

# The Shifting Scene of His Crimes

By Graham Flashner

Steven Bochco, the mastermind of *Hill Street Blues*, *L.A. Law* and *NYPD Blue*, is more comfortable these days at the cable networks, but his passion for character-based crime series abides. His new TNT series, *Murder in the First*, reflects his own history of innovation — and how we watch television today.

Photographs by Maarten de Boer



**W**hen you're one of the most successful producers in television history — when you've won ten Emmy Awards in a career that spans nearly five decades, created some of the most beloved shows of all time and even been inducted into the Television Academy Hall of Fame — it would be easy enough to rest on your laurels and ride off into the sunset.



Easy, that is, unless you're Steven Bochco, who returns from a five-year hiatus with a new TNT series, *Murder in the First*, that spends a full season dissecting a single murder case.

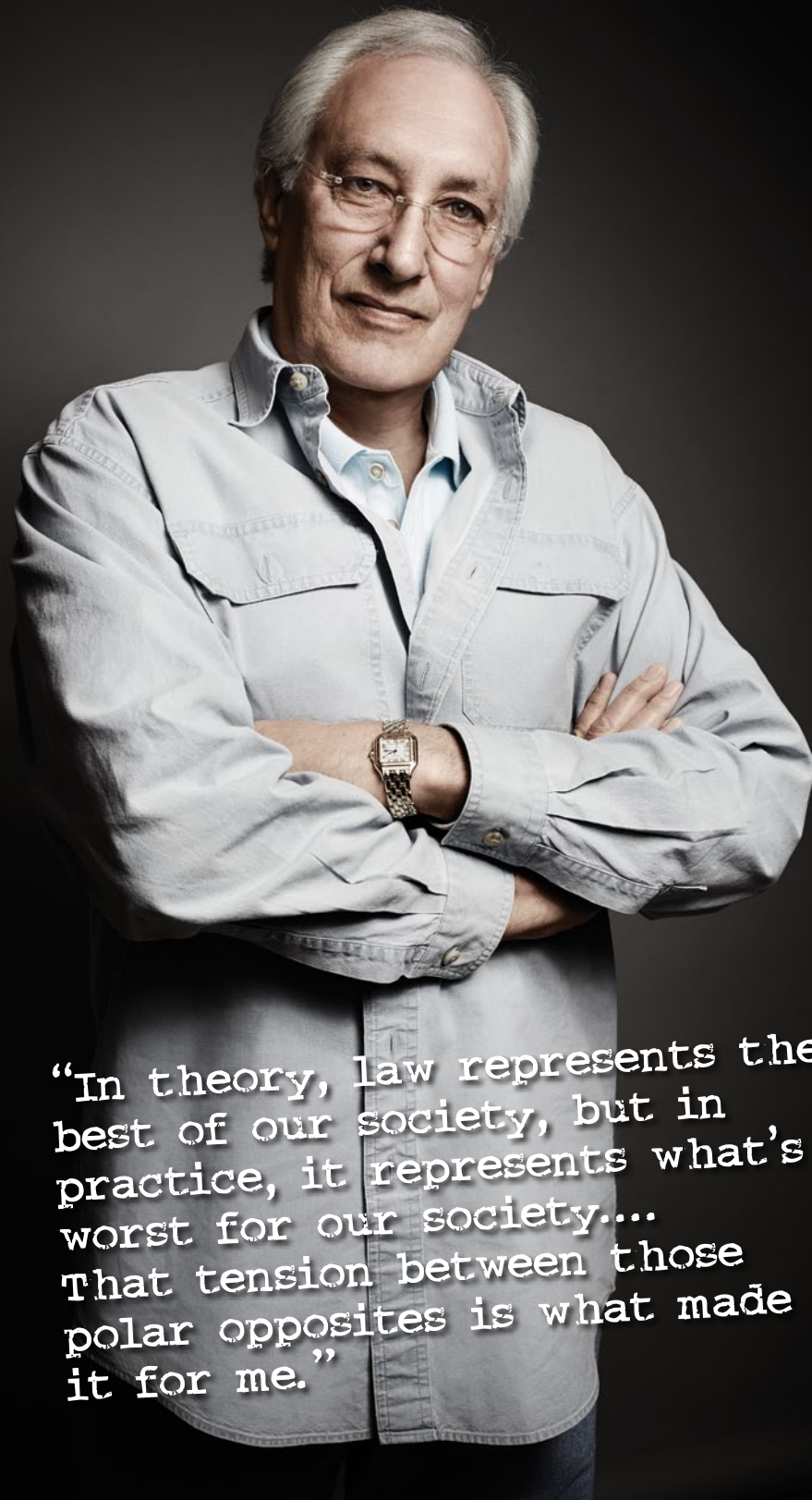
That concept may sound commonplace today, but in 1996, when Bochco pioneered it with his ABC show *Murder One*, it was revolutionary. "When you're working in television, if you're lucky enough to do something an audience responds to, you go for it," he says.

*Murder in the First* is Bochco's second series in a row for TNT. It's the TV equivalent of a summer beach read: a fast-paced murder mystery that resolves in ten episodes. To put it in procedural terms, Bochco has returned to the scene of the crime — but this time, he's hoping for a better result. For all its hoopla, *Murder One* lasted just two seasons. Bochco is confident that

today's audience is better equipped and more receptive.

"*Murder One* was twenty-two hours, which was a lot of episodes to sustain a single storyline," he says. "With DVRs and binge-watching, it's easier to track a single storyline across a season. Viewers weren't capable of watching that way twenty years ago."

Unlike *Murder One*, which was firmly anchored in the point of view of a ruthless defense attorney (Daniel Benzali), *Murder in the First* — a production of TNT Originals — is seen through the eyes of two homicide detectives, played by Taye Diggs (*Private Practice*) and Kathleen Robertson (*Boss*). The show also stars Steven Weber (*Dallas*, *Wings*), Miki Kirkland (*Safe Haven*), Raphael Sbarge (*Once Upon a Time*) and Ian Anthony Dale (*Hawaii Five-0*). And it's more of a hybrid of genres than its predecessor.



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“This show begins as a police investigation, which results in an arrest, kicks into more of a legal drama, morphs into a courtroom drama, then comes full circle at the end back to a police drama,” Bochco says.

Relaxing on a cushy chair in the office of his West L.A. production company, Bochco, silver-haired and tanned, looks at least a decade younger than his seventy years. He’s not as prolific as he once was, but his passion to tell stories still burns bright. Michael Wright, president and head of programming for TNT, TBS and TCM, says: “He is as fiery and combative and dedicated as anyone we work with.”

Bochco’s office, which could comfortably fit a Manhattan studio apartment, is also cozy enough to serve as a brainstormer’s paradise. Hanging by his workstation is an artwork in metal that reads, “SHOW ME THE MONEY,” a gift from his third wife, producer Dayna Kalins (Philly, *Raising the Bar*). A career’s worth of mementos lines the shelves, none more startling than Puddles, a taxidermied Pekingese that stares out at guests from a director’s chair. It’s a \$5,000 prop from an L.A. Law episode that Bochco wrote about a dying man who preferred taxidermy to burial. “It freaks people out,” Bochco says, smiling.

In person, Bochco is accessible and avuncular, revered by the people he works with, who alternately describe him as boss, therapist, wise man, godfather. Saved By the Bell child star Mark-Paul Gosselaar — who replaced Rick Schroder on *NYPD Blue* and credits Bochco with “launching my young-adult career” — says, “He really is a genius — there’s an aura about him, a respect he demands without demanding it.”

Alison Cross, who co-created *Philly* with Bochco and wrote three episodes of *Murder in the First*, says, “After you work with other people, you really see that Steven’s just better than anyone else. He has perfect pitch for structure, and discipline of form, and he makes writers feel like they’re part of a family.”

David Milch, who met Bochco on *Hill Street Blues* and whose very first script won him a writing Emmy, says simply: “He is a master at drawing out your ideas and helping you shape them.”

Bochco is famous for mentoring showrunners (Milch, David E. Kelley), and he was collaborating with an emerging young writer, Eric Lodal (*The Locrian Mode*), on a law show set in the Old West, when fate intervened in the form of a phone call. It was TNT’s Wright, who wanted to do a serialized show that examined all facets of the judicial system.

“I told Steven, ‘You were one of the first to take a serialized, storytelling approach to a crime drama, so it’s ridiculous you’re not doing it now. You should do it again,’” Wright recalls. Bochco says he mapped out the entire plotline for *Murder in the First* on one of his daily three-mile walks (“Structure is like breathing for him,” says Cross) and then brought it to Lodal for refinements.

The pilot begins with detectives Terry English (Diggs) and Hildy Mulligan (Robertson) investigating the murder of a middle-aged drug addict with a mysterious connection to arrogant Silicon Valley wunderkind Erich Blunt (Tom Felton of the *Harry Potter* franchise). Like every Bochco series, the story is as much about the characters as the case.

“I’m never interested in procedurals for their own sake,” Bochco says. “For me, a procedural is a skeletal excuse for building complex characters with interesting private lives that bang up against the confrontations of their professional worlds. We thought, how do you personalize a murder mystery?”

[Give Detective English] a wife dying of cancer — and have a female partner he can lean on as a best friend."

If *Murder in the First* doesn't exactly reinvent the wheel, it does display Bochco's trademark storytelling chops. The show's haunting final sequence — which juxtaposes two revelations on opposite sides of the emotional spectrum — is a master class on how to reel in an audience. Knowing what audiences want is what has kept Bochco in the top tier of TV producers.

**G**rowing up in New York City, Bochco knew from an early age that he wanted to write. His mother, Mimi, was a painter; his father, Rudolph, a concert violinist. Not surprisingly, the arts beckoned. "Writing was the only thing I was ever good at," he says. "Writing and sports, but I knew I was never going to be good at sports."

Bochco discovered film and television at Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University). His classmates included future *Hill Street* alums Barbara Bosson (later his second wife, and mother to his two children), Bruce Weitz, Charles Haid and Bochco's best college friend, Michael Tucker, who would star in *L.A. Law*.

By the time he graduated, Bochco had a job waiting for him in the story department at Universal Pictures. He arrived in May 1966 and, remarkably, has been steadily employed for the better part of the last forty-eight years. "Other than a couple of strikes, I've never been out of work," he says.

At Universal, Bochco worked as a writer and story editor on shows like *Ironside*, *Delvecchio* and *McMillan & Wife*. In 1972 he wrote his only feature film, the sci-fi thriller *Silent Running*. The experience soured him forever on a movie career. "I hated what was done with that film," he says. "I wanted to work in something that would give me more power over what I wrote."

Bochco's serious TV apprenticeship began when he was hired to work on ABC's hit '70s mystery *Columbo*, which earned him two Emmy nominations and put him on the map as a TV writer. Then, in 1981, came *Hill Street Blues*, which put him over the top.

Cop and legal shows up to that point had been largely one- or two-man affairs, with each case neatly tied up by the end of an episode. *Hill Street* launched a template that's become so widely emulated, it's easy to forget how innovative it was in its day: multiple interwoven storylines (some stretching over two or three episodes), ensemble casts, flawed characters and ambiguous endings.

Bochco created the show with screenwriter Michael Kozoll (*First Blood*). "The motivating concept was not to do the things that, between us, we had been doing over and over for years," he says, remembering their breakthrough as "one of the incredible moments in our lives where it was like a door opened up, and we walked through it."

Their timing could not have been more propitious: NBC, which had ordered the pilot, was in dire straits and had just replaced Fred Silverman with Brandon Tartikoff.

"We got a call from Brandon's young development person, Warren Littlefield," Bochco recalls. "He said, 'When are you going to pitch us a story?' I said, 'We're not. Wait a week, and you'll have an entire script.'"

As beloved as *Hill Street* became, viewers didn't catch on initially. "It was the lowest-

rated show in the history of TV to get a renewal," Bochco says. "If we'd been at a more successful network, it never would've gotten the chance." But after Tartikoff shrewdly moved the show to Thursday nights, *Hill Street*'s ratings took off and NBC was revitalized.

In 1988 Bochco did for legal shows what *Hill Street* had done for cop shows when he created *L.A. Law*, which won fifteen Emmys, including three for outstanding drama series (1989–91) and was nominated for eighty-nine over its eight-season run.

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Completing the trifecta was *NYPD Blue*, which Bochco and Milch created for ABC; the show earned twenty Emmys and eighty-four nominations during its twelve seasons. "It was a really traditional cop show," Bochco says, "but it had great characters, compelling stories, wonderful actors and a hook — a level of sexual frankness and language that hadn't been seen or heard before on broadcast TV — and that got people in the tent."

Bochco's willingness to take risks and tread where no other producer would dare also resulted in some spectacular flops. *Bay City Blues*, a drama about minor-league baseball, lasted just eight episodes; *Cop Rock* — a hybrid crime show–Broadway musical with cops and criminals breaking into song — lasted eleven.

"I got my ass handed to me on that one," Bochco says, laughing. "What you learn is that people may say they want something really different, but they don't. What they want is old wine in a new bottle: familiar, yet satisfying."

Bochco continued to crank out notable shows like *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, *Philly* and, of course, *Murder One*. In 2003 he realized a long-held literary dream by publishing a crime novel, *Death in Hollywood*. Increasingly, though, as the new millennium dawned, he found broadcast-network television creatively stifling.

"In the last dozen years, the business has profoundly changed as a function of vertical integration," says Bochco. "The level of micro-management exerted on creative talent in broadcast TV is mind-numbing. I don't

have a tolerance for it. I spent the most successful years of my career generally running my own company.

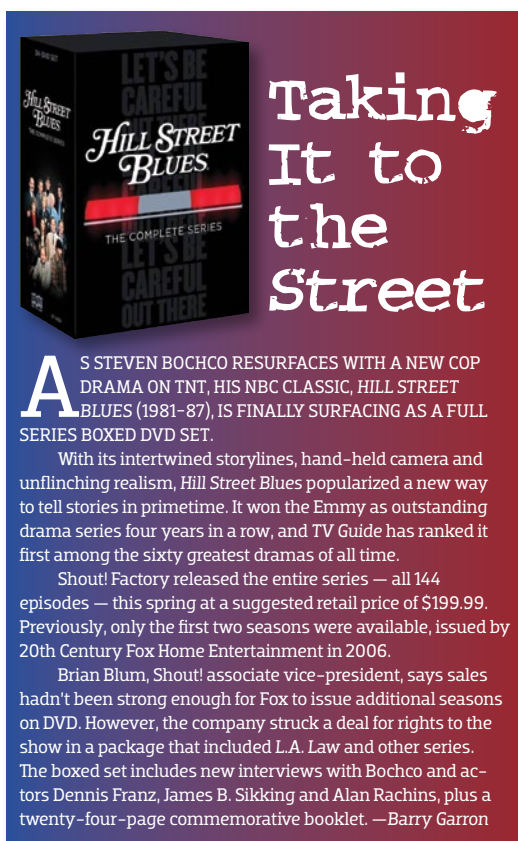
"No one," he adds, "told me what to do or what stories to tell."

ABC tried to do just that — and suffered the consequences — when it asked Bochco to take over a troubled series, *Commander in Chief*. A steady stream of notes from execs he didn't agree with led to Bochco's departure from the show and flight to basic cable, where he's been ensconced ever since. He mounted his first TNT show, the legal drama *Raising the Bar*, in 2009.

Bochco is philosophical about his estrangement from the broadcast networks, whose tastes he feels no longer coincide with his own. "I'm probably viewed as something of an anachronism, doing the kinds of things they don't really do anymore," he says. "The kinds of shows networks are branding themselves with today are not my cup of tea."

Nevertheless, Bochco's not one to rule anything out; he has a number of future projects "percolating" and he knows the fickle, cyclical nature of the business.

"As long as someone gives me an opportunity to do what I like to do," he says, "I'll continue to do it." ©



**Taking It to the Street**

**A**S STEVEN BOCHCO RESURFACES WITH A NEW COP DRAMA ON TNT, HIS NBC CLASSIC, *HILL STREET BLUES* (1981–87), IS FINALLY SURFACING AS A FULL SERIES BOXED DVD SET.

With its intertwined storylines, hand-held camera and unflinching realism, *Hill Street Blues* popularized a new way to tell stories in primetime. It won the Emmy as outstanding drama series four years in a row, and *TV Guide* has ranked it first among the sixty greatest dramas of all time.

Shout! Factory released the entire series — all 144 episodes — this spring at a suggested retail price of \$199.99. Previously, only the first two seasons were available, issued by 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment in 2006.

Brian Blum, Shout! associate vice-president, says sales hadn't been strong enough for Fox to issue additional seasons on DVD. However, the company struck a deal for rights to the show in a package that included *L.A. Law* and other series. The boxed set includes new interviews with Bochco and actors Dennis Franz, James B. Sikking and Alan Rachins, plus a twenty-four-page commemorative booklet. — Barry Garron