



DICK WOLF

by GRAHAM FLASHNER

GROWING UP IN NEW YORK CITY IN the 1950s and '60s, Dick Wolf was smitten with cop and legal shows, especially gritty dramas like *Naked City*, *N.Y.P.D.* and *The Defenders*. As Wolf explains: "Drama is conflict, and the good thing about police shows is, the stakes are death — they usually start out with a murder, and hopefully, at the end of the episode, you get a satisfying conclusion."

For more than twenty years, Wolf has been satisfying TV viewers with one of the most celebrated and popular shows in television history, *Law & Order*, as well as its equally addictive spin-offs *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)* and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*. And like the shows that influenced him, Wolf prefers telling stories the old-school way, *sans* time-altering gimmicks and moral ambiguity.

"I am a linear storyteller," he says. "I don't like flashbacks or cross-cutting; I like telling stories in an understandable, falling-dominoes kind of way, and that's never changed."

"The reason we've kept audiences for years and years is one very simple phrase," Wolf adds. "It's the writing, stupid. It's always the writing."

It's a phrase that's also inscribed on a plaque that sits on Wolf's desk.

Writing and producing have won Wolf two Primetime Emmy Awards (one in 1997, for outstanding drama for *Law & Order*, the second in 2007, for outstanding television movie, for *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*) and a Grammy (his company produced the documentary *When You're Strange*, about the life of The Doors, for the PBS series *American Masters*). His Wolf Films also produced the post-9/11 documentary short, *Twin Towers*, which won an Oscar. But his

name will forever be synonymous with *Law & Order* and its iconic two-note, "chung-chung" musical sting. More than just a groundbreaking police procedural, *L&O* became a stunningly lucrative brand name. At its peak, the franchise generated sales of more than a billion dollars a year, and was viewed by 100 million viewers a month, not just on NBC, but via syndication on A&E, TNT and USA Network.

"He's kind of this meta-producer," says Neal Baer, who was an executive producer on *SVU* for eleven seasons. "Dick had a real sense of how to market these shows, better than anyone I know."

Wolf Films has become a cottage industry in television, with production offices in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, and some 400 employees servicing several shows in production, including this season's freshman series, the NBC drama *Chicago Fire*. In a town where turnover is rampant, Wolf prizes longevity and loyalty. Producer Rene Balcer has been with Wolf since *L&O* began twenty-two years ago; postproduction supervisor Arthur W. Forney has worked on every single episode of *L&O*, and Wolf says that, "Peter Jankowski [president of Wolf Films] and I have probably spoken 355 days a year for the past twenty-three years." Proudly, Wolf notes that he's had the same office and phone number at Universal for twenty-seven years.

Actor Sam Waterston, who played District Attorney Jack McCoy for sixteen seasons on *L&O*, says that "Dick was a master delegator of authority, but he was also very smart and perceptive... his genius was in signing me to one-year deals, because I wasn't even sure I wanted to do series television. I thought maybe a season or two... he never tugged the rope; never pulled on the reins, I never felt trapped."



The premiere of Dick Wolf's newest series for NBC, *Chicago Fire*, was celebrated at the Chicago History Museum, with the cast arriving on a ladder truck.

"There's two great lessons I learned from Dick," says Balcer. "Never take no for an answer, and never let your ego get in the way of a better idea, no matter where it comes from."

Though his father worked in television, Wolf originally wanted to be a novelist. He attended the exclusive prep school Phillips Andover, where George W. Bush was a classmate — which would later serve as an inspiration for his 1992 film *School Ties*, starring Brendan Fraser ("A film that took eleven years to get made," Wolf notes, "and made eleven cents.") After attending college at the University of Pennsylvania, Wolf abandoned his literary dreams and spent a decade working on Madison Avenue as a copywriter.

All the while, he wrote screenplays on the side; by the time he turned thirty, "I decided I didn't want to sell toothpaste for the rest of my life," he says. Instead, he bolted for Los Angeles, and spent the next eight years in the movie business, writing indie films like *Skateboard* and the aforementioned *School Ties*.

When Wolf's agent called with an offer from David Milch, to join the writing staff at

Hill Street Blues, Wolf was nonplussed. He liked the freedom of the screenwriter's life, working out of his home office. "You don't understand," Wolf recalls his agent saying, "They're going to pay you five thousand dollars a week and then they'll pay you on top of that to write scripts."

Unfamiliar with how the TV business worked, Wolf was still hesitant, until his agent pointed out *Hill Street's* constant cycle of residuals. "My wife at the time was holding a one-year-old baby and listening on speakerphone," Wolf recalls with a laugh. "She walked across the room and said, 'He'll be there Monday.'"

Wolf spent a year at *Hill Street*, then jumped at the chance to be the supervising producer on the hottest show of the mid-'80s, *Miami Vice*. Wolf's first episode starred Liam Neeson, as an IRA terrorist who comes to Miami to shoot down an airliner with a Stinger missile.

Hill Street Blues had re-energized the police procedural with hand-held cameras and ensemble storytelling. In 1990, Wolf



Wolf, an executive producer on HBO's acclaimed *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, conferred on the telefilm's Canadian set with August Schellenberg, who played Sitting Bull.

dramatically expanded the genre's horizons with a format that combined his early love of cop and legal shows: the first half followed detectives investigating a crime (usually a murder), while the second half shifted the point of view to prosecutors trying to win a conviction. The show, of course, was *Law & Order*.

Wolf sold thirteen episodes to Barry Diller at Fox based on his concept, only to have Diller phone him the very next day and tell him it wasn't a Fox show. CBS ordered a pilot, but then passed on the show. Then—Universal TV president Kerry McCluggage shopped it to NBC's head honcho, Brandon Tartikoff. "Brandon said, 'How are you going to do this every week?'" Wolf recalls. "'Where are the stories going to come from?' And I told him that the bible for the show was the front page of the *New York Post*. 'Give me six episodes to write. And when you read them, you'll order the show.'"

Law & Order debuted on NBC on September 13, 1990. At the time, Wolf recalls, "I just wanted to get past the first thirteen." More than 450 episodes and twenty seasons later, *Law & Order* had tied *Gunsmoke* as television's longest running scripted series.

The show was justifiably famous for its ripped-from-the-headlines stories and fast-paced realism, which Wolf dubbed *trompe l'oeil cinéma vérité*. "The cops don't

catch 'em in twenty-two minutes, and the prosecutors don't hook them in twenty-two minutes," he says. "It's a compressed reality, but you take all the color and desaturate things, and with very fluid camera movements, it makes it look more realistic."

For hundreds of stage actors in New York's vibrant theater community, *L&O* also became a dependable side gig between roles. (Wolf once famously said, "If you're going to the theater and the actor does not have a *Law & Order* credit on the *Playbill*, it means that he either just got off the bus or he's really a bad actor.")

Wolf never imagined that *L&O* would become a franchise, but after the success of the 1998 TV movie starring original cast member Chris Noth, *Exiled: A Law & Order Movie*, he realized the time was right for a new series, and turned his focus to the Sex Crimes unit. "Dick has an uncanny sense of the zeitgeist," says Baer. "*SVU* was an area that hadn't been explored... I always said it was the most political show on TV, because we took on such complex social issues: I did shows on abortion, gun violence, euthanasia."

SVU debuted in 1999; *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, starring Vincent D'Onofrio, followed two years later, and suddenly, one could turn on the television and find an episode of some version of *L&O* playing

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Wolf and colleagues Yves Simoneau, Tom Thayer and Clara George celebrated the Primetime Emmy success of *Wounded Knee* in 2007; the production was nominated for seventeen Emmys and won six.

at almost any time of night. (Not that every spinoff had the Midas touch: two subsequent efforts, *Law & Order: Trial By Jury* and *Law & Order: LA* each only lasted one season.)

Once the series were up and running in the hands of his capable showrunners, Wolf was always on to the next project, often juggling five or six at a time. He has produced nearly forty TV series and films, including the Primetime Emmy-winning HBO TV movie *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and *New York Undercover*, a '90s Fox show that Wolf says, "I'd love to bring back today — it was the first minority-lead drama ever to be renewed."

When NBC decided not to renew *Law & Order* for a twenty-first season in 2010, Wolf says he was caught by complete surprise. It's not a subject he prefers to dwell on, though

he did joke that on his tombstone, he wants the word "canceled."

These days he's more excited about a sitcom pilot he's producing for NBC, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, written by Liz Brixius, about a young woman who awakens from a coma only to discover that she has a seventeen-year-old daughter.

Amidst his vast array of TV projects, Wolf also has found time to realize his early ambitions of becoming a novelist, authoring the thriller *The Intercept*, the first of three planned books centered on the fictional detective, Jeremy Fisk.

"It's wonderful to be able to play in this many sandboxes," says Wolf. "The older you get, the more you appreciate the opportunities you get... I feel blessed."