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Law & Disorder

As one of TV's best and best-loved series launches a new spin-off, its creator grapples with the aftershocks of terror

By Robert Wilonsky / Dallas Observer

Rene Balcer, like you and everyone you know, can't stop talking about what we now refer to simply as The Attack. We may resume our lives, fall back into our routine until it again feels mundane and comforting, but sooner or later, The Attack becomes the only topic of conversation. As we count the missing and bury the dead, even from a distance, and piece together what little remains of our stock portfolios and send friends and family off to fight the unseen enemy, we wonder and fret: How will the carnage and chaos of September 11 change our lives? Or will it? After all, who has time to worry about toppled landmarks and forthcoming war when a new season of *Friends* is about to begin? Like the president says, it's time for America to get back to business: Just who *is* the father of Rachel's baby?

On September 10, maybe we cared a little too much about that question. On September 11 and in the days since, it was doubtful we cared at all about what we saw on TV, save for images of smoke and rubble and a president behind a lectern. Movies were held out of theaters. Networks postponed the beginning of the fall season. The Emmys were pushed back until October 7; now, there comes word that HBO, up for nearly 100 awards, isn't even sending representatives to the awards show, and others may follow. The entertainment industry hides its collective head in shame. *We're so pointless*, mutter studio

executives and record-label bosses, *so inane*.

And this, at last, is where Rene Balcer comes in. For 11 years, he has been a writer and executive producer on *Law & Order*, among the most successful and adored series in the history of the medium. On September 30, Balcer's name will be attached to the third installment in what has become a brand name: *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, which differs from its predecessors, including *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, in that each episode begins with a crime being committed. We see bad men and women doing bad things: stealing diamonds, for starters, or murdering the innocent with broken bottles. And then we see good men and women, including *Men in Black*'s Vincent D'Onofrio and *Oz*'s Kathryn Erbe, solving the crime. As always, there is the patented *Law & Order* twist. We cannot always trust what we see or what we think we know.

Balcer is credited as the show's co-creator, with Dick Wolf, and developer. It was his idea, more or less--his characters, his setting, his stories. It was born out of the ashes of one of Wolf's failed shows, *Crime & Punishment*, which aired briefly in 1993 and told essentially the same kind of tale: Criminals spilled their guts to the unseen Interrogator. At this moment, Balcer would no doubt prefer to talk about his new television show. There is no one better suited to promote *Criminal Intent*, one of the few new shows of the fall worthy of your attention.

But the conversation, of course, keeps coming back to The Attack. And with great reason--a few, actually. First of all, the three *Law & Order* series were to be part of a five-hour mini-series dealing with bioterrorism in New York City. Those five hours of television no longer exist: NBC, Studios USA (which makes *Law & Order*) and others involved with the show axed the mini-series. Most likely, it will never see the light of day--a decision, Balcer says, that was a no-brainer, as far as he was concerned, though there were some among the staff who believed it could be merely pushed back. Some of the people who had worked and invested a lot of time and effort into the mini-series may have entertained thoughts of finding a way of still doing it, says Balcer, who, the day before this interview (September 20), returned to Los Angeles after spending a few days in New York City with his wife, who lives in Manhattan. "But I think cooler heads prevailed. In the aftermath of such a big shock, everybody reacts differently, and it's hard to hold people accountable for what they do in a crisis and in the immediate aftermath."

Discussions have been taking place all over New York and Los Angeles, as studios started yanking movies that had anything to do with terrorism, mayhem, and mass murder and networks started rethinking shows that depicted exploding airplanes (Fox's *24*) and mentioned Osama bin Laden (CBS's *The Agency*). A few days after the World Trade Center collapsed to the ground like a child's toy model, Balcer even received a phone call from a writer-producer on another show--he won't say which, only that it's been on the air "for a couple of years"--seeking his advice. The call came out of the blue: Balcer (pronounced *bal-SAY*) had never even met the woman on the other end of the line.

"She told me people at her show were sitting around wondering how do we write for a universe that no longer exists," says Balcer, once a journalist for a now-defunct Canadian newspaper. "She seemed pretty

distraught. She was referring to the idea that as of now, everything changes. That's an amorphous catchphrase. We don't really know what that means. My thought was, 'Well, if aliens landed, *that* would change the universe. That would change *everything*. That would change our views about ourselves, our view of God, of evolution, etc., etc.' I don't know if this is an event that changes everything. I think it will change some perceptions about our own safety, our role in the world, so forth.

"I'm not going to go through a list of platitudes, but, yes, it's going to have an impact. I just don't think it's a world-shattering event, as awful as it is. It's not something that will change the course of history... On the other hand, I'm kind of a guy who believes the glass is half full. As awful as this is, there may be something good that comes from it. If nothing else, Arafat declares a cease-fire, and Ariel Sharon decides, OK, now we can talk with the PLO. If nothing else, there's one thing. Sometimes, it takes a very sobering, awful tragedy to wake people up."

But what happens now that we're awake...and unable to fall back asleep, lest we let down our guard and make ourselves easy prey? *Law & Order* has always been a television show very much grounded in the real world, the awful here and now. Its plots have long been ripped from today's headlines: mothers who kill their children, politicians caught in sex scandals, priests who molest parishioners, revelers who attack bystanders in Central Park, athletes who have their girlfriends offed. But the show must now grapple with the fact that the headlines, big and bold, scream only one thing: AMERICA UNDER ATTACK.

Balcer is no stranger to war. He began his career, by accident, as a cameraman covering the Yom Kippur War in October 1973. He had gone to Israel to visit a girlfriend and landed just as the Egyptian and Syrian armies were storming the country, on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. He got his hands on a camera and went to work for Canadian television. But he must now contemplate how to let his televised fiction deal with horrific fact.

Balcer insists that *Law & Order's* reputation as a based-on-actual-events show is a bit misleading; he likes to say it doesn't simply offer "knee-jerk reactions to reality." Though the show's staff writers and freelancers, most of whom are based in Los Angeles, often construct their teleplays from newspaper stories, they're merely inspiration for plot lines--not the whole truth and nothing but. After all, this is fiction, entertainment, a diversion, not docudrama. While agents and authors hustle to publish books about the terrorist bombings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon--two are due within days, and more are sure to follow--television, especially series TV, bides its time and searches for some kind of opening. There is no rush.

"And I think something like the events of [September 11] are so huge that we still can't get our heads around it, let alone start being contemplative about them," Balcer says. "We don't know what else is going to happen as a result of this. I hate to go back to Pearl Harbor, because I don't think it's an accurate parallel, but it's like trying to do a story about Pearl Harbor in isolation, without going into what led up to it and what followed. And right now, we don't know what's going to follow, so that would be another reason not to go to it as a story. And also, I would be very skeptical about motivations for doing a story

like this. It's too raw. Maybe two, three, four, five years from now, we can look back at it and hopefully mine it for more universal truths."

And it might all be a moot point: NBC has ordered only 13 episodes of *Criminal Intent*, which are all completed. The audience will decide whether there will be more: If the network is happy with the show's early ratings, *Criminal Intent* will shoot nine more episodes at the end of January. For now, Balcer has little to do other than finish some small post-production details, wait for the show to debut...and talk about The Attack. He insists he is no more worried about the show's fate now than he was on, say, September 10. He says he'd be far more concerned if he was running *The West Wing*, which risks being rendered irrelevant--indeed, a completely useless fantasy--if it doesn't address the terrorist attacks. (It will, in at least one special episode to air October 3.) His is just a cop show. They've been around since the inception of the medium, and they'll outlive us all, war or no.

"Last week, we were talking about the entertainment business and, God, how silly everything is and how silly we are and what we do is," he says. "I think, well, there *is* a value in this. In New York last weekend, a lot of people went to museums. A lot of people went out and bought music. A lot of people went to plays. You can only stare at graves for so long, and you need to turn away from it in order to think about other things--in order to process the horror. Staring at it and staring at it forever is unhealthy. I'm not saying what we do is art, but art or popular entertainment helps put things in context. And it keeps us in touch with values that are eternal, that were there before and will be there after."

Dick Wolf Unhappy with *Criminal Intent*'s Timeslot

by Vanessa Sibbald/Zap2it, TV News

Dick Wolf, the executive producer of *Law & Order*, complained to reporters Thursday about the Sunday 9 p.m. timeslot his newest *Law & Order* spin-off, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, has been given by NBC.

The complaint echoes similar grumbling Wolf had two years ago when *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* was scheduled for Mondays at 9 p.m. That show has since moved to Fridays at 10 p.m., while the original series airs Wednesdays at 10 p.m.

Asked during the Television Critics Association in Pasadena, CA, why he always grumbles about the timeslots his shows are given, Wolf snapped back, "Because I always get the wrong timeslot."

"These shows are not 9 p.m. shows. They're not 9 p.m. Central shows. They're 10 p.m. shows," he explained. "There's a certain obvious synchronicity in Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 10 p.m., as opposed to (the current schedule) Sunday at 9 p.m., Wednesday at 10 p.m., Friday at 10 p.m."

"But because I'm so hallowed at NBC," he joked, "I always get my way."

"Hallowed Dick," as he was called the rest of the session, went on to describe how he isn't worried about over saturating audiences with *Law & Order* shows since he sees it as a brand rather than as a format. Including reruns, the three shows will collectively air 27 times on television per week this fall.

"As long as we don't screw up one of the brand extensions, I think the brand remains intact," he explained.

He added that the secret to the success of the brand is not serializing the dramas.

"If you look at the longest running shows on television -- *Gunsmoke* being the longest-running -- that's the way television started out."

"You get into serialized elements, and four or five years into a show, it's getting extremely soapy."

Like the two *Law & Order* shows before it, *Criminal Intent* will have a completely different story each week, with the personal lives of the characters kept to a minimum.

The drama, which stars Vincent D'Onofrio, Kathryn Erbe, Jamey Sheridan and Courtney B. Vance, premieres on the network this fall.

Rohm Talks 'Law & Order'

by Vanessa Sibbald/Zap2it, TV News

Best known for her roles on the TV series *Bull* and *Angel*, Elisabeth Rohm was introduced as the latest assistant district attorney on the hit drama *Law & Order* to reporters Thursday during the annual Television Critics Association Press Tour.

Rohm's character on the series, Serena Southerlyn, will be introduced in the first episode of the season as a researcher on a case Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston) becomes involved in.

"I guess I shine and Jack sees similarities in me and he wants to give me an opportunity," Rohm explains. "I don't just show up and I don't just have the job -- you actually see me on my feet earn it."

In real-life, Rohm was still attached to the TNT Wall Street series *Bull* when she was approached about joining *Law & Order*.

"I think we actually knew [*Bull*] was over and done with toward the end of production because of the fact that we only aired 11 [episodes]," she says. "When this came around it was a catalyst for them to release me. It was all pretty simultaneous."

Dick Wolf, creator and executive producer of *Law & Order*, says it was Rohm's performance on *Bull* which caught his attention.

"I thought Liz's work on *Bull* was quite extraordinary and projected edge and intelligence," he says.

Although the show's first assistant district attorney was played by male actor Richard Brooks, Wolf says he switched to casting women in the role after receiving advice from a well-placed NBC executive.

"Warren Littlefield, at the end of the third season, said, 'If you don't put women in the show, I'm giving you a cancellation notice a year early.' And Warren was right. That's when *Law & Order* started to grow," Wolf recalls.

Rohm is the fourth woman to inhabit the role after actresses Jill Hennessey, Carey Lowell and Angie Harmon. While some shows, such as *ER*, try to hold onto original cast members, Wolf says the changing cast has helped draw audiences.

"I think people actually look forward, at least on *Law & Order*, to seeing who the new cast member is. We used to get letters saying, 'I'll never watch the show again,' but I found it was the same handwriting on it each year."

Tube news / Television 101

By Gail Pennington/St. Louis Post Dispatch

Law & Order: Elisabeth Rohm joins the cast as Assistant District Attorney Serena Southerlyn. An investigator, Southerlyn first works with ADA Jack McCoy on a single case. "And I guess I shine and Jack sees similarities in me and wants to give me an opportunity," Rohm says. "I don't just have the job. You actually see me on my feet, earning it."

Executive producer Barry Schindel says, "What I love about her character is that she's not brand new to the office but is new to the kind of street crime and trial work. So without having a law student straight out of school, we get the ability to watch someone grow in the role who also brings certain talents that have so far been absent." After three successive brunettes, Rohm is the first blonde in the D.A.'s office. "It could have been a redhead," says creator Dick Wolf, but it had to be a woman. "Women like to see empowered women."

Despite a rumor of her departure, Dianne Wiest stays with the show, at least for the time being. Schindel says, "The original concept was that the Nora Lewin character was serving a 2 1/2-year interim appointment, so we'll worry about it in two years."

A *Law & Order* too near the news

(from MSNBC)

A *Law & Order* miniseries about terrorism in New York has been cancelled, but if it had been broadcast, "it would have looked more like a documentary than a drama," says a source who was working on the show.

Staffers were scouting out locations on the morning of the attack and when they tried to call into the soundstage, they couldn't get through. 'The soundstage ... had been converted to a makeshift hospital.'

"The parallels between the script and what happened are beyond eerie," says the source. "At least 50 percent of what was in the script we've been seeing on the news - right down to the Arab backlash, the fake passports and passport machines, and the rental car crossing down from Canada." The source says that staffers were scouting out locations on the Tuesday morning of the attack and when they tried to call into the soundstage, they couldn't get through. "The soundstage that had been set up was in the Chelsea Piers and had been converted to a makeshift hospital," says the insider.

The source says Dick Wolf, creator of the NBC series, is becoming known as the Nostradamus of the TV world. "On several occasions, he's overseen shows that have had creepy similarities to what was in the news," says the source. He cites for example, the pilot episode of the short-lived series *Deadline* which featured the murder of workers at a fast food restaurant. The show aired shortly after the massacre of Wendy's employees in Queens, and it was accused of exploiting the tragedy - although the episode was filmed two months before the actual killings.

A spokesman for Studios USA, which makes *Law & Order*, declined to comment beyond a brief statement which said, in part, "NBC, Studios USA and Wolf Films believe it is inappropriate to produce the *Law & Order* mini-series, dealing with terrorism, in light of the horrifying events that have unfolded over the past week."

***Law & Order* Spinoff Is Third**

(Associated Press)

And then there were three.

First came *Law & Order*, which premiered Sept. 13, 1990. In 1999, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* made its bow. Now NBC is trying again with *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*. It debuts Sunday at 9 p.m. EDT.

Unprecedented for prime-time drama (other than the soap *Peyton Place*, which ABC aired thrice weekly for a few months in the mid-1960s), *Law & Order* in one form or another hits the street nearly every other night.

The logic of this product line seems self-evident to Dick Wolf, its producer-auteur. A former advertising man ("You can't beat Crest for fighting cavities") he sees *Law & Order* as a flourishing brand: "A brand extension is always a good thing - unless you do something that doesn't live up to the expectations for that brand."

So far, so good.

Law & Order (which begins its 12th year Wednesday at 10 p.m.), won its largest-ever viewership last season, logging ninth place in TV households. Meanwhile, *Special Victims Unit* (whose new season begins Friday at 10 p.m.) grew by 7 percent over its freshman year to finish in a hearty 26th place.

Now fans of those shows will be happy to discover that *Criminal Intent* displays a definite family resemblance. (As Wolf observes, "All Campbell's soups have that red label.")

Each series explores the legal system. Each is set and graphically filmed in New York City, with its reliably strong scripts often cued by recent headlines (or, sometimes, uncannily forecasting them).

Despite the breathless tempo, each is a series of ideas and words more than action, confronting violence with a remorseful tone that, after Sept. 11, seems at least as fitting as it did before.

Each features a robust ensemble cast - and one constantly replenished. (On *Law & Order*, umpteenth newcomer Elisabeth Rohm is now settling in as Assistant District Attorney Serena Southerlyn.)

And each begins with a sonorous voice to set the scene: "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate and equally important groups ..."

That, of course, is how *Law & Order* starts, reaffirming its two-tiered format: For the first half-hour, detectives track down the bad guy; the second half, prosecutors haul the accused into court.

Special Victims Unit asserts that, since "sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous," an elite team of crime fighters is always at the ready.

And the new *Criminal Intent* carries this 10-second mission statement: "In New York City's war on crime, the worst criminal offenders are pursued by the detectives of the Major Case Squad. These are their stories."

In each instance, the never-seen speaker is Steve Zirnkilton, who, from his studio-home in Seal Harbor, Maine, describes his *Law & Order* voice as "commanding, but not judgmental; firm, without attitude."

Just so. But no less demonstrative is the musical theme, whipped up in its three successive versions by prolific composer Mike Post.

For the original *Law & Order* theme he sought music with "some of the strength and majesty of the law, but - since the first half is about the cops - with some flavor of the street."

For *Special Victims Unit*, he slowed it down slightly and "got heavier with the strings, since it was more about victims."

And now, for *Criminal Intent*, he has rearranged it with the bad guys in mind: "I got nasty, with a baritone slide guitar."

BEE-BONG!

There's one other distinctive *Law & Order* trademark: the BEE-BONG or CHA-CHING or whatever you call the hiccuplike sound that, inserted every now and then, gives the story's breakneck pace a needed pause.

"The sound began as the slam of a jail door," says Post from his Los Angeles headquarters. "Then I added some percussion and other metal sounds."

Listen up: Although the BEE-BONG remains otherwise unchanged since *Law & Order* began, Post confides that for *Criminal Intent* he mixed in "a little bottom" to his mini-entr'acte. "We'll find out if people are paying attention."

BEE-BONG!

Another thing is different about *Criminal Intent*.

While each of its forebears is an ensemble drama with certain greater-among-equals in its ranks (Jerry Orbach and Sam Waterston on *Law & Order*, Chris Meloni and Mariska Hargitay on *Special Victims Unit*), *Criminal Intent* is blatantly a showcase for Vincent D'Onofrio.

D'Onofrio stars as Detective Goren, a shrewd and intuitive polymath who taps into the criminal mind like a modern Sherlock Holmes. Plenty smart but usually a half-step behind him, Detective Eames (co-star Kathryn Erbe) serves as Goren's Dr. Watson.

Dick Wolf calls his latest "a psychological drama. The first two shows are a triumph of police and legal procedure over criminality. *Criminal Intent* is the triumph of intellect over criminality."

BEE-BONG!

"NBC has taken to hyping *Law & Order* as 'the second-longest-running drama series on network television.' No one mentions it would have to stay on the schedule through 2001 to match *Murder, She Wrote's* tenure right now."

That passage appeared in September 1995, not long after the initially struggling *Law & Order* caught ratings fire.

Now, with a guaranteed renewal through 2004-05, it is sure to rank second only to *Gunsmoke* (20 years) as the longest-running non-news-or-sports prime-time series in TV history.

At this moment, 262 episodes of *Law & Order* have been filmed, along with 53 of *Special Victims Unit* and 13 of *Criminal Intent*. Figure 45 minutes apiece (minus commercials), and you would need a week and a half, around the clock, to watch them all.

Better yet, just flip on cable almost any time to play catch-up. *Law & Order* encores several times a week on TNT and four times a day on A&E. Miss this week's *Special Victims Unit* on NBC? It runs Sunday at 11 p.m. on USA, which also repeats the current *Criminal Intent* at 11 p.m. the following Saturday.

BEE-BONG!

Campbell's Soup has dozens of varieties. For *Law & Order*, might there be at least a fourth selection?

It's a little premature to talk about, says Wolf, whose immediate concern is how viewers take to *Criminal Intent*.

Even so, he admits, "I've got two other variations buried in the recesses of my head."

Talk about the long arm of the *Law*!

Orbach Joins "I Love New York" Campaign

From "[Entertainment Today](#)"

Robert DeNiro, Regis Philbin and Jerry Orbach are among the entertainers who'll team up with New York Gov.

George Pataki for a \$40 million advertising campaign to boost tourism in New York. "The campaign not only sends a

message to America and the world that New York is open for business, but makes a strong statement that we will never surrender our freedoms or back down from a challenge," Pataki said. "After watching the best of America right here in New York in the aftermath of the evil attack on the World Trade Center, I know that people from around the world join us when we say, 'I Love New York.'" The campaign to encourage business travelers and tourists to come back to New York in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks will feature a television ad with Derek Jeter, Regis Philbin, Kelly Ripa, Ben Stiller, Pataki and New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. They'll begin to air nationally [in October].

Et Cetera

NBC is developing a series based on the 1968 **Steve McQueen** and 1999 **Pierce Brosnan** movies *The Thomas Crown Affair*. One name high on the list to star Chris Noth, who would play the title role. Sources say he's very interested in the new NBC series, but only if production would be centered in New York, the home of *Sex And the City* and Noth's hipster hangout, the Cutting Room bar... **Benjamin Bratt** was seen at the Montreal Film Festival to promote *Pinero*, in which he plays the titular character, a Nuyorican junkie poet/playwright who died in 1988. He suggested that *Law & Order* was attempting to organize a miniseries featuring all of the cast members who had not yet been killed off. This, however, was pre-September 11 Attack.

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apocrypha