came from candles and some gas. It is all very intimate in keeping with the full darkness that Dostoevsky wrote about. In complete opposite to that “darkness,” Dostoevsky also had humor in his work, which most people don’t remember. Because of that, his novel is balanced. It has all dimensions. He didn’t leave out any of the normal inconsistencies of human behavior.

Q: Why is this novel as relevant today as it was 100 years ago?

JS: Because we’re still struggling with “Crime and Punishment.” We have crime taking place that is not being punished for one reason or another and we have crime that is being punished perhaps too much. We have crime that is keeping us awake at night because there is so much of it. We haven’t really figured out a way to stop people from killing each other. We haven’t figured out a jurisprudence that takes care of violence and crime yet. These issues are very much a part of our consciousness. So, the novel and subject matter are still relevant. We deal with the issues every day. And I am talking about anything from O.J to Timothy McVeigh.

Q: Talk about Patrick Dempsey as Raskolnikov.

JS: He was the best thing that could’ve happened to this production. He is absolutely perfect as Rodya Raskolnikov. He brings the look of the character with his unmanageable, thick, wonderful, curly, black hair and, of course, he has a great face to match. He brings fire, volatility and humor to the part. Surprisingly, he doesn’t play anything on one note of agonizing through everything; he doesn’t do a humorless “Hamlet.”

Q: What does Ben Kingsley bring to the role of Porfiry?

JS: Ben Kingsley brings his maturity and his natural humor to the part. Ben has a wry quality about him, a dry worldliness that meshes well with this sly fellow called Porfiry.

Q: What does French actress Julie Delpy bring to the role of Sonia?

JS: Julie has the perfect European face that is so right for Sonia. She fits the kind of paintings one sees from that period in Russia. She has a European quality to her look. Julie is a VERY talented actress and she’s quite a well-known star in France. Besides being so right for the role, she speaks absolutely perfect English. For the last two years, she’s been trying to get rid of her French accent. I then asked her to put on a mixed Eastern European accent and she did that very well.

Q: How are viewers supposed to feel about Raskolnikov? This man has committed two murders. One victim was not very nice but the other was an innocent bystander.

JS: You can’t help but have compassion for this guy for the struggle he’s going through with his conscience and our moral structure. But I certainly don’t want the audience to feel he should get away with the crime. That’s not the point of the book nor is it the point of the picture. It is a portrait of a man who is ultimately brought down into realizing his true punishment is within himself, and that’s what the audience should get; that, in effect, he is not getting away with this murder because he is in his own prison.

Q: What kind of accent did you have the cast use? You have an American actor, a French actress, an English actor, then you have Hungarian extras. How did you give this a cohesive sound?

JS: Well, since 80 percent of our cast is Hungarian, the predominant accent obviously is Hungarian, which has an Eastern sound to it. I asked all the English-speaking actors and their dialect coaches to work for a Hungarian accent, a light one -- something that approximates more the sound of the majority of the actors in the piece rather than Russian. If we had Russian actors, then it would be perfect because then the sound would be the sound of St. Petersburg and Dostoevsky’s Russia. But we had to come to some kind of middle ground, a sort of middle-European sound that is more Hungarian than Russian, but I don’t know that most people in the audience are going to care about this area.

Q: You experienced a lot of controversy surrounding NBC’s “Long Island Incident.” Do you expect any controversy for “Crime and Punishment?”

JS: There will be the purists who will expect the entire novel to be translated onto the screen, which is impossible, unless we had six hours. Dostoevsky had all the space he needed to write whatever he wanted. I suspect that he got paid by-the-word. This is not a full translation of the novel to the screen. It is an adaptation to a dramatic form that we hope is the kernel of what Dostoevsky was writing about. We had to drop certain elements and certain story lines. There is no way one can do an adaptation to a dramatic form from a literary form without losing certain elements. We hope viewers are so involved in those elements that have survived that they won’t miss elements that are missing.

Q: What is it like to film in Hungary?

JS: I love filming here. This is my second production here. My first was a good 13 years ago, when there was still Communism and a Socialist economy. And the difference is like night and day. It was gray, inefficient and all the workers were on a lifetime contract so they didn’t have to knock themselves out. They were wonderful to deal with on a personal level but they left a lot to be desired on a professional level. Now, we have experienced, highly professional people, knocking themselves out to do their jobs to the fullest. I have never seen each of the departments in the business of filmmaking devote themselves so fully and with so much excitement as we had here. It’s really been a pleasure, and so far the weather has been terrific.

Q: Why will viewers watch “Crime and Punishment?”

JS: I hope the arrogance in bringing a classic novel like this to the screen might be titillating enough or interesting enough to get viewers to tune in. Once we’ve got them tuned in, the show itself will be so exciting -- the journey this man takes, the twists and the dramatic turns are so compelling that viewers will want to stick around.

Q: What do you want to stay with viewers when this is over?

JS: I think the realization that within all of us there is the yin and the yang. Within all of us, there is the conflict of good and evil, superior intelligence and a conscience. Recognizing these facts keep most of us from going off, taking the law into our own hands and becoming terrible people. I hope viewers think about this.

Q: Your track record shows that you do very special, high quality projects. Is it hard for you to find them?

JS: I have been so fortunate in being offered very good material in my career. I have probably defied the odds because of how difficult it is to initiate these projects. I am so thankful for the people who have the strength and perseverance to find the material and shuck it through the usual two to four years that it takes to get it to the screen. I have great admiration for producers who stick it out and keep coming back for more until they get projects like this produced. I know that every one of the projects in my career took an enormous amount of development, cajoling, salesmanship, begging, pleading and meetings even before I got the call. I tried executive producing for a year and a half at Metro Media, then another stint at Hearst and then with my own company. None of these projects ever got sold; it was so discouraging. I was in the rejection business and I didn’t need that. I suddenly asked, “What the hell am I doing?” and decided I’d leave day-after-day rejection to the producers. I have great admiration for them.

WRITER DAVID STEVENS TAKES ON THE HERCULEAN TASK OF ADAPTING DOSTOEVSKY’S ‘CRIME AND PUNISHMENT’ NBC World Premiere Movie, starring Patrick Dempsey, Ben Kingsley and Julie Delpy, to be Telecast Sunday, October 11

David Stevens (“Merlin,” “The Sum of Us”) talks about the challenge of adapting one of the greatest novels ever written -- Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment” -- into an NBC world premiere movie. Starring Patrick Dempsey (“Can’t Buy Me Love”), Academy Award winner Ben Kingsley (“Gandhi”) and Julie Delpy (“Before Sunrise”), the special event will be telecast Sunday, October 11 (9-11 p.m. ET).

QUESTION: Describe the plot of “Crime and Punishment.”

DAVID STEVENS: It is a book about the redemptive power of love. It is a massive attack on the system of the time but through it all, the love shines triumphant at the end.

Q: What was your first reaction when you were offered this job?

DS: The concept of doing “Crime and Punishment” for American network television was so off the wall, that I had to do it. The book is enormous and powerful, but is not easily accessible because 50 percent of it takes place in Raskolnikov’s attic and 50 percent of it takes place in his head. When somebody asked me how I was going to do it, I said “with some difficulty.”

Q: What was the most challenging aspect of adapting this novel?

DS: The most challenging aspect was to try and adapt what Dostoevsky wrote, not what people tell you he wrote. Many people had contact with the book in their college years and have a memory of it. You hear constant references to the cat-and-mouse games between Porfiry and Raskolnikov, the examining magistrate and criminal. In fact, in the novel, Porfiry appears exactly three times. There is a cat-and-mouse game of sorts due to Raskolnikov’s guilt. Porfiry is one of the functioning vexes of this guilt. But there is a concept in people’s mind that that’s what the story is actually all about.

Q: What was the easiest area for you in adapting this novel?

DS: The easiest area was coming to a decision that I should not be frightened of the novel and that I should not be frightened of what people think of the adaptation. I could only try. It was very freeing, just to say, “Okay, what do I think it’s all about” and not “What do others think it’s all about” -- just focus on “What do I think it’s all about. And how does it relate to the time? How does it relate to now?” And so I wrote a memo to NBC saying that Raskolnikov is Timothy McVeigh. The protagonist at the beginning of the novel, not in the movie, has already made his decision to commit a monstrous crime. And Dostoevsky asks, demands and finally succeeds in making us feel, if not empathy, at least some sympathy for this man, which is like asking us to feel sympathy for Timothy McVeigh.

Q: Is that why you think the novel relates to the present?

DS: It’s a universal theme. A man is so frustrated by the circumstances in which he lives that finally he sees violence as his only way out. He is brought to realize, as I believe Mr. McVeigh has not, that this is not the answer. In fact, all he has done is committed a monstrous crime, in which a desperately innocent person has tragically suffered, and that is what I mean about the redemptive power of love. It is Sonia, the prostitute, who brings him to the understanding of what he has done. He comes to an understanding that violence of this kind is not an answer.

Q: How do you make such a cerebral novel cinematic? How do you make what goes on in the man’s mind move on the screen?

DS: The writer takes the circumstances of what is happening in the mind and puts them into a non-cerebral situation. For example, I have no doubt that a lot of people will be cross because I start the film with the attempted assassination of the Tsar, which does not occur in the novel itself. However, a similar situation happened during the time Dostoevsky was about to start writing the novel. Because of the attempted assassination of the Tsar, Dostoevsky was imprisoned. And this led him directly to writing “Crime and Punishment.” So, it seemed fair to me to combine the two elements together. What this does is it opens the story and gives us Raskolnikov as Dostoevsky. While Raskolnikov has not yet come to the decision that he is going to murder Alena, Dostoevsky has not yet come to the circumstances that provoked him to write “Crime and Punishment.” So, immediately, we have a fairly spectacular scene to open with as opposed to the opening of the book, which is simply Raskolnikov walking out of his garret.

Q: What are the biggest changes you made from the book?

DS: All I’ve really done is show what Dostoevsky talks about. At the beginning of the book, Raskolnikov finds out what was going on in the country between his mother and his sister, Dounia, via a letter from his mother. I actually show what was happening. Show, don’t tell, is the first law with movies. I hope that I have been quite faithful to the book.

Q: Did you use actual dialogue from the novel?

DS: I don’t speak Russian so I have no idea. Did I use dialogue from some of the translations? Unquestionably. But not in a way that anyone would recognize because I’m a dramatist. I don’t like to use other people’s dialogue. I like to find the dialogue of my own characters. I like to become those characters and find the dialogue. But does it correlate with translations of the novel? Absolutely. Difficult to avoid.

Q: Is there any translation that you relied upon more than the others?

DS: Probably the Constance Garnett. Everybody said to me that translation is fairly old and stuffy. I found it actually the most accessible.

Q: Is there anything specific you did to make the story more palatable?

DS: That’s a really tough question to answer because the actual structure of the novel is really quite simple. Once you get through the self-searching and heart-searching of Dostoevsky, it’s really a very simple structure, and the movie has a very simple structure too. I brought some material from the very end of the book to the beginning as in the attempted assassination of the Tsar. We discover only in the last chapter that Raskolnikov had been extraordinarily generous. He had saved some children from a fire, he had given money to a dying student, and then when the student died, he gave money to the student’s father who was in a mental institution. This was all in the epilogue, in justification for Raskolnikov only getting a lenient sentence. I brought all that material up to the front to show why Raskolnikov was in such dreadful circumstances. It is almost impossible now for us to imagine what life was like for the poor in Russia at that time.

Q: You call the hero Rodya. Is this a diminutive term for Raskolnikov?

DS: Yes, Rodya Rominivich Raskolnikov. I tried to use diminutive language as much as possible because some of the Russian names are quite difficult. There is also a character in the book called Semen in the Russian form. For obvious reasons, I didn’t think it was a very good idea to use that.

Q: Did you watch any of the other versions?

DS: Oh goodness no. Deliberately not. I didn’t want to be influenced by what other people have done. I wanted to make my own decisions. A long time ago, I remember seeing a version of “Crime and Punishment” with Patrick Wymark portraying Porfiry. I forget who played Raskolnikov. And then when I was a younger man still, a French film of it. It seemed to me they took a passive view of Raskolnikov; they turned him into Dostoevsky’s classic, suffering figure. And one of the things I love that Patrick Dempsey has done is making him a figure of action. He is not just a weak, passive soul. He is a very strong and forceful character which, of course, he has to be to do the murder. And he has to be if the redemption is to have any meaning. But now, whenever I have a project like this, I try to avoid watching what other people have done because I don’t want to be influenced by them.

Q: Is there anything else you want to say about this project?

DS: It is very difficult for me to judge what the effect of this TV movie will be because I was given a job to do, which I would like to think that I have done well. I hope that people will find meaning in it. I know that beautiful acting work was done in Budapest and I hope that is recognized. And both Patrick Dempsey and Ben Kingsley give quite wonderful performances. I hope this telecast expands people’s minds beyond traditional concepts as to what is traditionally done on American network television. This is an oddball one. And I hope it is successful in what it attempts to do.

Janet