

TV Sunday THE NEW SEASON



Jessica Burstein

Dick Wolf has reached a height that most TV producers would kill for — four series on the air at once. The creator of 'Law & Order' is satisfied just making shows about crime and punishment. But did he tell you about his sitcom?

CRIME TIME

By MICHAEL GILTZ

HERE are some contradictions. Producer Dick Wolf was born and raised in Manhattan (Tudor City, to be exact) and makes TV shows like "Law & Order" and "New York Undercover" that he famously insists be shot right here. Where does he spend most of his time?

Los Angeles.

Dick Wolf's first career was in advertising. He followed in his dad's footsteps and from 1969 to 1976 made a name creating slick ad campaigns for the likes of Crest and National Airlines. ("Hi, I'm Cheryl. Fly me!")

What kind of shows does he make?

Ripped-from-the-headlines crime dramas that consistently tackle controversial subjects like abortion, capital punishment and any other button-pusher you can think of.

In its first years, "Law & Order"

suffered almost as many advertiser pullouts as Dr. Laura.

Dick Wolf is TV's most visible opponent government attempts to heavily control violence on TV.

How violent is "Law & Order?"

All crimes happen before the show begins and, in 10 years on the air, its main characters have never fired their guns.

The 54-year-old father of three laughs at these comparisons. Having the longest running drama in prime time (with an unprecedented five-year renewal, no less) should keep anyone content.

"I have the luxury of only making shows I'd want to watch," he says.

Still, you might think someone so closely identified with one genre would yearn to break out.

And, indeed, Wolf does. He has tackled other types of TV shows throughout his career (including a medical drama with "Frasier" father John Mahoney and a "Moonlighting"-style sci-fi romantic comedy). They all flopped.

His pet project — "An 8 p.m. drama that would follow a young boy in school from third grade on; one grade for each season" — has never even reached the pilot stage.

He's even got a comedy in the works.

"Strangely enough, we're actually talking about a sitcom that won't be that far afield from what I deal with now," he says.

Meaning a "Barney Miller" sort of show?

"I should be so lucky to come up with the next 'Barney Miller,'" says Wolf, adding: "If you talk to most cops, it's actually their favorite cop show." But he won't say more about his proposed comedy.

Meanwhile, his bread-and-butter crime shows continue to build.

Wolf enthuses about the stellar cast he's assembled for a new Monday night drama, "Deadline," a cast that includes Bebe Neuwirth, Tom Conti, Lili Taylor and Hope Davis.

"It's the writing that gets them," says Wolf, who's also snagged

Oscar-winner Dianne Wiest as the latest addition to "Law & Order."

Then there is "Arrest & Trial," a half hour syndicated show hosted by Brian Dennehy. Wolf is especially excited by the style and feel of this real-life version of "Law & Order."

"We've got the cooperation of 185 different law enforcement agencies and we're doing 195 episodes the first season," says Wolf. "One crime per half hour. You meet the real cops and the real prosecutors."

"We've taken a lot of time and effort to come up with recreations that don't look like other recreations. It's extremely voyeuristic."

He's such a crime junkie, Wolf is convinced the "Law & Order" magazine currently in the works is a no-brainer.

He's also not worried a third "Law & Order" will be one too many. It's already in the works, with NBC focusing one eye on the instant success of "Law & Order: SVU" and the other on the looming writer's strike that may leave

primetime nearly devoid of new dramas and sitcoms by the fall of 2001.

Whatever happens to the new shows, Wolf has learned from his mistakes and move on.

He learned from the flop "Crime & Punishment" not to break down the fourth wall by interviewing the characters (a seemingly bizarre device that's now a staple of ABC's drama "Once and Again").

He's been learning from his mistakes ever since he was 10 years old and writing for the school newspaper.

"I did a rip-off of Sherlock Holmes," says Wolf. "It was a fictional story I kept going for three years. A magnum opus. I got out of it when I graduated by writing 'To Be Continued...'"

He laughs, knowing an endless cliffhanger is the polar opposite of "Law & Order," which religiously avoids continuing a storyline from one week to the next.

"I learned a lesson, see? Get closure."