

Search

July 16 2004

ENTERTAINMENT

Film

Music

Arts

TV and Radio

Gadgets and gaming

First night reviews

The Month

Talking Point

Proms 2004

TIMES ONLINE

Home

News

Britain

World

Business

Your Money

Sport

Sports Book

Comment

Travel

Entertainment

Law

Crossword

Driving

Television and Radio

July 17, 2004

Laying down the law

Adam Sherwin on the crime series set to break all records

"HOW many bedrooms of Times staff have you been inside?" demands Dick Wolf, the creator of *Law & Order*, the longest-running crime series in American television history. Happily, the question appears to be a rhetorical one, as the Emmy award-winning producer continues a breakneck guide to creating your own billion-dollar television franchise.

"The answer is not many, I guess," Wolf surmises. "The secret to *Law & Order* is — no soap, no who goes home with who, who has a baby. It's a work-based crime show. You go to bed and feel satisfied you have seen a good hour of TV. It doesn't matter if you miss a week, a month or three years, when you come back it's still *Law & Order*."

That is not a strictly accurate description, since *Law & Order*, renewed until at least 2006 by the American NBC network, has itself multiplied to produce a dizzying range of spin-offs. The thirteenth season of *Law & Order* begins on Sky One this Thursday, with Jerry Orbach continuing as the hangdog Det Lennie Briscoe and featuring guest appearances from Gregory Hines and Mandy Patinkin.

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, a forum for more lurid sex crime investigations, has brought two million viewers to Saturday evenings on Five, which is also showing terrestrial episodes of its predecessor. *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, starring Vincent D'Onofrio, dominates Sunday night viewing in the US, and only a fool would bet against next year's *Law & Order: Trial by Jury*, a courtroom-based spin-off, failing to match the 16 million ratings still achieved by the mother ship, now in its fifteenth year.

VW MOVIE ICONS



Celebrating 30 years of the Golf, a motoring icon,

Volkswagen presents a season charting the work of movie icon Robert De Niro. Visit the special site for reviews, interviews, free movie tickets, competitions and more

FILM FIRST



Film First is the exclusive club for readers of The Times.

Sign up for a regular e-mail update on the latest screenings and other film offers and competitions

ARTS FIRST



Competitions, special offers and priority tickets for

a host of top shows, exhibitions and events.

Find out more here

Property

Health

Jobs

Food and drink

Books

Education

Student

Site Map

NEWSPAPER EDITION

▶ THE TIMES

▶ THE SUNDAY TIMES

SPECIAL REPORTS

Investor's Centre

Euro events guide

Movie Icons

UK Business Week

Web Conferencing

Just don't call it a franchise. "It's a brand, not a franchise," insists Wolf, 57, who is a former New York advertising executive. "Disneyland is a franchise — it's the same in Paris, Orlando and Tokyo. *Law & Order* is a brand like a Mercedes — they are all different models, it just depends what you want to drive."

Ever the salesman, the tireless Wolf is entertaining international journalists at the Monte Carlo TV Festival because the former *Hill Street Blues* writer has one milestone left to pass.

"In six years' time *Law & Order* will beat *Gunsmoke* as the longest-running drama series in the US," Wolf explains with evident satisfaction. "There isn't a day I don't think about it. I want to go home with the brass ring. People say there is too much *Law & Order*, but the audience will decide. There are still three more nights of TV that we haven't filled."

Quality won't be sacrificed to keep up ratings, he insists. "A hallmark of *L&O* is that you don't get the same information twice. If you don't remember it, too bad. Don't underestimate the audience. We have to compress so much story content into one hour that we don't have time for establishing shots or repeating information."

Briscoe's investigations often lead to courtroom acquittals, which reflect deep-seated failings within the US criminal justice system. "It's not a perfect system but it's better than the Napoleonic Code — if just as bloody," suggests Wolf. "The huge difference is the presumption of innocence."

Despite its longevity, the series still feels fresh: storylines are yanked from newspaper front pages to the screen within four months. A new US episode depicts a female army reservist, accused of abusing Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib, who is killed by the family of one of her victims when she returns to New York. Unlike other US network shows, the characters are allowed to argue that America's intervention was a disastrous act of imperialism.

"When you're a hit, the networks tend not to interfere," says Wolf, who has an episode based on the 2002 Washington sniper shootings in the new Sky One series.

Only *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, the murder investigation series on Five which has spawned its own Miami and New York spin-off series, can challenge *Law & Order's* reign in the US ratings. "It's going to be tough this year but at least Jerry Bruckheimer (the creator of *CSI*) admitted he was trying to emulate what I have done," says Wolf.

Ageing *Law & Order* stars, including Orbach, who is 68, are being retired just as they would in a real precinct, with Dennis Farina taking the lead detective's role. "We deliberately cast someone completely different. We don't want the 'understudy of Julius Caesar is being played by . . . ' syndrome." The trademark "ching-ching" musical stab that connects scenes has been satirised in *The Simpsons* — "the ultimate accolade", beams the producer.

British stars including Dame Helen Mirren are being lined up for *Trial By Jury*, and if Mr Wolf ever pauses for thought, it is over the surprising inspiration for his lucrative detective show brand. "My favourite British series is *Lovejoy*," he reveals suddenly. "I would really love to work with Ian McShane."

The thirteenth Season of Law & Order starts on Thursday, Sky One, 10pm. The eleventh season will be shown on Five later in the year. Law & Order: Special Victims Unit begins tonight, Five, 10pm



ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Caitlin Moran - Spy's failure of intelligence

Kids' favourite

Behind the screen

Radio choice

Starsky & Hutch (15)

Naked Lunch (18)

Puccini: La Fanciulla Del West (E)

A world of soap

This week's pay-per-view choice

Television: Friday, July 23

Television: Monday, July 19

Television: Wednesday, July 21

Television: Sunday, July 18

Television: Saturday, July 17

Television: Tuesday, July 20

Television: Thursday, July 22

Banned leader

TV film guide - Face/Off

Washed up?

Law & Order - going for a criminal record

Real-life soap

Mona Lisa Smile (12)

Black Hawk Down — Special Edition (15)

Big night in

TV film guide

Over the top with Big Brother

Contact our advertising team for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times.

Copyright 2004 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' **standard Terms and Conditions**. Please read our **Privacy Policy**.

To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from The Times, visit the **Syndication website**.