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## Law & Order's Balcer uses yearbook for names



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MONTREAL — Lower Canada College has provided some stellar members of society. Its alumni book has also yielded the names for some crooks, cops and crime victims on TV's most popular police dramas.

"I have the LCC alumni book and I can just throw a dart at it and I have a name," says a grinning Rene Balcer, executive producer of Law & Order: Criminal Intent and an alumni of the Montreal school. "That's the reason I do it.

"For me, it's just trying to come up with names all the time."

Balcer, a native Montrealer who now lives in Los Angeles, said the yearbook isn't the only source of character names for scripts.

"We did one whole episode (where) we used all the names of professional golfers - the obscure ones. We use hockey players. It's just a way of sending a hello.

"Some people get a kick out of it and some people enjoy being named after bad guys, the worse the better."

Law & Order: Criminal Intent is the third member of the growing Law & Order franchise that was born as a cops and lawyers procedural in 1990.

Besides Law & Order and Law and Order: Criminal Intent, there is also Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, about the New York police sex crimes unit. A reality spinoff, Crime and Punishment, which documents real cases in a California district attorney's office, returned this summer and Law & Order: Trial By Jury is set for its premiere early in 2005.

Balcer said a Russian version of Law & Order will also begin production in the next few months.

"Russian producers and writers will be taking these episodes and adapting them to the Russian reality and filming them in Moscow. It will be interesting to see how their filter will alter the view through this window.

"Will it be the Russian criminal justice system as it is on paper or as it is in reality or as it is in the dreams of their most progressive thinkers? Depending on which way it goes, it could either inspire or depress the Russian viewer.

"As one of the Russian producers told us: 'In Russia, we have many laws but not much order.'"

Balcer has been with the Law & Order franchise since the original started in 1990 and served as that show's head writer and executive producer.

Credited with leading Law & Order into the Top 10 shows during his years there, Emmy-winner Balcer was tapped by Law & Order creator Dick Wolf to create Criminal Intent in 2001 when it was decided to expand the highly successful brand further.

Balcer said there is a "universal fascination" with crime and punishment.

"It probably reflects a fascination with criminality, with breaking taboos, a need to understand what makes people do bad things," said the former journalist, adding it also probably reflects a fear of becoming a victim and a yearning for justice.

Law & Order: Trial by Jury will differ from the other shows in that it will follow a case from arraignment through to verdict and likely go inside the jury room.

Jerry Orbach, the venerable Det. Lennie Briscoe on Law & Order, will switch to the new show to lower his workload with a smaller part and Balcer said Courtney Vance, who plays Assistant District Attorney Ron Carver on Criminal Intent, will likely be part of Trial By Jury's rotating cast as well. That will be in addition to his Criminal Intent duties.

Balcer did acknowledge some concern about the number of spinoffs coming to TV. Besides the Law & Order franchise, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation has spawned CSI: Miami and will be joined by CSI: NY this fall.

"The spin-off is a double edged sword," he said, noting that while some people are excited to see more of their favourite brand, there are others who roll their eyes.

"I think there's probably a limit to the number of Law & Order spinoffs."

He acknowledged sometimes shows trip over themselves mining the same true crime stories.

"We thought crime was an unending renewable resource and we're finding that's not the case," Balcer joked, noting some tales have been found in Europe, Japan, Canada and as far back as the 1930s. "Everybody is trying to pick over the same crime stories so we have to dig a little further afield to come up with stuff.

"There's only so many crimes to go around. If you know any criminals, tell them to pick up the pace."

But he's not worried about so-called reality TV.

"They all have writers," he said. "They may not write actual dialogue for the contestants for The Bachelor or Survivor but they will write storylines for these characters and it's the result of interviews with these characters.

"They won't suggest 'why don't you say exactly this' but 'the next time you talk to Alison, you should talk about her mother.'"

Reality shows are "kind of a sugar shot for the networks. They get the boost but then they have the crash. It's really empty calories."

"The studios want to build a library, they want to build shows that will continue bringing revenue for years and years and years," said Balcer.

He pointed out that the thrill of the reality game shows is not necessarily the story but who wins. Once that's known, the interest is diluted and the shows don't stand up well in repeats.

"One hundred years from now people on Mars will be watching Law & Order reruns," he said. "They're not going to be watching reruns of The Apprentice."

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