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Byline: Megan Rosenfeld Washington Post Staff Writer

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"I think I have the longest association with 'Law & Order' of anyone other than Dick Wolf," says the Voice. He's the one whose deep, firm and somehow authoritative voice heralds each show. Eleven years ago, he intoned for posterity the following immortal lines:

In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: the police who investigate crime and the district attorneys who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories.

Then comes the familiar chord of music: chung chung.

"That is the term of art," says Peter Jankowski, president of the "L&O" producing entity, Wolf Films. "Chung chung."

Two years ago voice man Steven Zirnkilton had another lead-in to record:

In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories.

Chung chung.

Three weeks ago, Zirnkilton warmed up his pipes for yet another voice job, only this time he recorded it from his home studio in Bar Harbor, Maine, on a high-speed phone line instead of trekking into New York. Turns out there are yet more dedicated New York detectives to chronicle, tracking down bad guys on the new Dick Wolf show, "Law & Order: Criminal Intent."

In New York City's war on crime, the worst offenders are pursued by the detectives of the Major Case Squad. These are their stories.

Chung chung.

So direct. So simple. These are their stories. Stories ripped, or at least pasted together, from the headlines, including those in professional law and medical journals. And sometimes, stories that are eerily prescient.

For example, this winter all three shows are scheduled to combine for a miniseries on a subject a bit too close for comfort: a terrorist attack on New York. But as of Tuesday, Jankowski was too distraught about the real attack to think about whether to change plans. "A lot of tears are being shed out here," he said from Los Angeles.

But -- assuming that life and the new television season will go on -- Wolf is about to have two spinoffs of his long-running mother ship in prime time in the same season, an unusual if not unprecedented command of America's television public by a fictional franchise. Counting replays on cable channels, you could be among 60 million or so viewers watching 27 hours of Wolf "L&O" creations a week if you were so inclined. In reruns of the flagship series over its 11 seasons, you can compare the respective legal styles of early star Michael Moriarty with longtime incumbent Sam Waterston as the lead prosecutors, or the lithesomeness of assistant DAs Jill Hennessy, Carey Lowell, Angie Harmon and, soon, Elisabeth Rohm.

The crime thing seems to be what Wolf does best. His new shows last year tanked -- "DC," which was about low-level staffers on Capitol Hill, and "Deadline," a slick loser about a newspaper columnist and journalism teacher who was also a sleuth. A reality show about actual DAs in San Diego, "Trial and Error," has been placed in the NBC cupboard as a possible mid-season replacement.

Wolf's empire, Wolf Films, is headquartered on the Universal Studios lot

in Los Angeles, although the shows are filmed in New York. To use a military metaphor, Wolf is the general, the commanding officer, but he has a major general, Jankowski, and lieutenants in charge of each show. They are like platoons, each with its own executive producer, writers, actors, etc. At this point, "L&O" is headed by a lawyer, "Special Victims Unit" by a doctor, and the new one, "Criminal Intent," by a former journalist and "L&O" veteran, Rene Balcer. There's a team in New York (actors and crew) and another in Los Angeles (writers and studio schmoozers), a payroll that hits about 500 when all the shows are in production.

"Most importantly, we have people who have been raising their families on 'Law & Order,' " said Jankowski last week. "And that includes quite a few college tuitions."

Wolf, 54, would prefer that his shows be viewed not as a machine, but simply as television that is somewhat more intelligent than most of what's out there, largely because it is writer-driven, takes on issues and doesn't spend much time on the personal soap operas of the lead characters. As Wolf puts it, he is not interested in seeing lead detective Jerry Orbach's "bare butt," however attractive it may be -- a slam at another New York-based crime show, "NYPD Blue," now heading into its ninth season.

"Crime is a constantly renewable resource. People keep killing each other in new and interesting ways," Wolf said two weeks ago, to explain why the show -- or shows -- can go on forever. Speaking from his home in Mendocino, Calif., he sounded slightly weary and aggrieved, as though answering questions about his success was so tedious that he had to recycle a quote he'd used before. People who know him say this tone is unusual -- "he's one of the most courtly and polite people in the world," said one -- so perhaps he was just having a bad day.

The issues he has highlighted on "L&O" and "SVU" reveal a prosecutor's bias, in the sense that he believes the rights of criminals have been given priority by American courts over those of victims and their families. If the criminals in his shows get off, it's usually because the judge excludes evidence for some wimpy liberal reason, like an illegal search for evidence, or testimony about previous offenses. For the last few seasons Angie Harmon's character has been the voice of conservatives (favoring the death penalty and maximum sentences), a viewpoint perhaps made more attractive to liberals coming from a former model in a short skirt.

But occasionally the prosecutors in these shows admit they've gone after

the wrong guy, and there is a sure bent for gun control. Wolf is fond of saying the show is "an equal-opportunity offender," meaning that over the years the criminals have been people of all races, genders and classes. (Last year he wrangled with his network, NBC, when it apologized for an "L&O" episode in which a Puerto Rican Day parade spawned violent attacks on women. He is still angry that the network "caved in," as he puts it, to "special-interest groups.")

But the show has also won American Latin Media Arts Awards, NAACP Image Award nominations, and a Screen Actors Guild prize for exemplifying diversity.

The show has tackled abortion, religious intolerance, overzealous prosecution, diplomatic immunity, forcibly medicating the mentally ill, and black-Jewish hostility, as well as the more predictable mob hits, drug deals and wife murders. The only subject Wolf has forbidden is teenage suicide, because he believes there is a copycat factor. Yet, whatever issue the writers are inspired by, it usually emerges -- like the perp -- only after a number of false clues, blind alleys, red herrings and what have you, and they rarely hit you over the head with a cause. In the new show, the crook is known at the beginning, and the plot is about catching him (or her).

Barry Schindel, executive producer and Los Angeles-based head writer and show runner for "L&O," was once a public defender in the South Bronx. Six of his 12 writers are former lawyers. What, no cops? "I would not be opposed to hiring a detective, but no one has submitted a writing sample," he says.

The show, with its tried-and-true format of crime/police-work/trial, is structured in four acts. As a lawyer, Schindel likes the second half best. "It's kind of like a legal argument. You open the issue, explore the issue from each side and resolve it." Of course, on television the resolution comes a lot more quickly than it does in real life, and the summations say in 30 seconds what most lawyers take three hours to express.

Schindel says the new season will continue the ripped-from-the-headlines inspiration -- the season premiere is about a woman who's killed by a pit bull, and whether the dog's owners are guilty. And yes, there is a story coming up about a politician and an intern.

"SVU," after an overly salacious first season in which the crime-solving seemed to be a mere cover for kinky sex, settled down to weightier fare. Like the episode in which Richard Thomas played a killer driven by tertiary syphilis that an insurance company had not told him about. Another episode

dealt with a young woman gymnast who was so overtrained that her body was like a 13-year-old's -- raising the question of whether her attacker was a thus a pedophile.

"It's not about women's panties and rape anymore," says Neal Baer, the show's executive producer. "When I left 'ER' after seven years to do this, my wife said, 'Oh, God, don't do that show, it's just titillating.' She'd never seen it. It's really about the whys and hows and understanding of how cops react to these crimes, and how they occur."

Baer, a pediatrician who just finished his residency at UCLA during the hiatus from making next season's "SVU," heads a team of writers who pull stories from medical journals as well as newspapers and Baer's own experiences. He gives the scripts to a psychologist who works with police officers; he also talks directly to several New York police officers to get "cultural details" or to see if the lingo is correct. (One told him that if a cop wants to get information out of a hooker, he shows up on her street at 5 in the morning with coffee and doughnuts; that became a scene in one show.)

This year Amy Irving and Shirley Knight, as a patient and her psychiatrist, will discover some "recovered memories" of incest, and Mariska Hargitay's character, the product of a rape, will confront new scientific research about a genetically inherited tendency toward violence. Chris Meloni's character will have a crisis of faith in the system after a rapist is acquitted.

So where does "Criminal Intent" fit in? "It tells the story from the perspective of both the prey and the pursuer," says Balcer, who spent 10 years with "L&O" until he quit because he'd written every angle he could think of within the format.

" 'Law & Order' has settled into a kind of humdrum," he says with a certain lack of diplomacy. "This is a lot more fun, because with criminals you have license to do almost anything." One of the criminals is a Yale-educated lawyer with a cocaine habit and a disturbing tendency to murder his many girlfriends. Another story focuses on the murder of an abortion clinic doctor, and shows the killer to be a wacko but his right-wing Christian friends to be people of conscience. The main crime solver is a detective played by Vincent D'Onofrio, whom Balcer and Wolf are counting on to carry the show.

"Our hero is a detective with an understanding or empathy for some of

the criminals he pursues," Balcer says. "In the first episode he says, 'Bad men do what good men dream.' He has an appreciation that there is a fine line between the criminal and the non-criminal. And believe me, it is. It doesn't take much, whether it's cheating on your income tax or not paying the toll. . . ."

Balcer, a Canadian, describes himself as "an Abbie Hoffman law-and-order guy. I don't believe in the death penalty, and I do believe in gun control. Those viewpoints are expressed in episodes I write, but I don't swallow them whole. You could call me a skeptic."

Wolf has a personal goal of "L&O" winning more Emmys than either "M*A*S*H" or "Cheers," and he wants to see the show last longer than "Gunsmoke" (20 years). Meanwhile, the shows have given life support to New York theater by employing so many actors there, and tips to a lot of lawyers on how to win cases.

And criminals? They don't have a chance.

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