

TV

# 'Law & Order' returns with a bang, but is it still arresting?

The first episode of the 21st season ticks off many boxes, but we have lots of questions.

 TAP TO UNMUTE

Sam Waterston on the return of 'Law & Order'

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**By Randee Dawn**

*Dun-dun!* "Law & Order" is back!

The original behemoth that birthed "Special Victims Unit" and "Organized Crime" (among other spinoffs) originally ran from 1990-2010 and returned Thursday night with an episode called "The Right Thing." But was it the "right thing" to bring the series back?

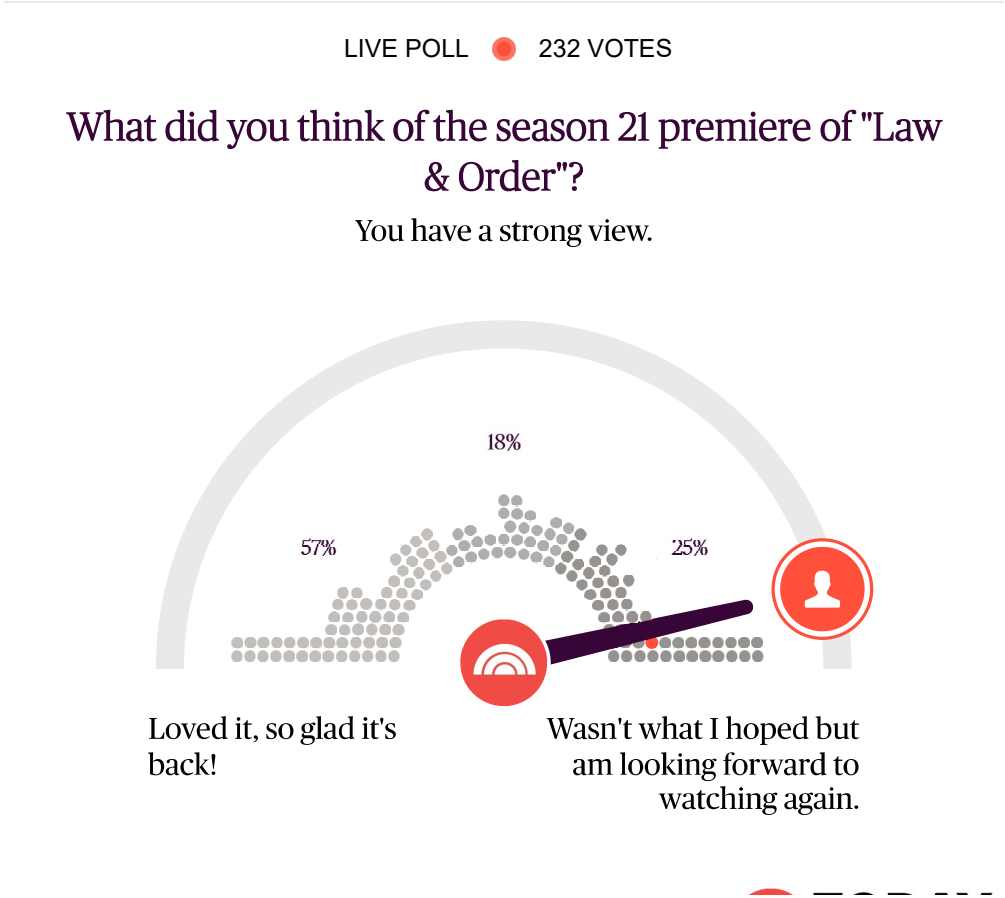
Your mileage may vary.

— New faces and old can be found around the precinct on "Law & Order." Pictured: Camryn Manheim (Kate Dixon), Anthony Anderson (Kevin Bernard), Jeffrey Donovan (Frank Cosgrove).  
Virginia Sherwood / NBC

It's a return that has been a dream of creator Dick Wolf's since it was canceled, according to former showrunner René Balcer. As Balcer told TODAY, Wolf had approached a series of outlets, including TNT, to revive the show post-cancellation in 2010.

"I think he would have been happy to do a live puppet show 'Law & Order,'" said Balcer, who started as a staff writer in the first season and became showrunner in 1996; the series won an Emmy in 1997. "It just ended in the most stupid, arbitrary, unjustified way."

It wasn't a bad idea, even if it didn't work right away. As Balcer noted, all reboots have benefits: "It's safe to do; it's pre-sold to the audience, so you don't want to mess with the secret sauce," he said. "There's so much money riding on these shows, it's like, 'Don't change anything, keep it as safe as possible.'"



For the uninitiated, NBC's "L&O" set the police/lawyer procedural into a neat, structured format: The first half of the show dealt with the crime and police detectives' efforts to catch a suspect; the second half focused on the prosecution's efforts to get a conviction. That seemingly rigid format turned out to have a lot of wiggle room to tell smart stories, though not much about characters' personal lives. That might seem anathema on most series these days, but it made "L&O" a perfect series to rerun – and it was those reruns, which formed the backbone of pre-original programming networks like TNT and Lifetime, that helped the show really find its audience.

— Hugh Dancy (as Nolan Price) and Odelya Halevi (as Samantha Maroun) are prosecutors with passion and ethics. Eric Liebowitz / NBC

Cancellation came under a cloud of curious behavior; despite the series being poised to break records as the longest-running scripted TV drama, and despite that it was renewed for a 21st season, behind-the-scenes politicking, along with discussions about licensing fees for those reruns at TNT, led to an abrupt pulling of the plug. The series never got a proper finale.

Fast forward approximately 12 years to "The Right Thing." What aired Thursday might not mess with the "secret sauce," yet audiences are likely to be divided. Fans who never tuned into the original show will likely see one series; those who watched many, or all, of the first run will likely see a subtly different series than they were expecting.

— Sam Waterston's Jack McCoy runs the D.A.'s office, just as he did in the original series. Michael Greenberg / NBC

There's always a certain amount of box-ticking that goes on in any "L&O" episode, and "Right

Thing" gets a full dance card:

- Ripped from the headlines story (echoing Bill Cosby's prosecution and release)
- Detectives getting to know one another, having friction: Det. Kevin Bernard (Anthony Anderson), Det. Frank Cosgrove (Jeffrey Donovan)
- Obligatory both-sides argument between those partners: Donovan goes full Stabler (see Elliot Stabler, of "Special Victims Unit"/"Organized Crime") while questioning a truculent citizen, then complains that cops can't do nothin' these days, since everybody's got cameras. Bernard tells him he'd get more bees with honey than vinegar and maybe cameras are a good thing.
- Butt-kicking, higher-ranked leader in the precinct: Lt. Kate Dixon (Camryn Manheim)
- Red herrings and strange diversions: Former ADA Jamie Ross (Carey Lowell) is back in the DA's office and has serious guilt over how this particular case turned out.
- Incredible coincidences (the detectives pick up one cigarette butt that's been on the sidewalk for many hours and *boom*, they have DNA on a suspect).
- Someone steps over the line: Donovan lies with glee to that suspect, telling her that as soon as she confesses to murder she can just head on home, since everybody's on her side. This is the moment where veteran viewers will think, *can't wait to hear how this plays out in court*.
- An arrest! And intermission.
- Meet the new lawyers: EADA Nolan Price (Hugh Dancy) and ADA Samantha Maroun (Odelya Halevi). He's passionate and all about ethics. She's ... helpful. Well-dressed. Model-level pretty.
- Meet the old lawyer: District Attorney Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston) is still in the job (he joined the show in 1994 and stayed until cancellation), with whiter hair and even less screen time – but he's there to butt heads with Price; McCoy was never a character to let ethics get in the way of a prosecution – he's always had his own moral compass. Nolan decides to try the case without the questionable confession.
- Grandiose speeches to the jury, followed by objections and tripwires within the courtroom.

Cosgrove mentions the confession during his grilling on the stand and then gives *Price* what for later: “I catch ‘em, you cook ‘em, that’s how this is supposed to work.”

- A verdict is secured! (Spoiler: They win the case, because ADA Maroun gives the closing speech and refers to an assault in her own family history. So, she's more than a pretty face.)

In its structure, that is how a “Law & Order” episode looks.

And yet.

— Detectives Bernard (Anderson) and Cosgrove (Donovan) have their scarf game down pat.  
Eric Liebowitz / NBC

In a lot of ways, “The Right Thing” feels like an episode constructed by people who read the playbook but missed the heart of what worked so well for the original. Showrunner and episode writer Rick Eid has his “L&O” bonafides (he was with the show from 2005-07) and has spent time on other Dick Wolf series (from “SVU” to “FBI”). He’s also working with less time to tell a story than when the show began in 1990 – as Balcer noted, back then they had around 46 minutes for each episode; today it’s closer to 42.

There are parts that ring true: The industrial teal-green interior of the precinct not only feels very similar to the original’s, it has a gritty, tactile feel to it. Manheim’s Dixon doesn’t get a lot to do, but she feels like someone who’s been in this job for a while. Anderson’s Bernard is a welcome return – he’s familiar and solid and we trust him immediately.

— Did someone take “Special Victims Unit” Detectives Benson (Mariska Hargitay) or Stabler (Christopher Meloni) off speed dial? Virginia Sherwood / NBC

The story, however, feels a bit stale; this is not exactly a new headline to riff on. And where are the detectives of the “Special Victims Unit,” even for a scene? The focus is a notorious,

headline-making sex crime; the absence of Cpt. Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) not only feels like a missed opportunity, it feels *weird*.

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Meanwhile, Cosgrove's and Bernard's pairing doesn't seem to make sense: The men are essentially the same age, and have only been paired up for a few months. Often on "L&O," detective partners are a veteran with a newcomer, not two peers. Their clashing feels pro forma and their sparring tacked on, not organic.

Stranger still is whatever is going on in the DA's office. It's hard to understand the career trajectory of Jamie Ross: She was a defense attorney who joined the prosecution, then left to spend more time with her family and return to being a defense attorney. Then she became a trial judge ("Law & Order: Trial by Jury"). Now she's no longer a judge ... but back as an ADA? Yes, there's a small nod to her former judicial position with the inclusion of a gavel on the bookshelf in her office – but that *office*! How is it she's secured a larger working area than even the district attorney himself? Complete with a flat-screen TV and loads of sunlight? If nothing else, we know a couple things about the DA's office: It's dark, it's cramped and it would be as gritty as the precinct except that there are stacks of paper everywhere.

This is not that place.

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— ADA Maroun (Halevi) is the right woman for closing statements. Michael Greenberg / NBC

"Law & Order" has always been a show that rises above mere procedural, at least for its



devoted fans. There's a canniness to it – the characters are book smart or street smart, but never caricatures or foolish for the sake of story. But some of the moves between characters in this episode suggest that expediency is more important than texture or case law precedents. (It's difficult to imagine a prosecutor who preemptively, without even going through the motions with the judge, throws out a confession.)

Still, this is the first episode. With luck, there will be more room to understand what's behind all these oddities: Jamie's enormous office; why two veteran detectives are now paired with each other for the first time; why McCoy would personally request Nolan join his office if they see the world quite so differently. There's room to make all that work. Can it happen in the space of 42 to 44 minutes every week?

Sam Waterston, Anthony Anderson on potential 'Law & Order' guest stars



Balcer thinks it can. “It’s a worthy show and deserves a shot,” he said. “I hope people will be patient. The original took three years to click. It’s kind of a curse that there’s been 20 years of the show, because all the actors will have seen it and they think, ‘I have to act like that.’ It’ll take time for them to find their own groove, and not try to be the next Jerry Orbach.”

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Randee Dawn (she/her) is an entertainment journalist and author based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for TODAY.com, Variety and The Los Angeles Times, she's an author whose debut novel, *Tune in Tomorrow*, about a reality TV show run by mythic creatures, will publish in 2022. She's also the co-author of *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion*. When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she dreams of the next place she can travel to, or cuddles her Westie. More at [RandeeDawn.com](https://www.RandeeDawn.com).

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