

FEATURE

NORTHERN JUSTICE

The producers of **Law & Order Toronto: Criminal Intent** on the show's origin, the magic of letting Toronto play itself, and the spectacular challenge of making the old feel new



WHAT'S THE MOTIVE??

Handwritten notes on a yellow sticky note, including the words "Motive", "Crime", and "Accident".

CRIME SCENE ???

ACCIDENT?

LAW & TORONTO CRIMINAL INTENT series FEBRUARY Citytv Stream it. Citytv+

Behind-the-scenes images courtesy of Amanda Matlovich

“People feel very strongly about *Law & Order*,” says Amy Cameron, co-founder and executive producer at Toronto’s Cameron Pictures.

For her, and the new project she was behind, she knew that could be a blessing or a curse. In February, her company’s new series, *Law & Order Toronto: Criminal Intent* (in partnership with Lark Productions), premiered on Citytv. More than a million viewers tuned in to the first episode, flinging the series into the number one primetime drama spot in Canada. It was that increasingly rare species, a television event, and people were curious to see how two very familiar entities—*Law & Order* and the city of Toronto—would mesh on screen.

The viewers, it seemed, liked what they saw and have largely stuck around for the rest of the series. As they watched, a new question arose in the minds of many: just how did *Law & Order*, that venerable American institution, land on these northern streets?

Origin of an original

“It all started with Rogers,” explains Erin Haskett, president of Lark Productions. As holder of the Canadian rights to the *Law & Order* franchise, Rogers Sports & Media had a longstanding relationship with Dick Wolf, the franchise’s creator, and NBCUniversal, its home network. Rogers was the first mover on the project, and reached out to Lark to explore the possibility of creating a Canadian *Law & Order*.



(L) Amy Cameron
(R) Erin Haskett



“People feel very strongly about *Law & Order*.”

Amy Cameron

An international original of *Law & Order* had never been done before—sure, there was a UK version, a French version and two Russian versions, but these were all adaptations that recycled scripts from their parent series. *Law & Order Toronto* is an original series, with the characters and storylines all built from the ground up.

In many ways, Canada was a perfect place for an original *Law & Order* to take root. “Canadian audiences have already seen all those American scripts in English,” says Haskett. “We’re very close to the US culturally; we’re very close to them

geographically. Audiences want something to feel like it’s their own.”

What also helped are the unique elements of the Canadian system, says Haskett. Broadcaster partnerships, CAVCO tax credits, Canada Media Fund financing: all of these depend on producers developing distinctly Canadian productions, not copycats of American forerunners. So, maintains Haskett, telling Canadian stories was certainly a creative decision they were happy to make, but within Canada’s broadcasting system and

Amanda Matlovich



Tassie Cameron



Filming a scene in a Toronto restaurant

“I think Toronto’s having a renaissance, and it’s a beautiful and cool place to shoot.”

Tassie Cameron



Karen Robinson as Inspector Vivienne Holness



On the set of the show

incentive structures, “That is also what needed to happen.”

Getting a Canadian *Law & Order* off the ground was a two-part equation: one part financial, the other creative. According to Haskett, the financing half of the equation came first. Once they confirmed that NBCUniversal was willing to participate and that Rogers could finance the production at a level necessary “to sit side by side the other *Law & Orders*,” they began to determine the right writers to nail the brand.

The creative team began with showrunner Tassie Cameron of Cameron Pictures, whose past credits include procedurals like *Rookie Blue*, *Private Eyes* and *Pretty Hard Cases*. Her ability to develop a compelling script and intriguing characters—Detective Sergeant Henry Graff, the enigmatic walking encyclopedia; Detective Sergeant Frankie Bateman, the incisive single mom with a climate-controlled demeanour; the deliciously no-nonsense Inspector Vivienne Holness—drew other creatives to the project like a

magnet. (The built-in “lure of the franchise” didn’t hurt either, says Amy Cameron.)

A capital location

If you’re a west coaster with a Vancouver bias, or a Canadian who doesn’t see Hogtown as the centre of the universe, you may be asking, “But why Toronto?”

For those involved, however, it was pretty simple. Toronto is Canada’s largest city (and largest market), well known outside of Canada’s borders, and astonishingly diverse.

“It’s quite an incredible tapestry to work from to set stories in,” says Tassie, noting the side-by-side placement of distinct and vibrant neighbourhoods, from Chinatown to Little Italy. “I think Toronto’s having a renaissance, and it’s a beautiful and cool place to shoot.”

In any case, it was Rogers’s choice to make, and “it was always going to be Toronto,” says Haskett. “The Wolf format team also felt that Toronto is a big city where we want to see what crime looks like.”

"Toronto is a big city where we want to see what crime looks like."

Erin Haskett

And from the opening moments of the first episode, which reveal Toronto's skyline from a speeding yacht on Lake Ontario, viewers can delight in watching Toronto play itself. A fabric store in Little India. The skating rink at Nathan Phillips Square. The Dundas streetcar. Construction cranes everywhere.

"One thing people know about Toronto is that it often stands in for New York and so many other places, so it's fun to showcase it and really see it as Toronto," says Amy.

A fine balance

It's all well and good to pepper a script with Toronto references, but how to make the show look and feel Canadian while looking and feeling like *Law & Order*?

Haskett and the rest of the team understood that the bar was high. "The expectation is that we match the rest of the franchise from a production value standpoint, but that we also have a very distinct reason for taking up a slot in Citytv's Dick Wolf Thursday night lineup," she says. "That was the real test for Lark and for Cameron [Pictures] and for Rogers."

Tassie Cameron and the rest of the writers' room had their work cut out for them. First, the show belongs to the Criminal Intent format. While classic *Law & Order* divides episodes into an investigation and a criminal trial, Criminal Intent series focus almost exclusively on solving the crime, at the expense of courtroom drama. Tassie describes the format as "Sherlock Holmesian," which makes it "quite a hard show to write, much harder than it appears. You need a certain kind of writer who has a very logical, almost mathematical or crossword-puzzle brain."

Dick Wolf's team supplied the Canadian team with the Criminal Intent "bible," which detailed the format's many rules—for example, in every act, an episode must shift to the criminal's point of view. "You have to abide by the rules of the

franchise, but then you're also trying to update them and make your show feel Canadian," says Tassie. "You'd think with these format rules in place that it would be quite easy to slot things in, and yet somehow it's not."

The writers continually had to stay one step ahead of the audience, who would be familiar not only with the format, but also with the headlines that the stories were inspired by—like the mysterious death of the shady CEO of a Canadian cryptocurrency exchange, or the Toronto mayor caught smoking crack on video. The writers couldn't retrace the actual stories exactly, or they'd quickly bore viewers; instead, they'd "spin [the headline] in a different direction that, ideally, people haven't anticipated, often with the help of another headline or two," says Tassie.



Aden Young and Kathleen Munroe as Detective Sergeant Henry Graff and Detective Sergeant Frankie Bateman

Amanda Matlovich

"I think people will come because of the strength of the franchise, and then, I hope, stay and be delighted. That's the power of the franchise."

Amy Cameron



Scenes from the show

Thanks to its high viewership numbers, the series has, unsurprisingly, been renewed for a second and third season.

Adhering to the rules of the franchise proved to be more difficult than anticipated in the editing room as well. Amy Cameron describes sending off the first producer's cut of an episode to the distributors, Rogers and NBCUniversal, and receiving notes that informed her that they weren't properly using *Law & Order*'s famous "dun-dun" sound.

"I thought, I'm sorry, but how hard is it to use the 'dun-dun' properly?" she laughs. "But without realizing it, we were using it as punctuation on a scene. It felt good to throw a 'dun-dun' in there after a scene, where in fact the 'dun-dun' is meant to be an intro. You have a black location card, you do your 'dun-dun.' It's a tiny little thing, but had someone not caught that for us, I think our audiences would have said, 'Ohhh, there's something

Did the team create a recognizable *Law & Order* world within the Toronto universe?

It would seem so.

wrong here." She adds, "Luckily, we have a lot of people who have worked on the show for a long time helping us catch mistakes!"

A grand reception

So, did they stick the landing? Did the team create a recognizable *Law & Order* world within the Toronto universe?

It would seem so. Thanks to its high viewership numbers, the series has, unsurprisingly, been renewed for a second and third season. "We are holding our own and even exceeding the [ratings of] US versions of the franchise, which is really exciting," says Haskett.

The team credit much of their early success to the strong promotional push before the first episode aired, when "you couldn't turn your head in many parts of the country without seeing a billboard or a digital ad on your phone or within the programs you were watching," says Haskett. "Rogers put the entire machine behind it."

"I've never been on a series before that had such strong marketing," adds Tassie. "They put so much behind it, and it really showed."

And while viewers' strong feelings about *Law & Order* could be either a pro or a con, in this case, the "lure of the franchise" proved to be an advantage once again.

"When I got the first overnight ratings, I burst into tears," says Tassie. "I was so overwhelmed with how grateful I felt that Canadians had come and shown up for this live the night it aired."

"People will always show up to sample a new *Law & Order*," says Amy. "I think people will come because of the strength of the franchise, and then, I hope, stay and be delighted. That's the power of the franchise: if you can hit the right elements and engage people's brains in a way that's familiar and yet completely new—new stories, new characters—there is something incredibly compelling about that." ■