

Interview: Creator Shawn Ryan Deciphers ‘The Chicago Code’

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CHICAGO – Shawn Ryan produced one of the best cop dramas of the '00s in “The Shield” and has proven that he will be a creative voice in the medium worth watching with his work on “Lie to Me,” “Terriers,” and, most of all, the new FOX drama, “The Chicago Code.” Mr. Ryan gave a call to HollywoodChicago.com this week and we discussed his past success and what he hopes for the future of his new venture, along with how directly it relates to Chicago’s history, neighborhoods, and local government.

HollywoodChicago.com: I interviewed Scott Rosenbaum [writer for “The Shield”] years ago and he said that his approach to that show was something closer to a novel with each season being a chapter. Are you taking a similar long-term approach with this show or are you thinking more episode-to-episode?

Shawn Ryan: I think, ultimately, people will be able to look back and see a novelistic approach but the reality of network TV is that you kind of have to worry about each episode. If it is a novel, I don’t have everything in my head quite yet. We didn’t on “The Shield” either. We would kind of figure out in general what each season would be and then we filled in the blanks as we went along. It wasn’t until we got to season five or six that we tried to figure out what the end game would be. So, I don’t know what the endgame for “The Chicago Code” is yet. We have to see if the fans take to the show and whether or not it feels like a long-term show or not and then I can start planning that out.

HollywoodChicago.com: How is writing for FOX different than writing for FX? Are you given a similar creative freedom?

Ryan: I’m given a lot of freedom. The guy who runs the network now at FOX is Kevin Reilly, who ran FX when I started making “The Shield.” So, the stakes are higher, there’s more money involved, and so it’s a little bit different in that regard, but no one’s sitting me down and saying “you can’t do this and you can’t do that.” It is a different audience. You have to keep in mind that for a bigger audience certain things that may have flown on FX on “The Shield” aren’t going to appeal to a great deal of people on FOX. But that’s something that I try to gauge on my own. No one has imposed it on me.



Director Adam Arkin, Shawn Ryan, and Governor Pat Quinn on the set of The Chicago Code

Photo credit: Chuck Hodes/FOX

HollywoodChicago.com: Is it difficult balancing appealing to a mass audience with what you want to do creatively?

Ryan: It hasn't been a problem for us in that regard on this show. I've been fortunate that the people at FOX really like what we did. We made thirteen episodes; finished filming just before Christmas. So, I can honestly say that we had the full support of the network. You spend some time thinking about what the right balance is in that regard. And you spend time trying to fill what you think are the needs of the network audience. That's what they pay someone like me to do.



The Chicago Code

Photo credit: Justin Stephens/FOX

HollywoodChicago.com: Then how closely do you watch that when it's done? Do you read all the reviews and break down the rating demos or do you let it be what it's going to be?

Ryan: I started reading some reviews and then they started to get to be too much for me. Even though the majority of them were good, it really creeps up on you and the good ones can't be good enough. Even the good ones, if there's one thing they didn't like then that's the only sentence you pay attention to. It gets to be kind of self-destructive and so I stopped reading them. I did pay attention to the ratings in the first week. I talk about controlling only what I can control but one of those things is how to help the network sell the show — who's liking the ads, who's responding to the show. We wanted to have a sense of where the show was doing well and where it could do better.

HollywoodChicago.com: So the marketing has been fine-tuned after the ratings for that first episode?

Ryan: One of the areas that we would have liked to do better was with young women. So, you start to think if there's something in the show that should be appealing to young women. In this case, there definitely is. We have a strong woman in charge of these cops and she's going through something pretty unique. Is there a way to sell that struggle? That journey? So, yeah, I spent some time with the marketing team. I don't want to make it seem like I'm doing it because it is their job but I will weigh in and nudge in one direction or another. That was something that we talked about. Especially when you have a platform like “American Idol” that does attract a lot of young women on which to sell the show.

HollywoodChicago.com: How much of the storytelling that you do is based on Chicago history or is it more of a general piece rather than specific events?

Ryan: Certainly, this show is fictionalized. Having said that, I would say that we were inspired more by reality in this show than we were in “The Shield.” That really sprung a lot from our collective imaginations. Occasionally, we'd use something that we read. In this case, we really dove into the history of Chicago. Sometimes we were inspired more by certain things we read in books and then we thought, “How can we put a 21st century twist on this?” All of the titles of the episodes have something to do with Chicago. So, for instance, one episode, we start with the premise of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. What was that and what would be a modern-day equivalent of that? There was a heat wave in '95. What would a heat wave do today and what would the cop's responsibilities be? That was the basis for an episode. So, we are taking more from reality in that regard.



The Chicago Code

Photo credit: Jeffery Garland/FOX

HollywoodChicago.com: How important is to you to be on-the-ground in Chicago and how do you choose the neighborhoods you highlight?

Ryan: It's extraordinarily important to me and my job was kind of to make the macro decision that we were going to invest in Chicago and do it all there. Having said that, when it comes down to individual episodes, occasionally there would be a story point — like the St. Valentine's Day massacre in Lincoln Park or an episode where we dive into Boys Town — but the vast majority of the work can be decided by the director and the production team. We give an indication as writers, but we're not dictating. We do talk about exploiting, in a good way, the city of Chicago to our fullest ability: Capturing the uniqueness of the city. That was important to me. We spend six out of every eight shooting days out in the world filming. It's pretty much the opposite of most shows. Most shows that “take place in Chicago,” really don't film in Chicago.

HollywoodChicago.com: Some of the behind-the-scenes material that allowed access into the entire creative process on “The Shield” DVDs still stands as some of the best TV-DVD special features to date. Are you allowing a similar behind-the-scenes access for this show?

Ryan: Yes. Yes. Though these companies are kind of resistant to spending too much time and resources on a first-season show. We don't know how successful the show's going to be and, therefore, how the DVD might do. But I maintain a completely open set in that regard with my studio. They had a lot of people filming behind-the-scenes. If we get picked up, I'm sure they'll be emboldened to increase those efforts in future years.



The Chicago Code

Photo credit: Jeffery Garland/FOX

HollywoodChicago.com: And when will we know that? Probably not till May?

Ryan: Probably. The ratings for the first week were good-not-great. If it stays in that range, we'll probably have to wait till May. If it rockets up, we'll find out earlier. If it craters and tanks, we'll probably know the bad news earlier than that. Most likely, we'll find out in May.

HollywoodChicago.com: It seems like every show that ends nowadays gets the rumor of a movie — “24,” “The Sopranos,” “Arrested Development.” Would you ever consider revisiting the world of “The Shield” or is it over?

Ryan: I've had some conversations about it but it's certainly a real high bar for me in terms of how much control I enjoyed over the show. And I'm so pleased with the ending that we had that to do something in that universe would have to be under a few conditions that are hard to come by. Having said that, I do talk with Michael Chiklis occasionally about it. He's certainly game for it. If there's the right idea and the right time that would be supported in the right way by the studio, then I'm open to it. I haven't said definitely not. I think it's good that a couple years have passed and we'll see if there's an appetite. We'll see if there's an idea that excites me and doesn't violate the show. Then we'd have to see if the studio is supportive of that. The show did very well for basic cable but is not pulling “24” numbers on FOX. So, I'm sure it would have to be done for a budget, but we did the show for a budget early on. So, maybe. But, I don't want to give hope to people that it's around the corner like maybe the “24” and “Arrested Development” do.

HollywoodChicago.com: I adore the show and I'm conflicted because the end was so perfect. I think a lot of shows come back to deal with unfinished business but I can't imagine you have any of that.

Ryan: I know one thing: If I were to attempt to do a movie, it would not be all of the same characters in the same place continuing that story because I feel like that story had an end. It would be something involving one or more of the characters in something that felt filmic — a two-hour movie story.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you have an endorsement for Mayor?

Ryan: Absolutely not. (Laughs.) Because I have to live with the winner. Believe me, I've learned enough about Chicago politics that whoever wins is going to be my favorite.

“The Chicago Code” stars Jason Clarke, Jennifer Beals, Matt Lauria, Devin Kelley, Todd Williams, Billy Lush, and Delroy Lindo. It was created by Shawn Ryan and airs on FOX on Monday nights at 8pm CST.



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