



Wednesday showdown doesn't worry Dick Wolf.

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Dick Wolf knows that he's in for a challenge on Wednesday nights this fall as CBS' "CSI: NY" takes dead aim at the "Law & Order" mothership. Even if viewership for his shows wasn't down slightly last season, Wolf would be aware that the latest installment in the Bruckheimer forensic juggernaut represents the biggest threat yet for "Law & Order."

"Yes, absolutely," he acknowledges. "I mean, I'd be retarded if I didn't know that."

The always blunt Wolf doesn't hesitate to break down the differences between what he describes as the "Law & Order" brand and the "CSI" franchise, calling the distinction a burr under his saddle. Pity the poor reporter at the semiannual Press Tour who fails to properly chart the brand/franchise delineation.

"Let me explain it, hopefully, quite clearly," Wolf says, like an exasperated elementary school teacher. "`CSI' is a franchise. It's like the Palm restaurant. If you go to Los Angeles, if you go to Chicago, you get a great steak. The only thing that changes are the caricatures on the wall.

"`Law & Order' is a brand," he continues. "Hopefully it's the Mercedes-Benz of television shows. Each of the shows are distinctly different. They have distinctly different attitudes. The way you can tell it's a brand is the Goldberg variation of Mike Post's theme and the `ching-ching,' which is really the only similarity between all four shows."

That fourth show Wolf is referring to is "Law & Order: Trial By Jury," an omniscient drama about the courtroom process set to premiere at midseason. Once again, Wolf is forced to defend the potential dilution of the "Law & Order" brand. And just as he did before the premieres of "Special Victims Unit" and "Criminal Intent," he's left to argue that there's room for more "Law & Order" on the television landscape.

"Let's have a show of hands," Wolf polls the crowd of critics. "How many people asked me six years ago about wasn't two `Law & Orders' too many? Then three years ago asked me wasn't three

too many?"

Despite diminishing ratings across the board, all three "Law & Order" series are dominant time slot winners in the 18-49 demographic and the original mothership and "SVU" are syndicated behemoths, turning TNT and USA into regular cable champs.

"The audience is going to tell us when there are too many `Law & Orders,' " Wolf insists.

For now, the producer is preparing "Law & Order" for a smooth casting transition from Jerry Orbach to Dennis Farina and anticipating Elisabeth Rohm's departure during the season. While wary about the enhanced competition, he maintains that there needn't be a Wednesday night loser.

"I am a great believer in the more good shows on, the better it is for all of us," he says.

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