

## Interview: Executive Producer Rene Balcer on if ‘Law & Order’ Will Save the Day

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 1, 2010 - 12:09pm

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CHICAGO – As the late, great Sophia Petrillo of “The Golden Girls” might have philosophized, “Picture it: September 13, 1990.” When “Law & Order” premiere, “The Internet” and “Email” were barely words, “mobile phones” looked like portable hair dryers, and Google, Yahoo, and AOL weren’t even gleams in Bill Gates’ eyeglasses — let alone Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube. HBO and Showtime had yet to produce A-list hour dramas, and F/X, TNT, AMC, and USA had yet to produce anything more than the occasional TV-movie at all.

Although it enjoyed considerable acclaim, few film or TV critics would have predicted on that Tuesday night that a gritty, dark crime show with no A-list movie or TV names — slotted against the pop-cultural buzz-saw that was “Thirtysomething” — would still be the toast of television almost twenty years later. But “Law & Order” beat the odds to not only survive, but thrive during the past two decades, despite these changes in the media landscape — and multiple changes of cast that were unprecedented for a TV drama, including the death of Jerry Orbach in 2004, and the stormy departures of Michael Moriarty and Fred Dalton Thompson.



Rene Balcer, Executive Producer of Law and Order

*Photo credit: Jessica Burstein*

The show’s two spinoffs, 1999’s “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” and 2001’s “Law & Order: Criminal Intent,” are still going strong after a decade, while “The Mothership” (as it’s known in NBC/Universal headquarters) is poised to tie — or if it gets renewed for next season — beat the legendary “Gunsmoke” as the longest-running scripted drama in TV history. (Outspoken NBC programmer Angela Bromstad gave “L&O” fans plenty of reassurance that she’d “hate to” see it fail to break the record in January, but NBC spokesman Curt King cautions that no final

decision will be made until the May upfronts.)



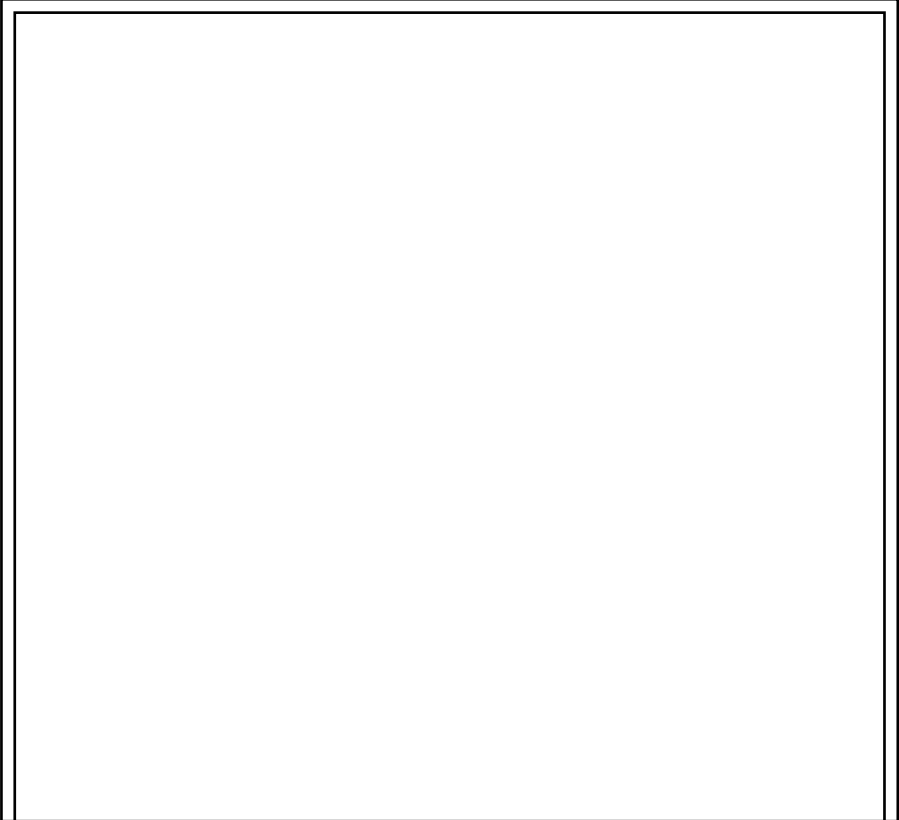
Recently, HollywoodChicago.com was lucky enough to score an interview with the show's Executive Producer and showrunner, Rene Balcer — who developed “Criminal Intent,” which is also returning this month on USA — and he offered his thoughts on the indestructible show as it returns to the NBC lineup on Monday nights, beginning tonight, March 1st, 2010.

**HollywoodChicago:** How has the show changed since those first few seasons, and what is the secret to the show’s success? And how do you keep a 20-year-old show fresh, from a writer’s point of view?

**Rene Balcer:** The secret to the show’s success? Every week, Dick and I send a small specimen of our blood to an individual who shall remain nameless but who resides in a very very warm place. But seriously, though there have been many many factors at play over the years (not to mention a good deal of luck) you’d have to credit the show’s unique format and self-contained story-telling. Oh yes, and the terrific actors. And the life-and-death subject matter. And NBC’s support of the show.

The show's changes have generally reflected changes in the kinds of criminality New York has faced over the course of 20 years. When the show went on the air, New York was in the midst of a crack war — street crime was rampant, neighborhoods were decimated, Times Square was a toilet. The early seasons of “L&O” reflected that — the show was very gritty, with a documentary feel; we used a lot of jittery hand-held camerawork; our cops pursued street criminals as opposed to boardroom bandits, etc. But for a variety of reasons (criminals aged out, money poured into the city, better law enforcement), the crack war ebbed. Also, what was stylistically innovative when the show began was adopted by lot of other shows like “ER” and “NYPD Blue”. And over time our show became more formalized in its look and rhythms.

A couple of seasons ago, we re-evaluated the show’s look and we started by asking ourselves what was different about New York from 1990. The obvious answer — 9/11. Though New York is in many ways a much safer city than it was twenty years ago, thanks to 9/11 and terrorism there’s much more a feeling of paranoia and “looking over your shoulder” than there was then. The city has over 20,000 security cameras, citizens are exhorted to “if you see something, say something”, IDs are required to go anywhere, pat-downs are routine. So we wanted the show to reflect this heightened sense of insecurity through its camerawork and obviously its story-telling.







Rene Balcer, Executive Producer of Law and Order

Photo credit: Jessica Burstein

It's always a challenge to keep any show fresh, let alone a gnarly old junkyard dog like “L&O.” But thanks to man's imaginative and unlimited capacity to inflict criminality on his fellow man, we're never at a loss for material. And bringing in new characters allows us to explore new and darker areas of a policeman's psyche or a district attorney's ethics.

**HollywoodChicago:** When “L&O” premiered, it was the height of the “nighttime soap opera”. “Dallas,” “Knots Landing,” and “LA Law” were still on the air, “Dynasty” and “Falcon Crest” had just ended, “90210” had just begun, and “Thirtysomething” was your competition. Now, the pendulum has swung back to the serialized drama — “Desperate Housewives,” “Grey's Anatomy,” “24,” “Mad Men,” “Damages,” and the HBO/Showtime shows. Are shows with self-contained “stories of the week” things of the past?

**Balcer:** I think over the past couple of seasons, you've actually seen the pendulum swing away from serialized dramas and back toward self-contained series. The serialized dramas you've mentioned have seen decreasing audiences, while some are in danger of being cancelled. Even in the age of DVRs, audiences find it hard to commit to weekly viewings of a serialized drama over the course of several seasons, while some have found that “serialized” doesn't necessarily translate to “quality”. More to the point for studios and networks, the economics work against serialized dramas — they don't repeat well and as a result fetch low prices in syndication sales. That being said, like most entertainment media television is a cyclical business: what's in today will be out tomorrow — or the day after. “L&O” has been fortunate in being able to ride out the cycles — and we've occasionally availed ourselves of serialized elements, for example this season we've followed Lt. Van Buren's struggle with cervical cancer and used it as a counterpoint and poignant subtext to our main stories.



“Boy on Fire” Episode 2014 — Pictured: (l-r) Alana De La Garza as A.D.A. Connie Rubirosa, Debra Winger as Martha Woodside, Linus Roache as Executive A.D.A. Michael Cutter

Photo credit: NBC/Will Hart

**HollywoodChicago:** “L&O” is notorious for using the best Broadway actors in guest roles, and has snagged even Julia Roberts and Kathleen Turner for guest shots. The late Jerry Orbach is still sorely missed by fans, and Jeremy Sisto, Anthony Anderson, and Linus Roache are indie film royalty, and known for top cable, miniseries, and Broadway roles. Have any personal-favorite episodes or moments — and actors that you've worked with?

**Balcer:** Let’s start with the present. This Monday at 10pm, Debra Winger delivers a powerful performance as a high school principal trying to keep her school afloat. In a few weeks, Amy Madigan rips Linus Roache a new one when she portrays his former law school mentor now embroiled in a life and death case. Right now, those two ladies are my favorite guest stars. As for favorite episodes, I’d have to count this season’s premiere, “Memo From the Dark Side” which took on both the Bush and Obama administrations over the issue of torture.

**HollywoodChicago:** There has not been a \*single\* A-list, top-rated and critically acclaimed new hour drama on the Big Four networks (besides spinoffs) in the last five years, except for “The Mentalist” and “The Good Wife”. Are high-IQ scripted dramas like “Law & Order” becoming an anachronism on broadcast, network TV? How has the cable drama revolution — and the aging of other top shows like “ER” and the original “CSI” — affected the landscape for shows like “L&O”?

**Balcer:** And for that matter, there hasn’t been a top-rated AND critically-acclaimed cable drama in a while either (there may be a show that’s one or the other on cable, but not both). There is always room for a smart drama on broadcast and cable, it’s usually a matter of execution and timing. And believe it or not, no one sets out to do a dumb scripted drama. As for cable’s impact on “L&O” — cable has been vital to “L&O”’s longevity: without the exposure the A&E and TNT reruns gave the show — and without the revenue from cable syndication, the “L&O” story might’ve concluded a while ago.

**HollywoodChicago:** In closing, what would you like to say to the many “L&O” fans who’ll be reading this column?

**Balcer:** Thank you — and keep watching. You’ll be sorry if you don’t.

*‘Law & Order’ returns on NBC on Monday, March 1st, 2010 at 8pm CST. It stars Jeremy Sisto, Anthony Anderson, S. Epatha Merkerson, Linus Roache, Alana De La Garza, and Sam Waterston from creator Dick Wolf.*

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