

RUNNING the SHOW

An Interview with Michael Chernuchin of *Law & Order*



Michael Chernuchin, Executive Producer/ Showrunner of Law and Order.

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Executive producer/showrunner Michael Chernuchin of *Law & Order* talks about what's it's like to write and run one of TV's most successful one-hour dramatic series.

BY KATE MCCALLUM

"cha-ching"
LAW & ORDER OFFICES
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NBC's classic Emmy Award®-winning dramatic series, *Law & Order*, was created by Dick Wolf and first aired in September of 1990. The show is now entering into its "Lucky 13th" season this fall and has been renewed through 2005. Only one other hour-long, primetime dramatic television show will have surpassed this record. *Gunsmoke* ran 20 seasons, from 1955 to 1975, but from 1955 to 1961 the episodes aired as half-hours. *Law & Order* consistently wins Wednesday night's top ratings and last season was ranked number five, unprecedented for a show in its twelfth year. In 1997 it won an Emmy for best dramatic series, has been nominated for the past 11 years, and has garnered many additional awards.

People everywhere cite *Law & Order* as their favorite television show. There have been 277 episodes of the series produced to date, which have come from 277 scripts which have been based upon 277 stories. But statistics alone don't do the show justice. Its remarkable longstanding appeal is built on the foundation of adhering to a time-tested, market-proven dramatic structure executed by exceptional writers.

As the writing staff at *Law & Order* prepares for the season ahead and the start of episode 278, I spoke with executive producer/showrunner, Michael Chernuchin, during a break from his writing duties.

scr(i)pt: *To what would you attribute the phenomenal long-term success of L&O?*

MC: First, probably the "ripped from the headlines" aspect of it. People are familiar with the cases and they want to see how we'll

fictionalize them. Second, each episode is self-contained. There's no need to see last week's show to understand this week's. Third, I would say habit. People know Wednesday night, 10:00 p.m., turn it on, and you'll see a good story. It's also on several cable networks right now—A&E, I don't know how many times a day, and it's also on TNT. I think that all helps.

scr(i)pt: *This season will start with episode number 278. How do you keep coming up with new and interesting stories?*

MC: Again, ripped from the headlines. We read *The New York Post* and newspapers from around the country.

scr(i)pt: *How did you break into the business and what is your work history?*

MC: I have a strange history. I actually have a graduate degree in English and I was going to be a famous novelist and playwright and that didn't work out. I got scared because all my friends were graduating from business school and medical school and law school. I didn't want to be the starving artist, so I did what I was qualified to do—nothing. I went to law school and I ended up, unfortunately, doing well in law school, getting a good job in NYC and staying there for a long time. One day I just got frustrated and wrote a spec script. It was actually during a deposition. I was defending a deposition; and I wrote a spec script, quit and moved out here. *Law & Order* was my first job.

Kathy Karr, who was head of development for Wolf Films at the time, pulled my spec script out of the pile. They brought me in and interviewed me, then hired me for a freelance job. I was ready to go back to New York because I couldn't afford an apartment in New York and an apartment here, but then the phone rang and it was the showrunner who said, "You're on staff, and we're turning your episode into a two-part episode." It changed my life. I stayed

for six years then ended up the last two of those years as executive producer.

After that, I created a show with Dick called *Feds* for CBS. I also co-wrote the feature film, *Eraser* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. I was an executive producer of *Brooklyn South* and *Michael Hayes*, and then created and executive produced my own show called *Bull* on TNT—which was TNT's first drama. Now I'm back here to executive produce/showrun *Law & Order*. So ... Tom Wolfe was wrong—you can go back home.

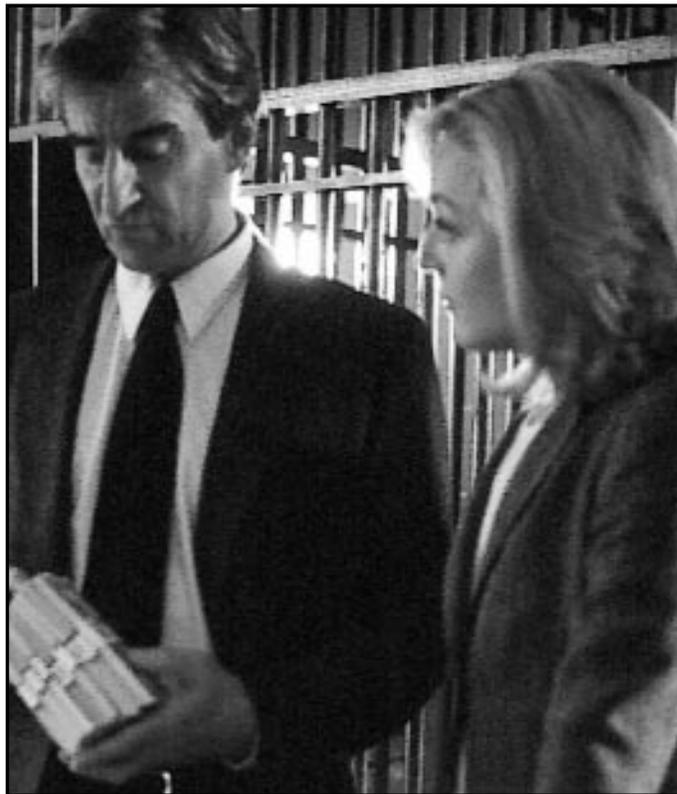
scr(i)pt: *So you started as a novelist?*

MC: Like many writers I have three or four unfinished novels in a drawer some place. I ended up in television because when I was frustrated with being a lawyer, I said, "What's the fastest way of becoming a professional writer?" I actually looked around, and television needed the most product, so I made the conversion from great American novel to great American television show.

scr(i)pt: *Will you ever go back and finish those novels?*

MC: Yes. One of these days ...

scr(i)pt: *Writer/executive producer/creator, Dick Wolf, has become one of the most successful TV producers in television. Law & Order has spawned Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, Law & Order: Criminal Intent, and now Dick has Crime and Punishment on the air with Dragnet premiering this fall. What is it like to work with Dick?*



Law & Order "Possession" (L-R) Sam Waterston, Elisabeth Röhm
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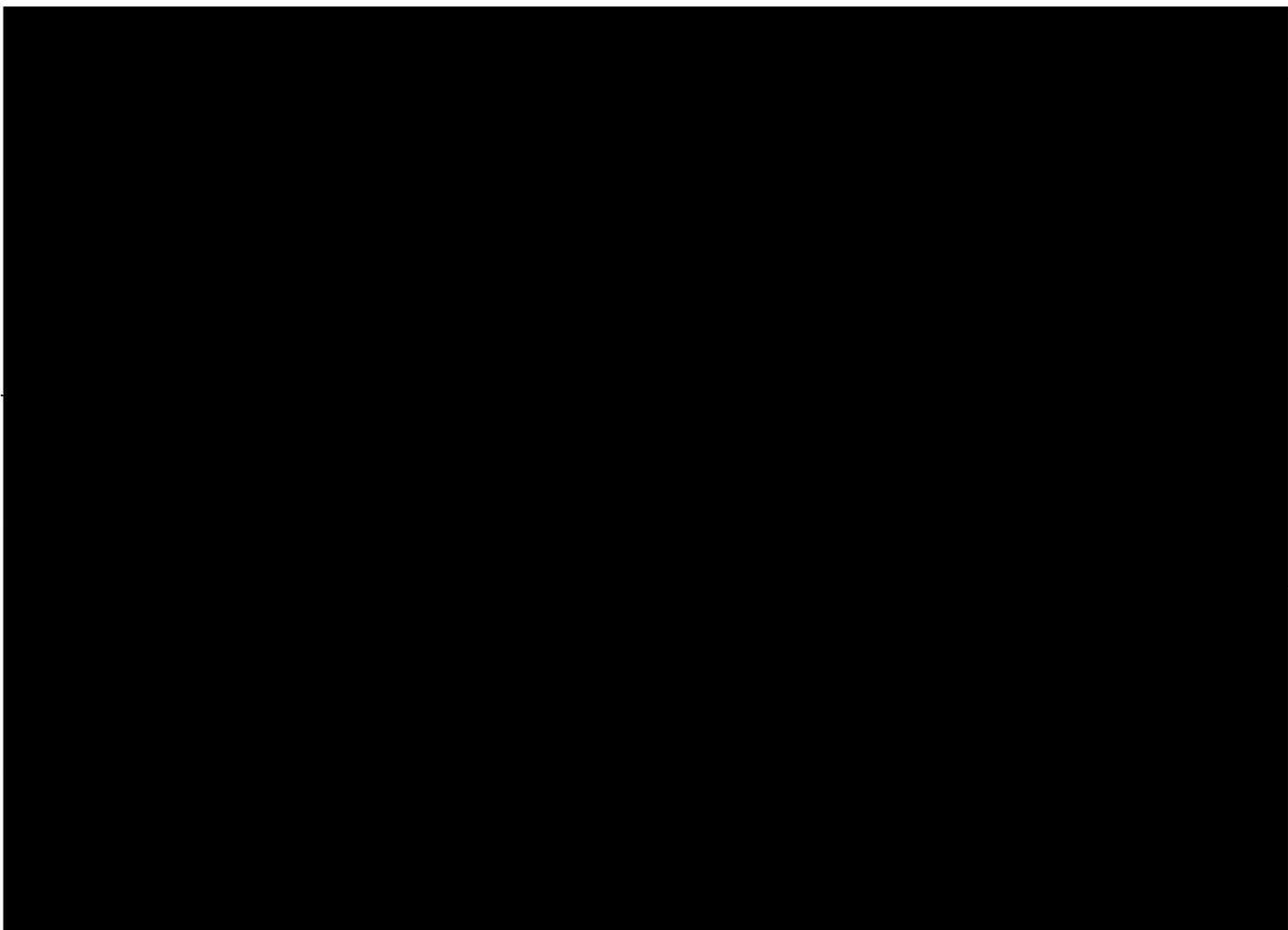
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Law & Order Season 12 (L-R) Jesse L. Martin, Dianne Wiest, Jerry Orbach, Elisabeth Röhm, Sam Waterston, S. Epatha Merkerson



opposed to other diseases and actually got an award from the Diabetes Association. We did a show about homeopathic breast cancer treatments, which I hope made a difference. I do a lot of shows about racial differences and, hopefully, that will make a difference, too.

scr(i)pt: *Are there any particular issues that you'd like to tackle that you haven't yet?*

MC: Yes, I think the biggest problem in this country is racism, and I don't think it's ever going to go away. I want to write a lot about that.

scr(i)pt: *Many of the writers on the Wolf shows have come from professional backgrounds. On the Law & Order staff five out of the 10 writers have been lawyers. Can you speak to this?*

MC: I think it's a show written by grown-ups—people that have life experience. I don't think you can come out of college and write any of the Wolf shows. I think you need to have been kicked around the block a couple of times. Thus, we have people from a lot of different backgrounds.

scr(i)pt: *What advice would you give to writers aspiring to break into the TV biz?*

MC: Write a spec script in hour-long format. I can speak from my experience. My spec, which was a spec pilot and what got me the job here, ended up being *Bull* 10 years later. A spec script is what will get you in. I would never submit a spec *Law & Order* to *Law & Order*. You've got to get an agent because no one's going to read you without an agent or lawyer.

When you write a spec script, push the envelope, you can always pull it back in. Write outrageous things. That will get the attention of somebody reading it.

scr(i)pt: *I often hear aspiring writers say they have "a great idea for a TV series." How hard is it to sell a TV show and what advice would you give someone who wants to do just that?*

MC: It is impossible. There are 800-pound gorillas out there. There are the Dick Wolfs', the David E. Kelleys', the Steven Bochcos', the John Wells', and combined they're about 90 percent of all hours on television. You should hook up with one of those people, or you could get lucky and walk through the door and they pull your script out of the pile and say, "This is great."

scr(i)pt: *What's your post Law & Order dream?*

MC: Play a lot of golf. No, I have a lot of feature ideas I want to write, a play idea and then there are always those half-finished novels sitting in the desk ... 

KATE MCCALLUM is an independent producer/consultant and writer. She was Producer on the NBC TV Movie *What Kind of Mother Are You?* and is currently developing *The Emmett Till Story* at Showtime with Gregory Hines and Diane Keaton. She's been fortunate to work with and learn from some of the best writers in the business including; Dan Pyne, John Mankiewicz, Gail Hickman, John Hill and now—Michael Chernuchin.

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