

TNT Feature Article - 2006

Behind the Scenes of *Law & Order*

A chat with longtime crewmember Chris Swartout

To many viewers, *Law & Order* is a TV institution, a cops and lawyers show that's maintained a remarkably high standard of quality for nearly 15 years. But, to me, it's always at least partially represented the hard labor of one of my best friends, Chris Swartout, who began as a lowly production assistant on the original series, then climbed the ladder until he's now a first assistant director and occasional director on *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*. I'm well aware of the pounding Chris and his cohorts take putting these shows together on a weekly basis. You can get worn out just reading about this stuff:

Paul Tatar: What does a first assistant director do?

Chris Swartout: My primary job in pre-production is to take the script and create a schedule where we can film an entire episode in eight days. I go out in the company van with several other people and we choose the locations that will be in the episode. When we're filming, my job is to make sure everything and everyone is where they are supposed to be at the right time to film as efficiently as possible.

PT: How long does it take for you to prepare to shoot?

CS: We spend eight working days getting a schedule together, finding the locations, casting all of the guest stars and supporting roles, having a cast read-through, production meetings, wardrobe meetings, prop meetings, extras casting meetings, etc. We shoot about seven pages of script a day.

PT: That's pretty fast, isn't it?

CS: On a feature film, you average about two pages a day, so you can see that we work much faster. Most of our days average 12-13 hours. Mondays usually begin at 6:30 a.m., and, by Friday night, we're finished after midnight.

PT: What's the longest work day you've ever experienced?

CS: My longest day was during season one -- 18 hours, on a Monday. For quite a while it was known as Black Monday, and now any long Monday is jokingly called "A Black Monday."

PT: **Law and Order** has such a New York feel to it. Are there certain kinds of places where you always shoot?

CS: We shoot in plenty of restaurants, people's apartments, office buildings, government

buildings. We also shoot in schools a lot, and I have now filmed in two separate chocolate factories in New York City. My favorite locations ever!

PT: What parts of the city itself are used most often?

CS: We film in Staten Island a lot because it has more of a suburban feel. We even used it to double as Buffalo recently. Next week we are using a city park's building in the Bronx as a stand-in for a Baltimore police station. We have to get creative.

PT: How much of an episode is shot on a stage?

CS: We tend to shoot about three or four days out of eight on our stage. We have space to build sets for each specific episode, so we've done everything: a two level architect's office, a huge photo studio, a high school locker room, a funeral parlor, tons of motel rooms and apartments, prison cells and hospital rooms.

PT: Any funny things ever happen while shooting?

CS: One of my favorites was when we were filming on location and the P.A. knocked on the guest star's trailer to tell her we were ready for her, and she didn't come out. We waited for 15 minutes, but nothing. Eventually we found out that she had somehow locked herself in the bathroom and had been screaming but nobody could hear her. We all had a good chuckle over that.

PT: What actors on **Law & Order** did you have the most fun with on the set?

CS: When I worked on the original show, I must say that Jerry Orbach was not only one of the nicest guys in front of or behind the camera, he could also figure out exactly how much time he had before the director would call "action" and would tell a joke of the appropriate length. I defy anybody to find somebody who worked with him who didn't respect and adore him.