

LAW & ORDER

From Julia Roberts to Timothée Chalamet: 25 'Law & Order' Guest Stars You May Have Forgotten

In honor of 25 seasons of the NBC show, take a look back at some of today's most award-winning performers who once guest-starred on the prime-time drama.

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Randee Dawn



Serena Williams on Tennis After Retirement, 'Law & Order' Cameo

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"Law & Order" has provided big breaks and resume fodder to hundreds, if not thousands, of actors over the years.

The NBC series, which will celebrate its 25th season Sep. 25, originally premiered in 1990 and still runs today, though there was that hiatus between 2010-2022.

It can feel like nearly every resident of New York City has had *some* spot as an extra or guest star. (Heck, even the writer of this very article appeared in the background of a courtroom scene in the Season 10 episode called "Gunshow.")

It's no surprise that among those scores of guest stars, several turned out to be at the start of brilliant careers, while others were stars in their own rights before stepping onto the set.

Ahead of the landmark launch of the new season, look back at some of the stars who popped up in arresting appearances over the years.

Cynthia Nixon

Season 1: 'Subterranean Homeboy Blues'

“Law & Order” was virtually brand new when future Emmy-winner Nixon, who would go on to appear on screen with “L&O” regular cast member Chris Noth in “Sex

and the City,” appeared as a ballerina named Laura Di Biasi who exacted vigilante justice on the New York City subway in 1990.

In 2007, Nixon guest-starred on “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit,” which earned her an Emmy for outstanding guest actress in a drama series. A few years later, she also appeared on an episode of “Law & Order: Criminal Intent.”

Philip Seymour Hoffman

Season 1: 'The Violence of Summer'

Hoffman, who would go on to win an Oscar in 2006, showed up in “L&O’s” first season in his first professional credited role as Steven Hanauer, who faced trial after a group sexual assault on a reporter.

Courtney B. Vance

Season 1: 'By Hooker, By Crook'; Season 5: 'Rage'



Courtney B. Vance as ADA Ron Carver on "Law & Order: Criminal Intent." **John Seakwood/NBCU Photo Bank / Getty Images**

In time, two-time Emmy winner Vance (“Lovecraft Country,” “American Crime Story”) would go on to play Assistant District Attorney Ron Carver for five seasons on “Law & Order: Criminal Intent,” but he first guested on two different episodes of the

mothership series.

His first appearance in 1990 was uncredited. He played an assistant to the mayor in an episode about a call girl organization run by a socialite. His 1995 role as Benjamin “Bud” Greer was meatier, though. When Bud’s mentor turned up dead, he used a defense of “Black rage” in court.

Allison Janney

Season 2: 'Star Struck'; Season 4: 'Old Friends'

In the world of “L&O” fans, someone who appears on the show more than once is referred to as a “repeat offender,” and Oscar-winner Janney (“The West Wing,” “The Diplomat”) fits the bill, with two mothership appearances two years apart.



Allison Janney in the Season 4 episode "Old Friends." [YouTube](#)

She first appeared in the small role of Nora during a 1992 episode about the beating of a soap-opera actress. In 1994, she returned as Ann Madsen, a terrified witness to a horrific crime.

Claire Danes

Season 3: 'Skin Deep'

Danes, who would go on to win three Emmys for her work in “Temple Grandin” and “Homeland,” played Tracy Brandt — a young model for a shady photographer. At the time of this pre-“My So-Called Life” appearance on the series in 1992, Danes was only 13 and making her TV debut.

Elaine Stritch

Season 3: 'Point of View'; Season 7: 'Working Mom'

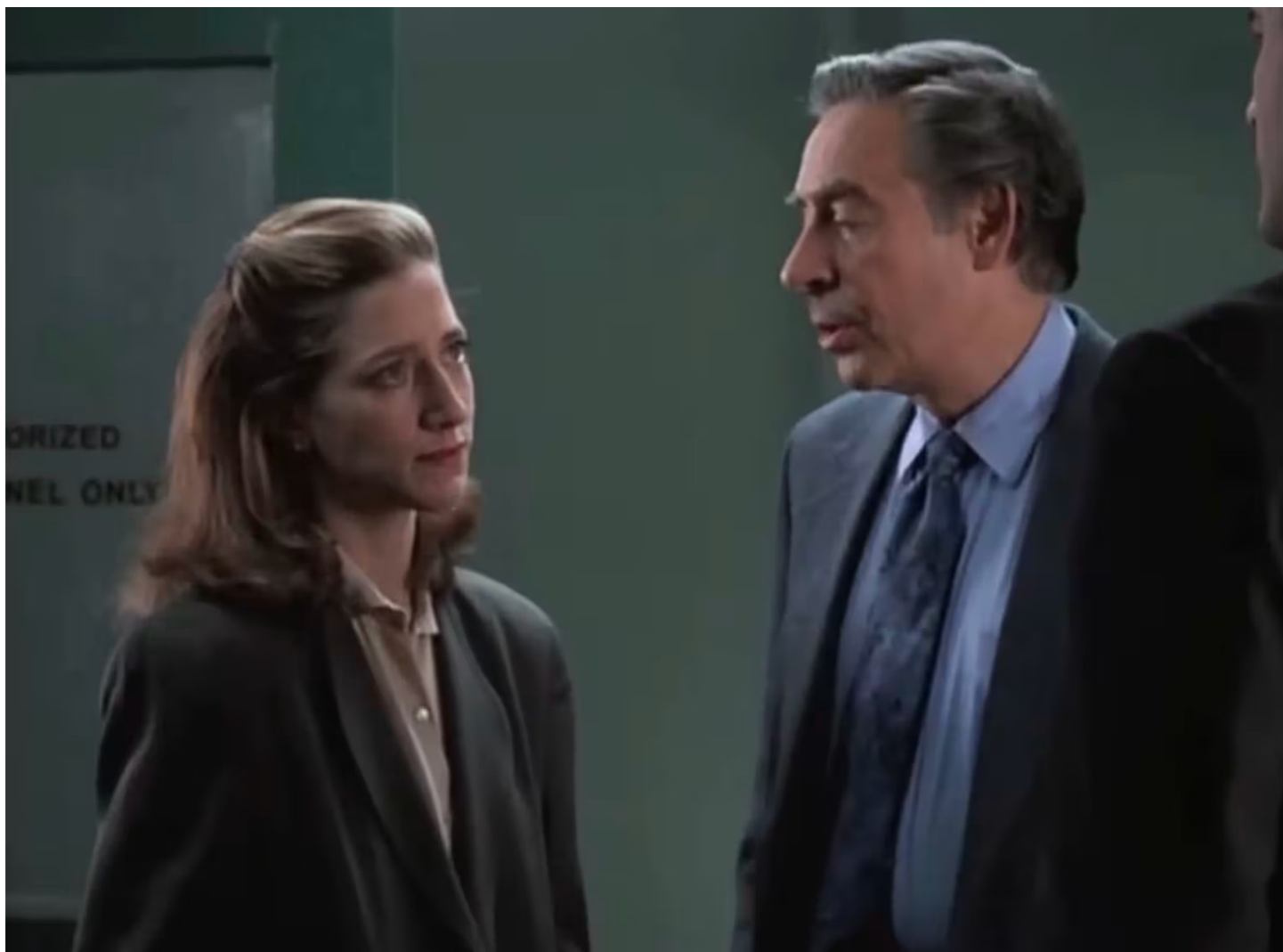




Elaine Stritch as Lanie Stieglitz on Season 7 of "Law & Order." **Jessica Burstein/NBCU / Getty Images**

Stritch was an Emmy- and Tony-winning powerhouse of the theatrical world (“Company,” “Elaine Stritch at Liberty”) who also charmed on TV (“30 Rock”). She added “L&O” to her extensive resume by playing sassy, canny defense attorney Lanie Stieglitz on two episodes in 1992 and 1997. She’s the only actor to have won an Emmy for the series.

Edie Falco



YouTube

Season 3: 'Mother Love'; Season 5: 'Scoundrels'; Season 7: 'Double Down'; Season 8: 'Grief'

Unlike most celebrities mentioned here, four-time Emmy winner Falco (“Nurse Jackie,” “The Sopranos”) had a recurring role on the series, playing Legal Aid defense attorney Sally Bell. She appeared in four episodes between 1993-1998.

Bell sparked and clashed beautifully with then-Executive Assistant District Attorney Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston) in the courtroom.

Eventually, Falco went on to star as real-life attorney Leslie Abramson in “Law & Order True Crime: The Menendez Murders.”

Julianna Margulies

Season 3: 'Conduct Unbecoming'

Margulies' long, successful run on TV series like "ER" and "The Good Wife" was still to come when the future three-time Emmy winner appeared as Lt. Ruth Mendoza, who got wrapped up in the death of a fellow naval officer in 1993.

J.K. Simmons

Season 4: 'Sanctuary'

Oscar-winner Simmons has a curious history with the show, going from guest star to crossover guest star to recurring regular. His first appearance was as Jerry Luppini in a 1994 episode about a hit-and-run car accident in which a businessman killed a boy in Harlem.

But in 1996 he made an appearance on “Homicide: Life on the Street” that crossed over with “L&O” as Col. Alexander Rausch.

Finally, he settled nicely into the recurring part of police psychiatrist Emil Skoda for 44 episodes between 1997 and 2010. He also played Skoda on a few episodes of “Law & Order: SVU” and an episode of “Law & Order: Criminal Intent.”

Sarah Paulson

Season 5: 'Family Values'

Future Emmy winner Paulson (“American Crime Story”) racked up her first known professional on-camera credit as an actor in 1994, playing Maggie Conner — a teenager who’d been sleeping with her stepfather — and whose mother’s manner of death came under suspicion. She later guest-starred in an episode of “SVU” in 2010.

Laura Linney

Season 5: 'Blue Bamboo'

“Ozark” star and three-time Oscar nominee Linney was moving up in the world of acting with roles in films like “Searching for Bobby Fischer” and “A Simple Twist of Fate” when she made her series TV debut in 1994.

On “L&O,” she portrayed Martha Bowen, a struggling performer who tried to break through in Japan while working under a shady nightclub owner. The owner was killed while visiting the U.S., and Bowen became the main suspect. Bowen was ultimately acquitted after her lawyer used battered woman syndrome as her defense.

Ellen Pompeo

Season 6: 'Savior'; Season 10: 'Fools for Love'

She's been a medical heroine since 2005 on "Grey's Anatomy," but before that, Pompeo showed a truly dark side to her angelic face in two mothership episodes.

In 1996, she co-starred alongside future "Grey's" actor Brooke Smith as Jenna Weber, a young woman whose family is brutally murdered. Four years later, she was back as Laura Kendrick, who came under suspicion for the deaths of multiple people, including her sister, after making a deal with prosecutors.

Julia Roberts

Season 9: 'Empire'

Sometimes actors get hired based on who they're dating, but we're positive that doesn't apply to megastar and future Oscar winner Julia Roberts.

She appeared on the series in 1999 as she was dating cast regular Benjamin Bratt. Roberts played against type as a scheming sports stadium investor who poisoned a major sponsor in the deal (with whom she was having an affair).

She did her best to put the moves on Bratt's Detective Curtis, but he turned her down. She earned a first Emmy nomination in the outstanding guest actress in a drama category that same year for playing the part.

Zoe Saldaña

Season 9: 'Refuge Pt. 2'

Saldaña, who won an Oscar for her performance in “Emilia Pérez,” earned her first on-screen credit as Belinca in the second episode of a two-parter called “Refuge.”

In the episode, a young boy witnessed a murder when a driver got into a shootout with the police. Belinca gave the investigating detectives a key lead in solving the case.

Chris Messina

Season 6: 'Rebels,' 'Homesick'; Season 13: 'Suicide Box'



Facebook

Another repeat offender in the “L&O” universe, future “The Mindy Project” star Messina got his first official pro credit appearing on not one but *two* episodes in the sixth season, one in 1995 and one in 1996.

He played Tommy Bell, a rich kid murdered in a biker bar in “Rebels,” and a smaller part in “Homesick,” about an infant’s poisoning. Years later, he played Don Cushman in an episode about the shooting of an off-duty police officer.

Kerry Washington

Season 12: '3 Dawg Night'

Washington's big movie ("Django Unchained," "Ray") and TV ("Scandal") career was still to come in 2001, when she appeared in an episode about a murder in a nightclub. She played Allie Lawrence, a singer involved in the shooting of a musician, and few people stepped forward as witnesses.

Bonus: The episode also included a pre-"Luther" Idris Elba, who played a DJ and witness to the shooting.

Washington posted about the episode on Instagram in March, sharing a brief clip from the show and wondering in the caption how it might have gone differently if current "L&O" star, and her former "Scandal" co-star, Tony Goldwyn, had been "grilling" her character instead of Waterston's McCoy.

"I would have been a lot tougher on you than Sam was," Goldwyn quipped in the comments.

Jennifer Garner

Season 6: 'Aftershock'

As a graduate student named Jaime who bonded with the married Detective Curtis Bratt after he witnessed a prisoner's execution, Garner made her lone "L&O" appearance in 1996.

Sebastian Stan


Season 13: 'Sheltered'

Before becoming Bucky Barnes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, future Oscar nominee Stan popped up, alongside Ty Burrell, in 2003's "Sheltered" as Justin Lafferty/Justin Capshaw, a grown man who was kidnapped as a baby.

Colman Domingo

Season 14: 'Hands Free'; Season 19, 'Sweetie'





Colman Domingo as Ronald Gumer in Season 14 of "Law & Order." **NBC / Getty Images**

Before becoming an Oscar-nominated actor, Domingo guest-starred in the 14th and 19th seasons of “Law & Order.” He played a defense attorney in his first appearance and a character named Donnie in the 2008 episode about the murder of an author.

Domingo also appeared on “Law & Order: Trial by Jury” in 2006 and two episodes of “Law & Order: Criminal Intent.”

Laverne Cox

Season 19: 'Sweetie'

Like Domingo, Laverne Cox (“Orange Is the New Black”) made a guest appearance in “Sweetie.” The future Emmy nominee portrayed a prostitute named Minnie. That same year, she also appeared in an episode of “SVU.”

Sarah Hyland

Season 15: 'The Dead Wives Club'

Five years before she began co-starring on “Modern Family,” the then-13-year-old Hyland played Kristine McLean in a 2004 episode about a young woman who drowned after a ferry crash.

She also appeared in a 2005 episode of “Law & Order: Trial by Jury” and two episodes of “Law & Order: SVU.”

Timothée Chalamet

Season 19: 'Pledge'

Young Chalamet (“Dune”) was a newcomer to TV in 2009, when he played Eric Foley, the son of two scientists. Eric was murdered by a man who had a crush on Eric’s mother way back in the day. Chalamet was still eight years away from his big, Oscar-nominated breakthrough in “Call Me by Your Name.”

Sasha Alexander

Season 22: 'Private Lives'



Sasha Alexander as Kristin Bartell in Season 22 of "Law & Order." **Jocelyn Prescod/NBC / Getty Images**

Having already been paired up with former “L&O” regular Angie Harmon on “Rizzoli & Isles,” Alexander got her turn in the mothership’s spotlight in 2023 as Kristin Bartell.

The episode focused on the death of a doctor with a political wife, played by Alexander, who suspected she was the actual target of the murder.

Stephen A. Smith

Season 24: 'Tough Love'

Radio host, TV personality and sports analyst Smith was already well known when he appeared in Season 24 as a “tough love” sports agent who ended up stabbed.

“It was an incredible experience,” he told Deadline. “I did some acting before I was that dead body. ... I actually have a scene where I’m doing some acting, and to have the opportunity to do it on one of my all-time favorite shows is an honor beyond comprehension.”

Katie Lowes

Season 24: 'The Hardest Thing'



Katie Lowes as Victoria Beyer in Season 24 of "Law & Order." **Will Hart / NBC**

Lowes, best known for her roles on “Scandal” and “The Hunting Wives,” played Victoria Beyer on the series early in 2025 as a daughter who helped her ill father go through with an assisted suicide plot.

Randee Dawn

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 is the author of the fantastical rock n' roll novel “The Only Song Worth Singing” and the funny pop culture fantasy “Tune in Tomorrow.” She co-authored “The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion” with Susan Green. When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she dreams of the next place she can travel to. More at RandeeDawn.com.