

Critique law and order



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

For just about as long as I can remember watching TV, it seems, there has been a program called Law & Order somewhere on the dial. As a child I remember my parents always tuning into the latest episode, and so to stay up for evening TV in my household meant watching the show with the “grown-ups,” a very desirable thing to do! For those of you unfamiliar with this phenomenon (what, have you been hiding in the woods?), allow me to bring you up to date. It’s about cops and crooks, lawyers and plaintiffs, crime and punishment. The stories often come from real-life headlines and although the show has had many different actors come and go over the years, it hasn’t seemed to affect its fan base. I’ll never forget the first time I watched Law ; Order.

It was 10: 00 PM in the middle of the week and I was only about 10 years old. I was watching a cop show that captured the complete attention of my parents and brother. The fact that they agreed on something made me sit up and take notice right away. What I was struck by right off the bat was the way it was organized (although I probably didn’t realize back then that that was appealing to me), a half-hour of cops, followed by a half hour of lawyers. A neat little package that we all could count on every week.

And there was a certain “ look” to it, too. Especially in its earlier years it had a harsh, almost gritty look to it. The expression that their stories were “ ripped from the headlines” lead one to believe that it was always “ current” and important, and compelling. Episodes dealt with bombings at abortion clinics, sexual abuse, child and spousal abuse, murder, extortion, gay-bashing, anything you could find in the newspapers might appear on the small screen that evening. This feeling of being “ in the moment” was very

compelling to me. It became almost impossible not to try and second-guess who they might be paralleling in one of their stories, sort of a double “ who done it” along with “ who done it for real”.

Law & Order is the longest running drama on television at 12 years and is the number 6 rated show this season. Repeats of the original Law & Order are so often in syndication it’s been said that at any given time somewhere in America there’s always at least one episode of Law & Order on the air. That may be an exaggeration, but not by much. This series also gave birth to two other shows that are intertwined, sometimes, with the original. One is “ SVU,” Special Victims Unit and the other is “ Criminal Intent”.

These programs are not like the “ spin-offs” of years gone by, where characters from one show ended up with their own shows. The three Law & Order shows all run simultaneously, sometimes moving in and out of each others plot-lines, on occasion. Its as if they made a conscious effort that if they were going to do any “ spin-offs” they were going to have to have their own personality. ‘ SVU’ is more emotional, while “ Criminal Intent” has a much more Sherlock Holmes approach. The personalities are different. They wouldn’t work otherwise.

I think that even though they strive to be different and stand on their own, these shows know the advantage of using the Law ; Order brand in their titles. They know that this will tell the audience there’s a certain level of quality and point of view that will be with the show. They’re like brothers and sisters in a family, but they are unique unto themselves. Another thing that I think lends to their success is the fact that they seem to rotate actors in and

out of the series with some frequency. Even with the twists and turns of their plot lines after 12 years the audience might be getting a little tired of even the most enjoyable characters by now (think “ Friends”). Filmed entirely on location in New York City, this realistic program looks at crime and justice from a dual perspective.

One can count on there being several possible suspects all looking quite guilty in the first half hour of programming, while in the second half the “ legal eagles” duke it out in dramatic fashion, with the occasional tearful courtroom confession squeezed out “ just in the nick of time”. Even the predictability of this formula holds some comfort for the audience. This formula has even created a cheering section within my family. My father prefers the first half, with the detective work doing the excavation and my mother preferring the second half with all the courtroom intrigue and maneuvering. I tend to straddle the fence, really enjoying it in its entirety.

I guess now that I’m all grown up with the ability to watch whatever I want, I still tend to tune into Law & Order, either the current incarnation or one of the reruns on cable TV and continue to enjoy this show. That’s the best example of “ quality control” one can give when it comes to such a long running show...it worked then, it works now, and I can hardly envision a time when that won’t be true.