

20th Century's Bochco: Selling the cerebral

Earlier this month, *Time* magazine had this to say about Steven Bochco, co-creator and executive producer of both *Hill Street Blues* and *L.A. Law*: "No producer of the 1980's has been more influential." It's not surprising that CBS wooed Bochco last fall in hopes of bringing him on as its new entertainment president. After Bochco turned the offer down, he was quoted as saying he "couldn't afford the pay cut," a line he borrowed from an *L.A. Law* script.

He wasn't kidding. Network entertainment presidents don't usually sign on at a minimum of \$10 million over six years. But that's about what ABC will pay Bochco for first dibs on the next seven series he produces for prime time. His association with 20th Century Fox will continue, where he'll produce his shows on the Fox lot, and Fox will distribute the programs in all aftermarkets the ABC shows eventually reach.

If the shows he creates for ABC turn out to be as popular as the current *L.A. Law* on NBC, he stands to earn many millions more on top of what ABC is paying him, from his share of the syndication rights, domestically and abroad.

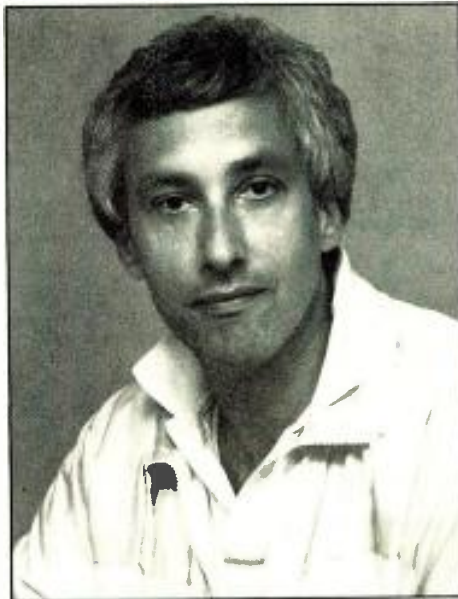
Not bad for a boy from New York who grew up aspiring to be a musician (his father, Rudolf, was a violinist who played with, among others, the NBC Symphony Orchestra) and, later, a playwright. In fact, he received his degree in theater from the Carnegie Institute (now Carnegie Mellon University) in 1966.

It was the summer between his junior and senior years that he was introduced to the world of television production. His then-father-in-law, Louis Blau, a Los Angeles attorney, arranged an internship for Bochco at Universal Television. Bochco had helped his own cause earlier by winning an MCA writing fellowship at whil at school. But Blau had a number of friends at Universal, and as Bochco has recalled, "he made a few phone calls and I had a summer job."

A year later he rejoined Universal as assistant to the head of the story department, a slot that was essentially waiting for him, by prearrangement with Universal, upon graduation. His writing and producing credits at Universal included *Name of the Game*, *Columbo* and *McMillan and Wife*.

From the beginning Bochco was principally a writer, as he remains today, although he has evolved into producer as well. Bochco once told BROADCASTING, "I'm a writer-producer. I've become over the years a good producer, but originally I was just a writer with a fancy title."

Those who know him and his work share with *Time* the assessment that he is the most influential television producer shaping prime time in this decade.



STEVEN RONALD BOCHCO—executive producer, 20th Century Fox, Los Angeles, and co-creator and executive producer, *L.A. Law* (NBC), and executive consultant, *Hooperman* (ABC); b. Dec. 16, 1943, New York. BFA, theater, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1966; writer and producer, Universal Television (with writing and/or producing credits for *Name of the Game*, *Columbo*, *McMillan and Wife*, *Griff*, *Delvecchio*, *Richie Brockelman* and *The Invisible Man*), 1966-78; writer and producer, MTM Enterprises (with writing and/or producing credits for *Turnabout*, *Paris*, *Hill Street Blues* and *Bay City Blues*) 1978-85; present position since 1985; m. actress Barbara Bosson, Feb. 14, 1969; children—Melissa, 18, Jess, 13.

"I would say he qualifies for that honor," said independent television producer, and Bochco friend and admirer, Stephen J. Cannell, who worked alongside Bochco as a producer at Universal and is himself no small figure in television with credits including *Barretta*, *The Rockford Files* and *A Team*.

"I think what he did," says Cannell, "was to introduce a cerebral quality into the writing that was not the rule of thumb, let's say, prior to *Hill Street* and *L.A. Law*. He has proved with ratings that the audience profile has changed and that these kinds of shows, if done well, can become very successful and big money makers." Notes Cannell of television, "It's an advertiser-driven medium. If the networks believe they can make money turning cars over they will do it."

Not all Bochco's efforts have been as "cerebral" as *Hill Street*. *Turnabout*, for example, was one of his early attempts for NBC, and a high-concept comedy that provided little aid or comfort to the network during NBC's lengthy stay in third place in

the late 1970's and early 1980's. Bochco wrote the pilot for the series, one of his first projects at MTM, which he joined in 1978 after 12 years with Universal.

Turnabout starred Sharon Gless as Penny Alston, a cosmetic executive who believed her husband's life was better than hers and idly wished they could trade places. Her wish is granted by "an impish statue she had purchased from a gypsy." The series went on to relate the "comic adventures" as Penny and her husband struggled to adjust to living with each other's personalities. MTM shot 13 episodes. NBC pulled it after seven, in March of 1979.

Then there was *Every Stray Dog and Kid*, high drama that was shot down as a pilot. The two examples cited above say something about Steven Bochco—there may be better situation comedy writers, and everything he touches does not turn to gold. They also show that an occasional miss has proved no impediment to future success. Indeed, between *Hill Street Blues* and *L.A. Law*, there was *Bay City Blues*, which lasted four weeks on NBC's 1983-84 schedule.

According to Bochco's friends, one of his personality traits is an ability not to take himself, or his success, too seriously. Said one: "He's not self-absorbed. He was the first one I heard say, 'Come on, we aren't curing brain cancer here.' A lot of people have said it since."

Bochco's critical success is reflected in the list of awards he has won, including eight Emmy's (six for *Hill Street* and two for *L.A. Law*), as well as Golden Globe, Humanitas, Writers Guild of America, Peabody, People's Choice, Image and Edgar Allen Poe awards.

Grant Tinker, for whom Bochco worked when Tinker was running MTM, said last week that by "process of elimination" *Time*'s assessment of Bochco "is a fairly accurate thing to say." And the Bochco legacy may well extend into the 1990's, said Tinker. "I sense no tiring in the guy. He's just as active" now as in his *Hill Street* days. Tinker and others noted Bochco's legendary feistiness with the folks at standards and practices. "He likes to tilt at windmills and the establishment," said Tinker. "But I think he's also getting a little mellower now, although I think he'd be shocked and outraged to hear me say that."

His "feisty" personal style, some say, has been misread as abrasiveness by those who don't know him, and may have contributed to his dismissal from MTM in 1985. MTM said astronomical *Hill Street* budgets were the cause. Bochco has said the dispute was over "personal reasons," and not business. Regardless, three years later, Bochco, with Fox as his production vehicle, continues to create successful television (ABC's *Hooperman*, the latest example, has just been picked up for year two) and to tilt at windmills all the way to the bank.