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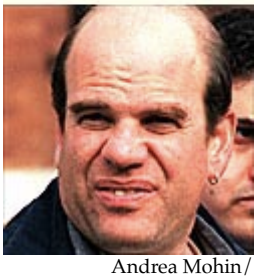
Who Gets to Tell a Black Story?

A White Journalist Wrote It.
A Black Director Fought to Own It.

By JANNY SCOTT

BALTIMORE -- David Simon was white but he knew he could write black people. Maybe not all black people but the ones he had known in Baltimore, where he had been a crime reporter for 14 years. He had spent a year on a Baltimore drug corner and written a book that had done something almost unheard of: It had shown black inner-city drug addicts as complex and startlingly human.

So Mr. Simon was not thinking much about his whiteness when he walked into the Los Angeles offices of HBO in January 1998 and set about trying to interest three white programming executives in the improbable idea of making the book into a television series.



Andrea Mohin/ The New York Times

Director Charles S. Dutton, above, and author David Simon.

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No one talked about race at that meeting. At least, not directly. No one remarked upon the fact that Mr. Simon was white and that nearly everyone in his book was black. Nor did anyone mention that HBO was not about to make a series about black drug addicts created by, as one HBO executive put it later, "a bunch of white guys."

Instead, the executives asked Mr. Simon a lot of questions. How did black people in Baltimore react when his book, "The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood," came out? What did the mayor, who was black, say? What would happen if HBO were to make the series, and shoot it in Baltimore, and protests broke out?

Then they asked him to suggest a writing partner.

He offered two names. One was James Yoshimura, an Asian-American playwright and television writer he had worked with on "Homicide:

Life on the Street," the NBC series based on Mr. Simon's first book. The other was David Mills, an African-American writer and frie Mr. Simon's since college, who had recently been nominated for Emmys for episodes of "NYPD Blue."

Mr. Simon suggested Mr. Yoshimura and Mr. Mills for the same reason, he said later: He liked working with them. He did not feel he needed a black writer to help him tell a black story. He had spent his career as a white reporter in a mostly black town. He had a good ear and had paid attention in a way he knew most white people did not.

He was not unaware, however, that Mr. Mills might have special appeal for HBO. It was apparent from the line of questioning that a black writer was high on HBO's priority list. And, as Mr. Simon put it, as soon as the bait was dangled in the water, the fish leapt onto the hook.

At the mention of Mr. Mills, a look shot between two of the executives, Kary Antholis and Anne Thomopoulos. Mr. Antholis had been following Mr. Mills's career. He had even mentioned him to Ms. Thomopoulos -- as a smart writer who had worked at the highest levels of television, and who also happened to be black.

Do you know David Mills? one of them asked Mr. Simon.

Yes.

Could you get him to work on this project?

Sure.

Within minutes, Mr. Simon had a deal, HBO had a miniseries and Mr. Mills had a new job as Mr. Simon's writing partner and fellow executive producer.

The Risk and the Buzz

A miniseries about drug addicts was risky television. But it appealed to Chris Albrecht, the president for original programming at HBO, because HBO defined itself by doing what broadcast networks would not. That approach had earned HBO the admiration of critics, lots of Emmys and an expanding audience of subscribers, a fifth to a quarter of them black.

CHART: Race and Television
Who is watching it? And who is creating it?

"The Corner" would not need a mass audience on HBO, because HBO did not make its money off commercials. What HBO wanted was attention and buzz. If the series could be shot quickly in the summer and fall of 1999 and put on the air the following April, it would be in Emmy voters' minds when they voted in June.

But no matter how good "The Corner" might be, Mr. Albrecht said later, there would be black people who would want to know wh HBO was doing it at all. They would forget "Introducing Doroth Dandridge," "Laurel Avenue," "The Tuskegee Airmen," "Miss Ev Boys." The question would be, Why are you portraying black pe that way?

HBO needed African-Americans involved for two reasons, Mr. Albrecht said: for creative reasons and for public relations.

"I really still wanted to find somebody who would be my . . . " Mr. Albrecht recalled later in his office in midtown Manhattan, choosing his words, "who would be an additional, uh. . . . " He paused, then used a vulgar expression for a person capable of detecting pretentious nonsense. "You know?"

He wanted Charles S. Dutton to direct "The Corner."

If anyone knew Baltimore's corners, it was Mr. Dutton. He had grown up in the city and spent his early years on its streets, where rock fighting -- snowball fighting, except with rocks -- earned him the lifelong nickname Roc. His only sister was a recovering cocaine addict. His only brother, who died of AIDS in 1993 at age 44, had been a heroin addict for nearly 25 years.

What had saved Charles Dutton was prison. He dropped out of school at 12 and pleaded guilty to manslaughter at 17, after stabbing a black man who had pulled a knife on him in a fight. He served two years. Then he was sent back for weapons possession, fought with a white guard, and ended up serving another seven and a half.

The tale of his redemption is well known. He grabbed an anthology of plays by black playwrights on his way into solitary confinement one day. By the light under the cell door, he read "Day of Absence," a social satire by Douglas Turner Ward. He was so taken with it, he organized a production, starred in it and discovered what he had been put on earth to do.

He formed a drama group that performed Shakespeare and Arthur Miller. He got his high school equivalency certificate and a junior college degree in prison, went to Towson State University in Maryland and Yale Drama School while on parole, and won his first Tony nomination for his performance in the August Wilson play "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" on Broadway in 1984.

After a performance of "The Piano Lesson" by Mr. Wilson in 1990, Mr. Albrecht introduced himself to Mr. Dutton. He then lured him to Los Angeles to star in his own television program, "Roc." The sitcom, in which Mr. Dutton played a garbage man, Roc Emerson, appeared on Fox for three tumultuous seasons starting in 1991.

Mr. Dutton was not overjoyed with Hollywood. On stage he had felt he could change the world, he said earlier this year. He had found the closest thing he knew to a utopian, race-neutral place. But he arrived in Hollywood suspicious of half-hour television and determined, as he put it, that no one would make a monkey out of him in prime time.

Andrea Mohin/ The New York Times

Director Charles S. Dutton, center, talking with actor T.K. Carter, far left, who plays Gary McCullough, on the set of "The Corner," on location in Baltimore.

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To accomplish that, he spent much of his three years "stomping, kicking and being a despot," he recalled. Then he moved on to movies, everything from "Cry, the Beloved Country" and "Alien 3" to "Cookie's Fortune" and Spike Lee's "Get on the Bus." And he became an outspoken critic of racism in Hollywood.

"There isn't a single black person in Hollywood with any power," he said last fall. "This isn't paranoia. Because if I stood in a room with every major black star, just talking, then I would hear the same things out of their mouths that are coming out of mine. Multimillionaires. The main thing you'll hear is, 'Whenever I take a project, I can't get it done unless I have a white partner.'

"In other words, if Denzel Washington, Danny Glover, Morgan Freeman, Wesley Snipes, Laurence Fishburne, if they went to a studio and said, 'I want to do the movie of Hannibal.' They'll say, 'Yeah, well, we have to call in Al Pacino or the latest young Italian actor to play Scipio,' the guy who defeated Hannibal many years after all his conquests. And, damn it, that's who the story will center around."

In the world beyond Hollywood, Mr. Dutton, who is 49, was widely admired. A striking figure with a stocky build, shaved head and eloquent face, he often traveled the country, speaking at small black colleges and in prisons. He was respected by working-class and upper-middle-class blacks alike, and by many whites.

HBO sent the scripts to Mr. Dutton and no one else.

At first he said no. He had directed just one movie, an HBO film called "First-Time Felon." But he was not interested in another urban drama, especially one about drugs. "I had a certain bitterness and anger with family members who allowed themselves to be destroyed that way," he recalled. "I had to ask myself, do I want to take this emotional journey through this world?"

Yet the scripts intrigued him. What he admired about the story was that it was told from the addicts' perspective, not some glamorized

dealer's. It made clear what he had long seen as the hypocrisy of the war on drugs. And it could serve, he said, as a raw reminder of element of society that Americans chose to forget.

HBO offered him two episodes. Then four. Then all six. The sho schedule would be a killer, but doing all six might give him a degree of control that television directors rarely had. He would take a bath financially, he said later, because he made his real money as an actor. But he wanted to prove he had the stamina and the concentration to pull it off.

In what he would later call a momentary lapse of sanity, he said yes. He had come to respect Mr. Simon and Mr. Mills, he said shortly after accepting the job. But, as he also said, there would not be one moment when he would forget that "it's a white writer and a white producer and it's HBO and a black director."

And no matter how many supportive black people HBO would line up, the job of defending the miniseries would fall to him. "I'm going to have to be the person saying, 'Hey, y'all, it's cool,' " he once said, chuckling at his impersonation of himself. " 'Ain't no sense in gettin' upset. This is a *goooood* movie. Go watch it. Order HBO!' "

The Crew Is Too White

On July 22, Mr. Dutton laid eyes on his crew for the first time.

They were gathered at the intersection of Montford Avenue and Oliver Street, a broken-down place with a bar, a corner store, a boarded-up deli and little else. Three weeks before they were to start shooting, the heads of the various departments, newly hired by the producers, had come with the producers and several HBO executives to scout their principal location.

Mr. Dutton arrived separately. He slid out of his car and focused on the stream of men and women emerging from a couple of vans.

They weren't all white. But almost.

It was not as if the producers hadn't known that he wanted a racially mixed crew. He had brought up the subject with the unit production manager, Nina Kostroff Noble, on his first day in Baltimore: I'm not going into the ghettos of Baltimore city for a whole damn summer with an all-white crew, he would remember saying. And if you guys were smart, you wouldn't either.

What makes you think it's going to be all white? she had responded.

It was always the same, Mr. Dutton said later. The business was "full of nepotism and cliquism." Italians hired Italians, Asians hired Asians. "So why is it a problem when it's a black project? Every black project that I've worked on, with the exception of the Spike Lee movies,

you've got to go through this every time. You've got to say, 'Why can't we have some more black folks on the crew?' "

Not that Mr. Dutton wanted an all-black crew. Having healthy b representation was a matter of pride and fairness, but he also be it was more fun when a crew was truly diverse. For a series about black addicts, filmed in East Baltimore, he thought the right percentage of African-Americans was their percentage in the city, roughly 65 percent.

Affecting an earnest white voice, he mocked the response he got in Hollywood whenever he complained: Are you saying the studios are *deliberately* not hiring black people? No, he said, they didn't go into a room and say: "You know, we ain't hiring no damn black people. Everyone agreed? And here's the story if we get questioned about it."

It just came naturally, without thinking. And if you confronted them, they would say: "Hey, my next-door neighbor is black. My best friend is black." You could throw racism two inches in front of white peoples' faces and they still wouldn't see it, Mr. Dutton said. Or they'd deny it and say you were the one causing the problems.

"There isn't a black actor in Hollywood, on the star level or the lowest level, who doesn't in private vehemently rail against the industry," he said. "The biggest stars. The hugest stars. Because somewhere along the line they are still reminded, 'You know something? You're a big star but you're just another nigger.'

"And so either you succumb to it and you roll over and you grin and you bear it and you shuck and you jive and you laugh when it ain't funny and you scratch when it ain't itching. And you go about being a good little boy and you're patted on the head and they give you the next little movie. And you look around and there ain't no black folks on that one, either."

He paused, then added: "But those that do that will probably rot in hell somewhere."

At Montford and Oliver, he could hear the first assistant director starting to introduce him: "This is the director, Charles Dutton." Instead of walking over and shaking hands, he turned his back on them all and crossed the street.

It would have been phony, he said later, to shake hands and grin and act as if everything were all right. So, flanked by his black bodyguard and his black driver, he went to work studying the location. He figured everybody got the message: I'm not doing this with a white crew. Sorry. Nothing personal.

Nina Noble, the unit production manager, was upset. She recognized the problem immediately. But Mr. Dutton was not behaving like the

captain of the ship, she said later. Some of the black crew members felt like tokens; some whites felt slapped in the face, she said. They her so.

Ms. Noble was white, but she prided herself on being colorblind her work. In the case of "The Corner," she had intended to go farther than usual to hire a racially mixed crew. She and Mr. Simon and the other producers had discussed it at length. None of them wanted anyone in the community, cast or crew feeling exploited or degraded.

But there were not many black technicians in the business, especially in Baltimore, Ms. Noble said later. And it was expensive to bring them in from other cities and house them. When she had asked one of the unions if it had a minority roster, she had been warned against trying to violate seniority rules.

Even so, the crew she had begun putting together already included a number of African-Americans. Unfortunately, some of them were not there that day, because they were not department heads. And one of those who were there might have been mistaken for white. "O.K.," Ms. Noble said later. "It's not enough that we have people who are black. We have to hire people with dark skin."

She had been hoping that Mr. Dutton, after several weeks on the job, had begun to deal with everyone on what she called "more a personal level and less on a racial level."

"I guess I was wrong about that," she said.

Later that day, Mr. Dutton spoke with one of the visiting HBO executives, who then spoke with Ms. Noble and Robert F. Colesberry, the third executive producer. Along with Mr. Simon, they all agreed they had to try even harder to hire more African-Americans onto the crew.

In the following weeks, they hired a black script supervisor, hairdresser, director's assistant and production assistant, all of them from out of town. The Teamsters came up with three black drivers. By the end of production, the shooting crew consisted of 41 white people and 33 black people, by Ms. Noble's count.

Many crew members said it was the most racially mixed crew they had ever seen. It was a source of satisfaction for many people, including Mr. Simon, who believed that the white people had learned from the experience. He said later: "If Charles wanted us to be 65 percent, and if inertia would have made us 10 or 15 percent, somewhere in between is where we ended up. And I don't know what perfect is."

Mr. Dutton thought he did. And where they had ended up was not perfect.

That day would remain a defining moment for him. "I didn't see anything but white people, white people, white people," he said " 'Hey, we're making a movie about these black people and *we're* experts.' Absolutely, I felt like, well, hold it. The way to impress with your liberalism or your humanity or your honesty or your integrity where the black community is concerned is to share the damn pot."

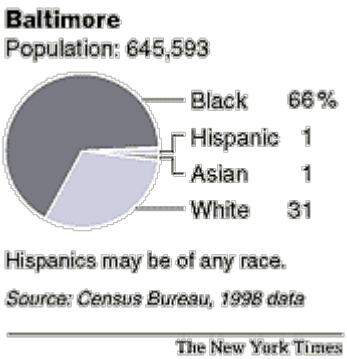
Something lingered after that day, Mr. Simon remarked many months later. A few people told him they felt that whiteness was a liability on the set, he said. If they got their feelings hurt, it could be a hard shoot. But he believed the wrong move at that moment was to get offended. It solved nothing.

"There are white people for whom that moment of having somebody be standoffish or curt or unpleasant, or even the veiled suggestion that race is a barrier, that ends it," Mr. Simon said. If there was one thing that being a white reporter in a mostly black city had taught him, it was what could be gained by not walking away.

A Long Way From Silver Spring

Mr. Simon, who is 39, grew up in a mostly white world, the youngest of three children in a liberal Democratic household in Silver Spring, Md., in which books and newspapers were revered and argument was sport. He went to suburban public schools that were heavily white. He recalls as a child having heard a racial epithet used only twice, but having known enough to be indignant.

Race was rarely discussed at home, but equality was a given. Mr. Simon's father was the director of public relations and a speechwriter for B'nai B'rith. His mother worked for several years for a group called the Negro Student Fund, which helped underachieving public school students move to independent schools.



• CHART: Race and Television

Mr. Simon learned about race in Baltimore. The Sun hired him out of the University of Maryland in 1983. Race was out in the open in Baltimore in a way he had never seen before. It was no big deal, he said, to walk into a bar in Highlandtown and hear white people talking about black folks, or to meet a black person and be told everything that was wrong with white people, no offense.

Race seemed to permeate everything in Baltimore: housing, education, politics, criminal justice. It was as if the city had swallowed whole every other trend but had choked on race, he said. The biggest crime story was drugs, and intravenous drug use in Baltimore occurred

predominantly among African-Americans. To be a decent reporter, he had to learn to listen to black people.

In 1988, Mr. Simon spent a year with the Baltimore Police Department's homicide unit, doing the reporting for what becar 1991 book, "Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets." Waiting around at crime scenes and in people's houses, he ended up shooting the breeze for hours upon hours with people the police encountered on cases.

"So then the trick becomes: can I just be patient enough not to ask every question at once, to laugh only at the jokes that they tell when they're funny, and not to laugh at the ones that, if you laugh at them, they know you're full up with it, and to venture your own joke about something," Mr. Simon recalled.

At The Sun, he made a specialty of turning obscure murders into full-blown dramatic narratives. Gregarious, voluble and funny, he believed he could talk to anybody.

And every time someone rendered himself or herself human, he said, "it was an argument against whatever racial simplicities you've constructed in your mind."

In 1993, he took a leave of absence and went to work on "The Corner" with a former police detective named Edward Burns, also white, who believed that the drug war had led the police badly astray, and who shared with Mr. Simon the impulse to demonstrate to the credit-card-carrying world that the people the drug war had demonized had lives and sensibilities and deserved understanding.

Mr. Simon and Mr. Burns picked the intersection of Fayette and Monroe Streets, one of a hundred open-air drug markets in a city said to have the highest rate of heroin use of any in the country. They went every day. They talked, joked, hung around, listened, eventually winning the confidence of dozens of people whose stories would become the soul of the book.

When "The Corner" came out in 1997, the Rev. Frank Reid, a fifth-generation African Methodist Episcopal minister and pastor of the largest African-American church in Baltimore, based sermons on it. He held a party to celebrate it, and 500 people showed up.

Mr. Simon had leapt a chasm few white people cross, Mr. Mills, his friend and writing partner, believed. He had written about black addicts not through a microscope but by sitting next to them. He had learned the language, sensibility and sense of humor of the ghetto, a sensibility Mr. Mills knew from his childhood. And he had gotten more intimately involved with his subjects than Mr. Mills could imagine doing himself.

Mr. Simon's newspaper articles, meanwhile, looked less and less like what normally turns up in a newspaper. They began with parag like " 'You don't look so good,' says the cop, smiling. 'You look li death.' " Then an editor at the Sun accused him of ennobling cri Disgusted, he left in 1995. He went to work as a writer and prod on "Homicide."

That the subjects of his journalism were often black was not what drew Mr. Simon to them, he insisted earlier this year. Race had simply made the territory seem less accessible, so their voices had not been heard. There were things he missed because he was white, he said. But there were other things a black writer from that world might have missed because he or she was too close.

Occasionally, he found himself accused of exploitation.

"I'm losing patience with the idea of it being exploitive," he said. "Except to acknowledge that in one sense all journalism is exploitive. Janet Malcolm was right. We're all selling used cars. And any journalist who tries to say we're not is lying through his teeth.

"The only ethic that I can find that you can hang your hat on says: Now that I have the material, how do I treat my subjects? Do I accord them all the humanity they deserve, or do I write a crude and simplistic exposé?"

Faces From the Old Days

The shooting schedule in Baltimore was relentless: 12- and 13-hour days, five days a week, no end in sight. By early October, Mr. Dutton had not slept eight hours straight since August. The production was on time and under budget. But at times the film was being written, cast, shot and edited almost simultaneously.

It was emotionally grueling, too. Day in and day out, they were shooting in the depths of the world they were depicting, in the decaying row house neighborhoods that in Baltimore seem to stagger on forever, with the drug corners, tumbledown bars, boarded-up windows, rumble of demolition trucks, shriek of sirens. Everywhere, there were children.

Every day people would turn up to watch, a shifting collection of neighborhood residents, acquaintances of Mr. Dutton, survivors from his prison drama group, aspiring actors and hangers-on -- more than a few of whom found their way into small parts in the series, blurring the boundary between the film and the street.

For Mr. Dutton, being back in the old neighborhood was not necessarily fun -- the handshaking, embracing, hearing sob stories, shelling out money, seeing people he had once idolized who had gone nowhere. He kept waiting for someone, he said, just someone, to

arrive by car, not on foot, and get out with kids and a wife and everyone looking healthy.

Mr. Simon was around, too, along with many of the people from book. Of those who had not died, some were clean and turning lives around. Mr. Simon had remained close to them. Now he found joy in helping them get small roles, for which those in speaking parts could rake in the princely Screen Actors Guild rate of $596 a day.

Mr. Mills visited the set rarely. What he loved was the solitary process of writing, so he passed his days in the office, writing and fine-tuning scripts. Mr. Simon let him try anything, and relied on him. But there was a well-defined hierarchy, Mr. Mills observed without resentment. "The Corner" was Mr. Simon's project; he was there to serve Mr. Simon's vision.

They had first worked together on the University of Maryland student newspaper and Mr. Mills, like Mr. Simon, had gone into journalism. They had written their first television script together, for "Homicide," in 1992, winning an award from the Writers Guild of America. Mr. Mills had then quit his job at The Washington Post to become a television writer. Their friendship, they both said, had long ago moved well beyond the issue of race. And that appeared to be the truth.

For the first few weeks of production, Mr. Simon was on the set every day, often in the background, watching or talking with Mr. Colesberry and Ms. Noble, and occasionally Mr. Dutton. Then, after a few weeks, he began coming less often. At the time, he said he had pulled back because he was confident that the production was in good hands. But later, he said he had also begun to sense that Mr. Dutton responded better to Mr. Colesberry than to him. Mr. Dutton seemed distant, more curt. Mr. Simon said he figured Mr. Dutton was feeling the pressure, like everyone.

In fact, Mr. Dutton had come to distrust Mr. Simon.

"As good as some of this material is, I'm wondering where his real heart is in this," he said in October. "Is this really and truly an effort to do something about this?" No matter how sincere Mr. Simon was, he was "taking somebody else's misery and making a dollar off of it. Which can't be denied, whether he's the most sincere goddamn white man in the world."

Where the distrust had started, Mr. Dutton could not say for sure.

Early on, he had gotten the impression through HBO that Mr. Simon and Mr. Mills had doubts about having him direct all six episodes. Then, the initial encounter with the crew had badly soured his enthusiasm. He blamed Mr. Simon, in part; if his niche was going to be writing about black people in Baltimore, then he should have made

sure there were more behind the camera.

From the first days of the shoot, Mr. Dutton said, Mr. Simon was getting on his nerves. Mr. Dutton was not accustomed to having a writer on set, and he was not interested in hearing how Mr. Simon envisioned particular scenes. There always seemed to be people, like Mr. Simon and Ms. Noble, whispering in corners.

He hated to say he felt unappreciated. But he did feel monitored, judged and second-guessed. The only reason he had not cussed somebody out was because he had to get through the shoot. If he had gotten angry, it would have been intimidating and disruptive. To keep the peace, he let things go.

He was suspicious of white writers, he said at the time. Every aspect of black life had been distorted by white people, he said, and the series was about an element of society that he knew white people detested. He would have felt more comfortable, he said, if the writer had been black. As for Mr. Mills, Mr. Dutton felt he knew little about him; when they had first met, he had not even realized that the light-skinned Mr. Mills was black.

"I know that David Simon can visit and sit with as many black folks in this city as he wants to," Mr. Dutton said one day in late September, standing on a crumbling stretch of sidewalk in the rain. "They can pay the families to get the stories. They can listen and walk around with dope fiends. They can write about murders, and they still won't know a damn thing about black people. Not this, you know. Not this."

He added: "I know the pulse of *this*. I know what people think the minute they walk out them doors. I know what mothers feel when their sons and daughters walk out of the house to go to school. I know what it feels like to kill somebody. I know what it feels like to get shot. I know what it feels like that people be looking to kill me. I don't have to show up as a crime journalist after the fact."

A Painful Scene

The scene on the schedule for Columbus Day was especially difficult.

Mr. Simon had watched firsthand the event it was based on, back in 1993. Two addicts he had been following had emerged from a courtroom, accompanied by their mothers. Suddenly, one of the mothers had exploded at the other, raving and hurling obscenities in the crowded corridor.

Mr. Simon had considered leaving the scene out of the script; it had been painful to witness and painful for the mother on the receiving end.

But it had seemed essential, showing the way the corner world kept intruding on people's attempts to lead ordinary lives. Mr. Simon and Mr. Mills had ended up including it, but toned down the language.

Will Hart/ HBO

Brian O'Neill, left, and Sean Nelson in the HBO mini-series "The Corner."

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The performance could not be cartoonish, the producers had agreed; it could not be an eye-popping, head-rolling, sitcom stereotype. But the actors who had auditioned for the part had leaned in that direction. So the producers had gone to the expense of importing a New York actor to play the part of the angry mother.

Privately, Mr. Dutton found the scene embarrassing. "There was something about it that was so ghetto, so stereotypical ghetto," he said later. Not that he doubted that it had happened. But there would be black viewers who would ask, Why did you have to show that? And there would be white people who would think, Oh, yeah, that is just how they are.

When HBO had first approached him, he had had reservations about exposing the world of the corner. Not just those aspects that were embarrassing but those that felt intimate and precious, he said later. Now, he said, he sometimes felt he was giving Mr. Simon more than he could have imagined. He felt he was giving away secrets.

He remembered a performance of "The Piano Lesson" on Broadway. Dionne Warwick had been in the audience and had walked out during the second act. Months later, she told him why. "She said she couldn't take it anymore," Mr. Dutton remembered. "Because we were letting white folks in on all of our sacred little things. It was almost like that's all we had, or have."

On Columbus Day Mr. Simon was on set, a courthouse in East Baltimore. He was standing off the corridor where Mr. Dutton, intense and absorbed, was having the actors repeatedly rehearse the scene. The corridor was crowded with extras hired for the day to mill around in the background.

Mr. Simon was watching the extras. They kept failing to react to the commotion between the mothers. A couple of women looked so oblivious and white-bread, it was funny. A man playing one of the bailiffs kept going to great lengths to make sure he would be in the shot. Mr. Simon, who knew him, would remember later that he had shared a laugh with the man about that.

Meanwhile, the actor playing the raving mother was dead on. It was

the moment Mr. Simon had witnessed in another courthouse corridor six years earlier, reinvented by a television production crew, transformed by artifice. He was elated. He laughed again.

Out of the corner of his eye, at one point, Mr. Dutton caught sigl Mr. Simon laughing. It made him furious.

He shot Mr. Simon an angry look. Mr. Simon seemed to turn away.

Maybe he had misinterpreted that laugh, Mr. Dutton said later. But he didn't think so. One of the actors had noticed it, too. "Why has he got to be laughing at *this* scene?" Mr. Dutton would remember the actor asking.

Mr. Dutton never mentioned the moment to Mr. Simon. But he said privately that a black writer would never have laughed. Not even a snicker. "Because they would have even felt a little bit of shame in it. It boils down to nobody wants to look in the mirror and see ugliness. Nobody wants to look in the mirror and see ignorance."

Months later, Mr. Simon would remember an angry look. He said he had assumed Mr. Dutton thought he was meddling, because he had asked one of the assistant directors to get the extras in the background to react.

Maybe he should have been more sensitive, he said. But how could he have been? The moment between the mothers had been painful to witness, but its power was attenuated six years later. If it had not been that moment, it could have been 10 others. He had laughed at 10 other things that were not funny in reality but were funny in the process of representing them.

"I know what I wasn't laughing at," Mr. Simon said earlier this spring. "I wasn't laughing at somebody who was black and poor and uncouth making a spectacle of themself in a hallway. That's the one thing that wouldn't have been funny to me, and wasn't when it happened."

One Connection

If there was one thing Mr. Simon and Mr. Dutton could talk about, it was Baltimore street lore. Mr. Simon loved the crime history of Baltimore the way other writers loved stories about the mob. Baltimore's organized crime was its black drug trade. The most enjoyable conversations Mr. Simon and Mr. Dutton had were about that world.

For years, Mr. Simon had believed there was a great story to be told about the early 1960's period in Baltimore when men who had made their money as hustlers and gamblers moved

into drugs. It was a moment of reckoning, he thought. That story, perhaps wed to the War of the Roses, as represented in Shakespeare's history plays, had the makings of a classic black gangster film.

Andrea Mohin/ The New York Times

Producer and screenwriter David Mills, left, director Charles S. Dutton, center, and Executive producer and author David Simon.

- MORE PHOTOS

At its center might be the character of Melvin Williams, who was said to have risen from the pool halls of Pennsylvania Avenue in Baltimore to lay the groundwork for the heroin industry that then engulfed the city. Mr. Simon had written a five-part series about Mr. Williams's drug empire for The Sun in 1987. Mr. Dutton, it turned out, had known Mr. Williams since childhood.

Looking back, Mr. Dutton would marvel that Mr. Simon had first mentioned the idea to him not long after they met. And it had come up again and again in the following months. Just in passing, Mr. Simon said. But Mr. Dutton believed he knew what Mr. Simon was getting at. In late October, he mentioned to Mr. Simon that he liked the idea of the project, too.

So, four days before the end of the "Corner" shoot, Mr. Simon made his way over to Mr. Dutton during a break. He gave him a copy of the newspaper series and laid out his idea in detail. On the sidewalk outside the fast-food restaurant where they were shooting, they fell deep into conversation, then continued inside, squashed side by side in undersized plastic chairs.

Mr. Simon believed he would have a hard time selling the idea to a studio without Mr. Dutton, he said later, and an easier time persuading Mr. Williams to cooperate if Mr. Dutton's name were attached. Mr. Dutton knew that world, had the draw to get the project made and would even be great in the role of a police lieutenant colonel who was key to the story.

Similarly, Mr. Dutton believed that Mr. Simon would have the screenwriting reputation needed to win over a studio, he said later. Mr. Simon had the passion needed to get the project off the ground. He would have access to older police officials. And, Mr. Dutton said, he might be the only person Mr. Williams and others would open up to.

"I'm going to be the first one to admit, the idea is very, very, very clever," he said later, referring to Mr. Simon's choice of the War of the Roses as a frame for the story. "If more writers would think of those kinds of clever devices, a lot of those so-called black films in that

genre would be a lot more interesting."

By early November, the editors had pieced together the first epi
of "The Corner." Seeing those rough assemblages, Mr. Dutton th
he and Mr. Simon and Mr. Mills were on the same page about m
things after all. He was struck by how distinct and memorable each character was. Watching a scene in which an addict was stabbed to death, he had found himself weeping.

Maybe he had not given Mr. Simon enough credit, he had begun to think. "All the credit from the literary point of it, but from the humanity point of it, I was a little guarded," he said. On the other hand, it was a two-way street, he insisted; he remained convinced that Mr. Simon had had doubts about him, too.

In the final days of shooting, Mr. Dutton said, he took a step back and watched Mr. Simon with some of the "real people" from the book. Mr. Dutton was impressed by the emotional bond between them, and by Mr. Simon's commitment to remain involved. "If he has the patience for it," Mr. Dutton said, "I envy him."

Mr. Simon was truly fascinated by the world of the corner, Mr. Dutton believed. "There are times when he's been around the real people in this, I would look at him from afar and he'd be totally enraptured," he observed one day. And Mr. Dutton would be sure that the person Mr. Simon was listening to was full of it. Without hearing a word, he said, he could tell.

"So, in that regard, I have a soft spot for David," he said, adding: "Sometimes I shake my head and I say, 'Poor boy, if he's going for that.' But then other times I'm wary. Because, wait a minute, is this guy as nonchalant as he seems?"

Editing by Committee

When the shoot ended, Mr. Simon, Mr. Mills and Mr. Colesberry moved to Manhattan and set up shop in an editing studio in TriBeCa to work on their cuts. Mr. Dutton kept his distance, often working on his own cuts in a midtown hotel. His creative juices flowed better there, he said. But it also felt awkward in TriBeCa, "those guys tiptoeing around me."

Under the rules of television, the producers had the power to overrule Mr. Dutton on cutting the series. He submitted his director's cut of each episode, then they took it and made theirs. Mr. Dutton disliked many of the flashbacks that had been shot: "I'd say 3 percent work. The other 97 percent don't," he said one day. He took some out -- and the producers put some back.

He also chose particular takes of certain scenes, only to have the producers replace them with selections of their own. They were

eviscerating one of the characters, Mr. Dutton complained privately. He hated their musical choices, too. Using blues music for the ti theme was, to him, "the typical white-boy idea of what black life like."

Still, he kept his complaints to himself. The producers had the right to do what they were doing. So why bother objecting?

By late December he was not sure he would be showing up in Pasadena in mid-January to help promote the series at a semiannual meeting of television critics. "I could say, 'I wish you guys well, but I'm unavailable,' " he said. "I could be shooting a picture in London." Or, he said, he could be on his farm in Maryland, shoveling manure.

But on Jan. 19, there he was in Pasadena. Minutes before the preview, he stalked into the room at the Ritz Carlton where the HBO contingent was waiting. He seemed barely able to bring himself to say hello to Mr. Simon, Mr. Colesberry and Mr. Mills. "I didn't know why Charles was so mad," Mr. Simon said later. "I thought it was the cuts."

Mr. Simon resolved not to let the day end without inviting Mr. Dutton to have a drink and talk things over. Mr. Dutton had plans but took Mr. Simon's cell phone number, just in case. It felt as though the ice was cracking, Mr. Simon said later. Then Mr. Dutton never called. When they bumped into each other the next morning, Mr. Dutton explained cheerfully that he had been out late.

Back on the East Coast, HBO asked Mr. Dutton at the last minute to film a personal preamble to the series, describing his reasons for making it. The idea worried Mr. Simon and Mr. Mills; they did not want HBO apologizing for the series in advance. They shipped a draft script to Mr. Dutton. But he sent back a message saying he would write the preamble himself.

Then, two days before he was to shoot it in Baltimore, an HBO executive informed Mr. Simon, Mr. Mills and Mr. Colesberry that Mr. Dutton did not want them there. They were stung but complied. So, on a cold Saturday in early March, Mr. Dutton returned one more time to Montford and Oliver and filmed his 90-second introduction, alone.

"I didn't need two cents from anybody," Mr. Dutton said later. "I didn't want five opinions on how we should shoot it or any genius ideas for rewriting. I don't even know why anybody wanted to be there. If they wanted to be there because they were worried about what Charles Dutton was going to do, then that's indicative of the entire shoot."

"The Corner" had its premiere at 10 p.m. on Sunday, April 16. Apart from a few lukewarm notices, one in The New York Times, the reviews were unanimous in their admiration: "ferociously written," "superbly directed," "spectacularly acted," "unblinkingly honest." In The Washington Post, Tom Shales called the series "an act of

enlightenment, raw and shattering and strangely, inexplicably, beautiful."

Week after week, the ratings were unusually high for HBO in th time slot, especially in African-American households. There wa of the black backlash everyone had feared. Sales of Mr. Simon and Mr. Burns's book surged. People seemed stunned by the series' realism. Watching it at home, Mr. Dutton found himself struck again by the writing.

"I have to say the writing is absolutely brilliant," he said, looking back on what Mr. Simon had accomplished. "Without a doubt, he captured the hell out of those lives. Whatever painstaking efforts he had to go through, to sit and live for a year on those corners, it is totally a credit to him to have put it down on paper in the noncompromising way that he did.

"That's what makes the piece as beautiful and strong as it is. That he didn't take any weak shortcuts to appease a certain element of society, that he presented it just as it was told to him and just the way he observed it and just the way he analyzed it. In a nutshell, it's absolutely remarkable what he did."

About This Series

Two generations after the end of legal discrimination, race still ignites political debates -- over Civil War flags, for example, or police profiling. But the wider public discussion of race relations seems muted by a full-employment economy and by a sense, particularly among many whites, that the time of large social remedies is past. Race relations are being defined less by political action than by daily experience, in schools, in sports arenas, in pop culture and at worship, and especially in the workplace. These encounters -- race relations in the most literal, everyday sense -- make up this series of reports, the outcome of a yearlong examination by a team of Times reporters.

With distance, Mr. Dutton believed he had let the strains of the production cloud his judgment. He had failed to see that Mr. Simon had been as nervous about the project as anyone, maybe more so, he said. Mr. Simon was probably worried about career, life, limb, everything, if it had come out badly.

Mr. Simon, meanwhile, continued to raise the Pennsylvania Avenue idea with Mr. Dutton when they saw each other. He had been rereading Shakespeare's history plays and had begun trying to contact Melvin Williams in prison. He was planning to write an outline and send it to Mr. Dutton. It had begun to seem possible that they might eventually work together again.

"I can't express to you how minimal whatever problems Charles and I had were compared to how I felt when I went onto that corner in 1993," Mr. Simon said. "People were a lot more direct about not wanting us there on that corner than Charles was when I was on set. The trick was coming back every day. Most people's opinions changed. To an extent, I had 60 days with Charles. I think by the 60th day his impressions might have been different. If not, I would suggest

60 more might help. Or 120.

"Now, racially, in this country, you don't usually get that kind of prolonged experience. Either people bend over backwards to get along or they don't and they steer clear. But I've sort of been trai and you could call it crassly manipulative, because I want the book or I want the movie to be better -- to stay put."

"If he thinks I was a bastard to work with, I don't think he was so easy to work with, either," he said a couple of days later. "But I would still do it a second time, based on the quality of the work that occurred. I know this: This time directing for him, he has directed something that's better because I wrote it, and I've written something that's better because he directed it.

"If we come out of it the second time and we've managed not to acquire some degree of understanding of our own foibles and insensitivities and misunderstandings, if we wind up in this exact same moment, then we're idiots. We ought to be able to learn."
