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THE CITY WEEKLY DESK

# A 'Law and Order' Addict Tells All

**By MOLLY HASKELL (NYT) 2466 words**

WALKING up Madison Avenue through the usual thicket of cellphones, I heard my first interesting snatch of conversation since that accursed invention forced an avalanche of inanities on our ears. A woman was saying: "He's a bastard. Justified homicide." She didn't have to mention the quality of the food on Rikers Island for me to know she was one of us, the not-so-secret addicts of "Law and Order," Dick Wolf's long-running, ubiquitously syndicated, hydra-headed NBC series about New York cops and district attorneys. I know it's a hit of major proportions around the country, too. Its ratings are phenomenal. Like Woody Allen, it travels better than you'd think.

But its heart beats to a New York rhythm, its in-jokes and phony addresses and familiar locations are for us and us alone. These days, with its spinoffs and reruns, the show has become something of a joke itself, risking critical contumely and self-parody by spreading like an oil slick into every unoccupied slot on television. But the miracle is that it hasn't worn out its welcome, and the spinoffs have developed distinct and different virtues of their own. If anything, like an old friend, like New York itself, "Law and Order" has grown more precious since Sept. 11.

Familiar stories (the Mayflower Madam, Lisa Steinberg); locations from Chinatown and the Battery to the quadrangle of a certain well-known uptown university (bordered by the Low Memorial Library and Butler Library); working-class cops and D.A.'s with their own baggage and biases; a story with a beginning, middle and end: all have become, since the terrorist tragedy, as much consolation as diversion.

The standard and often justified criticism of long-running shows is that they begin to try too hard, recycle material, make disastrous cast changes. Of those cast changes "Law and Order" can certainly be accused: How could they kill Claire? How could they get rid of Jamie for the fashion-plate Angie?; I still miss George Dzundza, and some of the new D.A. babes look as if they spent more time on their hair than their law books. But I'm amazed at the health of the basic organism, how it survives and adapts not only to weaker cast members but also to the changing times and moods of the city itself. It seems to me the number of convictions on the show rose during the Giuliani years, for example, as exasperation with judges throwing out evidence and perps getting off on technicalities reached critical mass.

On the other hand, the show remains marvelously evenhanded. The sheer quantity, the multiplicity of shows, allows for a roughly equal distribution of venality over time. Good and bad apples are to be found among whites and blacks, Asians and Hispanics, cops and robbers, thus avoiding the deadening hand of political correctness.

In its 12-year history, and as it roams with egalitarian fervor into every area of the city, showing how intertwined different ethnic groups and neighborhoods are, "Law and Order" has rubbed up against a remarkably complex range of social issues: from capital punishment (a harrowing show in which Sam Waterston's D.A. is forced to watch the execution of a criminal his office had prosecuted) and biotechnology (Is a dead man's widow entitled to his ex-wife's frozen embryos as part of the estate?) to constant badgering and second-guessing from the media, and ever-present issues of class and race. (Should blacks be accorded more lenient treatment after years of inequity, or is that a more pernicious form of racism, damaging to both blacks and the law?) And there's the vexing question of how we temper the either-or edicts of criminal law with a more nuanced appreciation of the enormous (but

incalculable) influence of environment and genes.

ALL of these thorny matters, plus the often questionable tactics of the law enforcers themselves (deals and lies and subterfuges for the greater good), constitute pressures that bend and sway the law so that its determinations are never completely clean or bias-free. Yet for all the question marks it leaves, and however queasy the aftertaste, its conclusions are never open-ended. There is a thin line between outright corruption and necessary compromises, but there is a line, and it is faithfully maintained. And there's a consolation in watching our city, its institutions and protectors survive, battered but intact, week after week.

Especially welcome after the real-life cataclysm that robbed us of many of our finest and bravest, "Law and Order" remains a testimonial to the teamwork and no-nonsense valor of the cop on the beat. Long before 9/11 shifted our perceptions in that direction, the show had been chipping away at the stereotype of the bad cop, humanizing the men and women in blue.

Central to that process and to the proletarian soul of the show has been Jerry Orbach's divorced detective with a hard-drinking past, Lennie Briscoe, the 27th Precinct's maestro of the reality-check wisecrack that zaps the pretensions and fads of the upper-crust celebrity-plutocracy of New York. Managing the complex tone of black humor in the face of horror, he surveys bodies lying in an East Village boutique and when told it's a "vintage" clothing shop, says, "Oh, yeah, I think I recognized my old bowling shirt." When told a perp smokes high-end cigars, he remarks, "They're hard to find since Demi Moore and the beautiful people started smoking them."

The show is a time capsule, reminding us of a time when the worst things that happened were individual crimes with (mostly) single vics: a Park Avenue philanderer found in a pool of blood, or a black dope pusher wrongfully arrested for murder, or an S-and-M artiste hanging by his leather belt, or a ranting homicidal psychopath, suddenly back on his meds, turning into a slick legal mind who can mount his own defense.

Even the show's more lurid siblings -- "Special Victims Unit" (which deals with sex crimes) and "Criminal Intent" (in which a Columbo-like Vincent D'Onofrio uses guile and brainpower to seduce a villain into self-exposure) -- are not so harrowing that they keep you up at night. The original classic is, for some people I know, the cup of Ovaltine that, with reassuring predictability, tucks them in at night. One couple falls asleep, like clockwork, just before Sam Waterston or Steven Hill (the pre-Dianne Wiest D.A.) has closed the office door with yet another rueful aperçu. They're on the late-night rerun track, whereas my husband and I are on the early-bird cocktail-hour shift, on A&E at 7, or at least we were until a week ago, when the 7 p.m. reruns moved to 6, and we followed.

FOR those of us who are hopelessly hooked, the symbiosis with "Law and Order" begins with its physical presence on this corner or that, turning iconic and less well-known quarters of the city into a New York set. As it reaches into all areas of the city, from the barrio to the boardroom, from prisons to institutes of higher learning, the show restores New York's rightful place as capital of glamour and grit at a time Hollywood has abandoned us for Toronto, that cheaper, cleaner but ersatz "New York."

The New York of "Law and Order" may be as much a myth as the skylines and dance floors and Park Avenue apartments that starred in an earlier, more rhapsodic vision of the city. But its myth is modern, multiethnic, capacious in its reach, and startlingly close, something you can reach out and touch. Many's the time I've stumbled onto a shooting and felt as if I were living inside it, like "The Truman Show."

Likewise when watching an episode with particular geographical resonance. Like the scene in "Criminal Intent" in which the art dealer perp is standing in front of the Church of the Heavenly Rest (where my husband and I were married) with the Guggenheim Museum (right around the corner from our apartment) in the background, complaining about the vacuity of the museum's motorcycle show. Or the "Law and Order" episode in which the highbrow suspect (a New York variant of the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski) provides his alibi: at the time in question, he was, he says, at the Metropolitan Museum, listening to the free chamber music on Friday night, "one of the few civilized things left in this city."

Then at a more advanced level of addiction, the show is a member of the family. It is a ritual woven into our lives as "their stories" become ours, a mirror that not only reflects matters of civic concern, that packs a wallop as a crime show and is wittier than most (streetwise suspects with "priors" know the angles and how to deal better than any law student), but also serves as a template in which we vicariously act out and perhaps exorcise little conflicts of our own.

When in a group the subject comes up, we shriek with delight at discovering fellow hard-core fans. The first question is, When did

you first turn on? The conversation becomes more sheepishly confessional. Which show(s) and how often? Time(s) of day? Do you have a limit on repeats of any particular episode? How long until you recognize it?

We compare notes on how the show insinuates itself into our lives, creating a whole set of games and guilty rituals that vary from person to person, couple to couple. My husband and I have established ground rules: only one a day. Watch no episode more than three times. One of the few benefits of growing old and dim, I remind my friends, is that we'll all be able to watch "Law and Order" over and over again without remembering if we've seen it.

For us, the evening begins with the Dragnet-like opening: "There are two separate and equal . . . These are their stories." Then the teaser precredit sequence: cops in a patrol car stopping at a deli for coffee, their kvetching rudely interrupted by a gunshot. Two black women walk into a pawn shop to find its owner dead on the floor. A husband and wife arguing -- in a car, on the sidewalk, in the garage -- when suddenly they stumble over a corpse. In the precredit sequence, husbands and wives are always arguing, presaging the connubial carnage to come.

I REMEMBER the sequence vividly, but not what follows, since the opening is a deliberate feint, setting you up for one kind of tragedy before zigzagging in a whole other direction. My husband, who has total recall for movies, has none for the opening scenes of each episode of "Law and Order" and will insist that we've never seen a particular show. I counter that not only have we seen it, but we've seen it more than the allowed three times. A dispute ensues, as difficult to adjudicate as some of the conflicts on "Law and Order." Will we watch it again until his memory clicks in (by which time we're already into the courtroom, too late to start another) or will we go ahead and put on one of the "Law and Order" tapes we keep in reserve?

We love the episodes in which husbands or wives kill each other. They allow us to express all sorts of murderous feelings vicariously and playfully. We pretend (heh, heh) to pick up tips and ideas, using the jargon of the show. The efficiency of various weapons and methods, alibis, and so on, we've got it all figured out, even how we'll play it when arrested.

Bail, for instance. My husband, though perhaps not an upstanding member of the community (his fondness for the prone position works against that), is such a known homebody, so averse to travel of any kind, that the idea that he might pose a "flight risk" would have the judge falling off the bench. On the other hand, that same clinging to the hearth will limit the freedom of movement and location that provides plausible alibis. An "accident" in a car or private plane, indeed one that involves extensive locomotion of any kind, is out of the question. But my husband does teach at Columbia. Does the student employment office offer hit men as well as bartenders?

Bonding with the show means that you feel its sorrows as your own. The departure of a beloved cast member can be traumatic. The stories themselves can break your hearts: parents, of both the victims and the perpetrators, who lose their children, to death, to drugs, to crime, to lovelessness and missed communication.

Even more wrenching are the rare eruptions of grief from the regulars. Who can forget the scene in which Lennie sits in wordless companionship with an old friend, a cop recently exposed for corruption, on the small patio of the friend's house in Queens? Or when he visits a wounded Paul Sorvino, playing his partner, at the hospital, and offers desperate words of cheer, trying to reassure him -- and himself -- that he'll be back on the street in no time. I could be dead. I could be wounded. I could be crooked. I could have gone down in a river of booze. But here I am. So goes the unsung threnody, the there-but-for-the-grace-of-God lament, that runs through the show, imbuing it with a magisterial tone of dignity.

Over and over it is brought home to us, at the end of each episode, that whatever small triumph has been achieved, it's just a drop in the bucket. We're holding fast for now, but tomorrow's another day when we might prove less resistant to temptation, might finally slip across that thin line between the urge to kill or steal or betray or take a little on the side and actually enjoy doing it.

Correction: April 14, 2002, Sunday A front-page article last Sunday about the television show "Law and Order" misidentified the character who visited his wounded partner, Phil Cerreta (played by Paul Sorvino), in the hospital. It was Mike Logan (Chris Noth), not Lennie Briscoe (Jerry Orbach).

**CAPTIONS:** Photos: Jerry Orbach, left, and Sam Waterston, big-city crime-fighters. (pg. 1); Jerry Orbach, right, with sidekick, Jesse L. Martin, center. Like an old friend, like New York itself, the show is more precious than ever. (Studios USA); Shooting "Special Victims Unit" on West 17th Street, top, and, above, Sam Waterston with Elisabeth Rohm. The show roams with egalitarian fervor into every area of the city. (Studios USA); (Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times)(pg. 14)

Chart lists the ratings for the three "Law and Order" series for February. (pg. 14)

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