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Crime pays for Law & Order

By MERCEDES FLOREZ

The success of spin-offs from Law&Order and CSI has sparked a franchise frenzy in Hollywood. MERCEDES FLOREZ reports.

Is it drama or is it reality? The three programs that make up the popular Law & Order stable have capitalised on the growing trend towards ripping headlines from the crime pages and turning them into an hour of drama.

All three shows are filmed entirely on location in New York City, and the producers aren't ashamed to admit that newspaper headlines inspire many of their storylines.

Series creator Dick Wolf says his inspiration for SVU, which deals with the detectives who take on sexually based crimes, came from the pages of an FBI crime manual.

``It's one of the biggest problems in law enforcement," Wolf says.

``If you read the FBI manual which characterises crime, they have come to the conclusion that any murder which

is not about money is probably sexually related."

Network Ten head of programming David Mott agrees.

``Law&Order has the classic `ripped from the headlines' themes -- they deal with issues that are being read in the papers," Mott says.

``And, in that respect, they will never run out

of storylines."

The device has translated into strong ratings worldwide for the show.

In Australia, about 1.6 million people tune in to Law&Order: SVU on Thursday nights, giving it a convincing win in its slot against stalwart medical drama ER.

In the US, all three shows win their respective time slots, with SVU attracting 15 million viewers as it screens its fourth season.

The show's producers are so confident of SVU's growing popularity in America that they plan to move it into the Tuesday-night battleground in a crime face-off against the ABC show NYPD Blue.

It was recently reported that Law&Order's production company, Universal, wanted to tie the three series into one package when renegotiating the rights with NBC.

The deal would make each episode worth \$8 million and the entire package worth more than \$1.6 billion.

The New York Times claimed the move would make it the most lucrative deal in television history.

Wolf is also developing a fourth drama in the franchise for the 2004-2005 season in the US.

It will play up the legal angle more than the police aspect.

Mott says Law&Order consolidated its popularity here when it became the first show in Australia to beat ER.

``The writing is absolutely brilliant, and the remarkable thing is that it's not cast-driven -- crime is the headliner," he says. ``It has defied the critics."

Mott says the popular style -- a one-hour episode that always has a conclusion -- is a major attraction for viewers who like to dip in and out of their drama series.

Law&Order: SVU screens on Channel 10 on Thursday at 8.30pm.

Caption: Arresting: Vincent D'Onofrio (third from left) with his Law&Order castmates

Illus: Photo

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