TV News

Too Much 'Law & Order'?

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By Jay Bobbin

LOS ANGELES (Zap2it.com) - It was a foregone conclusion before NBC even announced it: "Law & Order" would spawn a third spinoff series.

Not only have the original crime drama and its two-note music "bumper" stayed healthy for a remarkably long time, particularly in today's television climate, but "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" and "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" have developed their own followings and strong ratings. When NBC and executive producer Dick Wolf announced the development of "Law & Order: Trial by Jury" for the 2004-05 season, it was hardly a shock that the well would be visited again.

Yet there was a surprise in store: When NBC announced its fall lineup last month, "Law & Order: Trial by Jury" was not listed as a season-starter, even with Jerry Orbach transferring his familiar police-detective character Lennie Briscoe from "Law & Order" to the new show. Since the latest addition to the franchise is likely to get attention similar to that granted its three forerunners, why the delay?

One possible reason is that NBC wants to keep a virtually sure bet up its sleeve to replace programs that may fail in the fall. Another is that the network might not want to be seen as relying too heavily on "Law & Order" at the outset of a TV season.

And another may be difficult for insiders to acknowledge, but it's still something to consider: Maybe there's just too much "Law & Order" these days.

That isn't as much a comment on the quality of the existing three series as a recognition of just how often they are shown. NBC typically uses repeats of the three shows to fill schedule gaps, speaking to how reliably they perform, no matter how many times a given episode has aired (and, in many cases, in spite of the immediate relevance to the period in which it was written).

On top of that, as it heads toward its 15th season on NBC, the original

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"Law & Order" is now a staple of cable network TNT as well. Three episodes air nightly each Monday through Wednesday, with additional showings on other nights of the week and each weekday afternoon. "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" is a weeknight fixture on USA Network, with mini-marathons on Saturday nights. And after its NBC debut, each "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" episode gets additional exposure on USA Network. That's only once a week ... at least for now.

Recently, NBC used reruns of all three series to fill its Saturday-evening slate. The result inspired CBS -- either by subliminal suggestion or directly -- to do something similar next season with a weekly "Crimetime Saturday" hour that will rotate repeats of "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," "CSI: Miami," "Without a Trace" and some of that network's other popular mystery shows.

It can be argued CBS has its own variation on "Law & Order" with the "CSI" franchise, which expands to three shows this fall. "CSI: New York" will debut on Wednesdays directly against, ironically enough, the parent "Law & Order" series. The veteran show is likely to face its toughest competition to date, since the "CSI: New York" pilot aired in May as a "CSI: Miami" episode that drew nearly 24 million viewers, a huge audience in today's network environment.

In turn, there's another irony: Way back when, producer Wolf first pitched "Law & Order" to CBS, which passed on it. The show actually had its thematic roots in a mid-1960s ABC series called "Arrest and Trial," in which each story was similarly split into two parts: the probe of a crime by the police (in that show's case, a detective sergeant played by Ben Gazzara) and the consequent courtroom activity by lawyers (with Chuck Connors as a defense attorney instead of a 'Law & Order'-style prosecutor).

Too much of anything can be risky, but solid casting and smart writing have worked in favor of all the "Law & Order" shows. The casts of "Special Victims Unit" and "Criminal Intent" have stayed mostly intact, with the exception of Stephanie March's departure from "SVU" as the assistant district attorney. Kathryn Erbe had a temporary "CI" replacement while she was on maternity leave, but certainly and most famously, the initial "Law & Order" has survived the most cast changes.

Original "prosecutor" Michael Moriarty left after four years and was replaced by Sam Waterston, who remains. Richard Brooks was Moriarty's partner, then gave way to a succession of female lawyers played by Jill Hennessy, Carey Lowell, Angie Harmon and current cast member Elisabeth Rohm.

On the police side, founding co-star George Dzundza's character was killed off at the end of the first season; Paul Sorvino came in relatively briefly, then came Orbach (to be replaced this fall by Dennis Farina). Chris Noth ("Sex and the City") had a long run as the younger police partner, then was supplanted by Benjamin Bratt, who yielded to Jesse L. Martin.

Even the ultimate authority figures on "Law & Order" have switched. When Dann Florek left after three years, to resurface later in the same

role on "Special Victims Unit," the still-remaining S. Epatha Merkerson was recruited. Steven Hill was long on board as the district attorney, until Oscar winner Dianne Wiest entered (briefly, as it turned out) as the person elected to the job. Upon her departure, politician turned actor turned politician-again turned actor-again Fred Dalton Thompson became the post's present occupant.

For all those changes of faces, the basics of "Law & Order" have endured ... and proliferated. It's hard to imagine "Law & Order: Trial by Jury" won't be another success for producer Wolf and NBC, but will it give rise to a fifth "Law & Order" series? Or will four finally be deemed enough?

Consider that "Star Trek" is now on its fifth live-action TV variation, so anything is possible. Stay tuned.

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