

# "Make It Look Messy"

## Striking a New Note With HILL STREET BLUES



Michael Kozoll and Steven Bochco have composed a series that has impressed critics more than viewers. Can a show that demands to be watched create audience demand?

Todd Gitlin

Network executives in Hollywood talk about "unique" the way shoe salesmen talk about "comfortable." Shows which rank very high on somebody's chart may even be graced with the sobriquet "very unique." But unique is somewhat of a misnomer in a business which trades on the packaging of novelties that don't surprise anyone, or are predictably surprising: mutants and hybrids that bid fair to remind the audience of a prior treat or treatment. That's why in the pitching and yawning that generates new deals for new series, the standard industry shorthand is

recombinant. And that's why writer-producer Michael Kozoll can now chortle about his latest series, which the networks might have ordered by saying, "Give us a cross between 'Barney Miller' and 'My Mother the Car'" or "It's a combination of 'Police Story' and *I Remember Mama*."

Kozoll is creator, with Steven Bochco, of NBC's "Hill Street Blues," the most intelligent, well-cast, well-acted urban dramatic series since "Naked City" and "East Side, West Side" two decades ago. It's a series that is so brilliantly written, so startling and complex in its atmosphere and methods, that it requires a new level

of attention from its audience. Win, lose, or draw (and "Hill Street" survived dismal ratings last season to be renewed for the fall), the show has already begun to alter Hollywood's sense of what could be done on the small screen if ingenuity were left to take its course.

"Hill Street Blues" is neither a hybrid nor a mutant, although there are precedents for several of its elements. MTM, which produces it, has done other shows set in the workplace—"The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Lou Grant," "WKRP in Cincinnati"—where quasi-families of co-workers play out their relationships and

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emotions. Drama-comedy fusions are also an MTM specialty. Varieties of street realism have characterized earlier network shows like "Naked City" (1958-59, 1960-63), "East Side, West Side" (1963-64), and "Police Story" (1973-77). But none of these shows, for all their virtues, embodied the particular tangle of human affairs that distinguishes "Hill Street."

One hears a lot of talk in Hollywood about the importance of chemistry, as if the whole town were nestled on Du Pont's backlot. In the case of "Hill Street," however, the cliché has a point. First, there are the scripts. Bochco and Kozoll found a voice for "Hill Street" which is at once hilarious, desperate, moving, and respectful of the varieties of human interdependence and imperfection.

Part of the achievement is a matter of form. After the pilot, the shows were written in four-show blocks, with four stories running concurrently, each starting at a different point and often not ending at all, as many life problems do not so much conclude as segue into new ones. In "Hill Street" shoptalk, the stories were "knitted": so, as we shall see in a moment, was the look of the film. What were originally nine principal characters mushroomed into thirteen, as some short-term characters proved too good to lose. In the original pilot, cops Renko (Charles Haid) and Hill (Michael Warren), attacked by junkies, were DOA and critically injured, respectively; but the two had tested well. So the closing police radio voice-over was rerecorded to give them a new lease on life: Reenter Hill and Renko, and their continuing fraternity has been one major carrier of the show's emotional weight.

The density of the scripts, marvels of compression, matches the actual density and convolution of city life. The first scene after roll call in the episode called "Rites of Spring" set up no fewer than five major stories in three minutes. In the course of that two-hour show, three more story lines were introduced and two others continued. At the end of the show, at least eight major stories were still unresolved. No wonder many people who have watched only an episode or two find "Hill Street" hard to follow. And no wonder others think it is splendidly true to the confusions of living.

The language of "Hill Street" is quick, smart, and rarely damaged by episodic television's occupational hazard, the sure-shot, trademark line. In bad television, a point is made twice so that no one can miss it. In mediocre television, and even in much of the better stuff, an expository line

will come once. On "Hill Street Blues" at its best, the obvious line will not be said at all. In the pilot, one story involved teenagers holding hostages during a liquor store robbery. At no time did anyone burst into the Hill Street station to announce, "There's a holdup in progress; they're holding hostages!" It never had to be said.

Many of the characters are also very unique, indeed. Veronica Hamel's Joyce Davenport, liberal public defender, is the first woman television regular who is at once professional, tough, intelligent, and sexy. The man with whom she shares her bed and, on one occasion that gave Broadcast Standards pause, her bubble bath, is Daniel J. Travanti's Captain Frank Furillo. He is no gang-busters cop but "a quiet sufferer and a stoic," as Kozoll sees him, and a rock of pragmatism. "One of the things I like about Furillo," Bochco says, "is that he understands he's not going to solve crime up there. He negotiates survival on the hill."

This is also a show which knows that race and class tear this society apart, that behaving decently under these conditions is an everyday trial, and that there are no blindingly obvious solutions for the accumulated miseries of the ghetto. The show's racial byplay honors the everyday street knowledge of race without sliding into race baiting.

Despite the occasional quick fix to move into or out of a segment, the payoff for characters is not so much a deed done or a criminal caught. Instead, it's a provisional sort of knowledge, what Kozoll calls "a very Henry Jamesian finish."

**B**ut the quality of the scripts only begins to define the innovative texture of the show. "Hill Street" is distinguished by the totality of its look, its sound, its rhythm. Much credit for that look goes to the veteran director responsible for the pilot and the first four episodes, Robert Butler.

Butler, in turn, is quick to insist, "It starts with the material. It starts with the layered, the laminated, the potentially confusing complication of all those people doing all those frail things."

With producer Gregory Hoblit's help, Butler set out to match the show's look and sound as closely as possible to its concept. This was an ensemble show, dense with principals. People should be on the move; scenes should flow into one another. "Twelve people standing around looks like the Acropolis; it's the worst," Butler says. The camera might pick up,

say, LaRue (Kiel Martin) and Washington (Taurean Blacque) as they walk into the squad room; Goldblume (Joe Spano) might join them; Furillo might pass by, calling to LaRue; the camera might then follow LaRue into Furillo's office—all this without a cut.

"I hate establishing shots," Butler says. "We can go from a close-up of Furillo in his office to a medium shot of Davenport at a restaurant, instead of seeing the cab pull up and the doorman opening it: All that shoe leather drives you crazy."

No slack time, no flab, no exposition. With plenty of tight shots, the station feels claustrophobic. The way the characters and camera move suggests that the police world is a society unto itself, that its people depend on one another, crisis is everyday, nothing comes easy. The heroism of these cops is not the swagger of a loner lording it over the scene. The show should look messy because the problems police deal with are messy.

At first there was talk of shooting the whole show in 16mm, with hand-held cameras, in black and white, but that seemed impractical. Still, Butler says, "I started to shoot the episodes in 35, all hand-held, but the guys [the producers] got a little spooky with it and asked that I do only certain heightened sequences hand-held," like the roll-call sequence that opens every show. Influenced by the PBS documentary *The Police Tapes*, he shot roll call with two cameras running simultaneously. He let the camera operators watch rehearsals with their eyes, not with their machines. "I told them, 'Don't worry if you have to find focus.' And when I saw the dailies, they looked pretty raunchy, but when it was strung together, it got smoothed a little bit, although it still had the texture and the juice."

The edgy look of roll call reinforces the irreverent, antic, raucous, sometimes hung-over mood of cops at seven in the morning, and plays against the comic robustness of Sgt. Phil Esterhaus (Michael Conrad) as he calls off his items: "I can well understand your spirited feelings toward spring's final, albeit belated, arrival. Nevertheless, be forewarned. Everyone out there is going to feel just as feisty as yourselves. Statistically speaking, expect a twenty-five percent increase felonywise, thirty to thirty-five percent misdemeanorwise. From us that means extra care today, and extra professionalism. That does *not* mean drag racing our units, siestas in the sunshine, and/or flirtatious interludes with no doubt scantily dressed individuals of the female persuasion."

## Hill Street Dossier

With more plots than Forest Lawn and more characters than the Chinese alphabet, it's little wonder that casual viewers of "Hill Street Blues" often find themselves wondering just what is going on with all those people. Here's a dossier on some of the show's leading characters to help you through the new season's episodes.



**Captain Frank Furillo** (Daniel J. Travanti): Hill Street's Lou Grant . . . protects his men but isn't afraid to bust their butts when they don't perform . . . typical day includes a visit from ex-wife Fay, who's usually complaining about her latest boyfriend . . .



**Joyce Davenport** (Veronica Hamel): public defender whose affair with Frank Furillo is the best-kept secret at Hill Street station . . . cool, icy, elegant—and a good lawyer, too . . . under pressure from Furillo to quit her job and get married . . .



**Phil Esterhaus** (Michael Conrad): Sergeant whose roll call begins the day . . . rhetoric is on the baroque and, shall we say, flowery side, not to mention redundant . . . engaged to a teenager, he fainted when his middle-aged mistress showed up at wedding . . .



**Mick Belker** (Bruce Weitz): sleazy-looking undercover cop . . . cross between Serpico and James Bond's "Jaws" . . . his bite is worse than his bark; just ask those who have tangled with him . . . favorite terms of endearment: "dog breath," "hair ball" . . .



**Bobby Hill** (Michael Warren) and **Andy Renko** (Charles Haid): salt-and-pepper patrol team nearly killed by junkies in show's pilot . . . Renko, a self-styled "cowboy" with motorcycle and swagger to match . . . Hill, quiet, a calming influence on his ram-bunctious partner . . .



**Henry Goldblume** (Joe Spano): community relations officer . . . idealistic, often at odds with hard-liners at station . . . wears bleeding heart on his sleeve, where it takes quite a beating . . .



**Neal Washington** (Taurian Blaque) and **J. D. LaRue** (Kiel Martin): another black-and-white team . . . Washington affects jivey street manner which makes him first-rate undercover man . . . LaRue has serious personal problems, most related to his alcoholism . . .



**Howard Hunter** (James E. Sikking): S.W.A.T. commander . . . Hill Street's answer to General Patton . . . frustrated by Furillo's reluctance to use military hardware on what Hunter calls "your basic nonwhite lawless types" . . .

Butler wanted the ragged look of reality in the composition of individual shots as well. He tried to break camera operators of their training in neat, balanced shots. "Make it look messy," I'm saying to Billy [Cronjager, director of photography]. "Don't make that pretty stuff we all know how to make. Make it look bad." They kept coming to me, both on the pilot and the episodes, saying, "It's pretty ba-ad." Butler affects a singsong lament. "And I said, 'Make it worse. Make it worse. It makes it more real. Leave the shadows. It's marvel-

ous.'" As for the twenty background characters, Butler remembers telling Cronjager, "'Get the people up; get 'em moving. Have 'em walk right through the scene.' 'Between the lens and principals?' 'Please.'"

The lighting was dimmed, too, to make the print look down and dirty. Although Butler, Hoblit, and others had wanted to shoot in black and white, they didn't think the network was ready. Still, they could "grind the film down" to get away from "magazine-cover stuff." Butler played

tricks with filters, with the wardrobe, and in the lab, all contributing to a tone of urban density people generally associate with the East and Midwest. (Actually, only the title sequence and a few other scenes were shot in Chicago; almost all exteriors were done on location in Los Angeles, usually along a skid row that, but for Southern California light, shames anything east of the Rockies.)

Butler and Hoblit also did for television dialogue something akin to what Robert Altman did for the movies. "What we're

all taught in the business is that one person speaks at a time," Butler says. "I just decided: 'Look, enough of this honoring of the cues. If you must, as a performer, do it, that's fair enough. But don't do it because the paragraphs tell you to.'" Meanwhile, a separate background track of ambient sound was laid on. Hoblit hired the improvisational comedy group Off the Wall to throw off everything from squad-room phone murmurs to dispatch calls. This is the bulk of the show's 'music.' (The rest, variations on the softly melancholy theme by Mike Post, reverberates at various moments in the show.) Off the Wall's buzz sets the show's tone: the sense that the islands of order in life are, as Robert Frost said about poetry, "momentary stays against confusion."

A miracle like "Hill Street Blues" isn't accomplished simply. Talent is required, but talent will not always out. Timing and serendipity count. So, in this case, did Grant Tinker, a company head who liked to shelter bright writers. And so did a network in trouble, casting about for ways of tapping into a young, urban audience, and willing to take some chances. But in the end, no network executive can order up a breakthrough.

Scripts, after all, begin with writers. The collaboration of Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll is one of those storybook partnerships in which the whole became more than the sum of what were already considerable parts. Michael Kozoll is a droll Milwaukeean in his late thirties, a watchful man whose middle name is irony, a former college linguistics teacher driven to writing television in the mid-seventies after two Bay Area junior colleges deemed his antiwar activities sufficient reason to unplug his teaching career. He moved to Los Angeles and became story editor at Universal for "Quincy," then for "McCloud," "Switch," and "Kojak."

There Kozoll encountered Universal veteran Steven Bochco, an effusive writer with the swerved wit who had gone from Manhattan's High School of the Performing Arts to Carnegie Tech, and then to story-editing "The Name of the Game," "Columbo," and "McMillan and Wife," and to producing a short-lived cop show called "Delvecchio," a character actor's dream featuring Michael Conrad and Charles Haid along with Judd Hirsch. Kozoll worked with Bochco on "Delvecchio" and stayed with him on another cop show, "Paris." For that program, Bochco brought in producer Gregory Hoblit, an ex-sixties activist Berkeley dropout who had made a documentary about the guru

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Bubba Free John, a film Bochco admired. In retrospect, one sees a tribe gathering.

With "Paris," Bochco and Kozoll had moved over to MTM, one of the class acts in town, where Grant Tinker was renowned for hiring inventive producers, giving them their heads, and backing them up when they got in trouble. Not long after "Paris," Michael Zinberg, who left MTM to run NBC's comedy development department, met with then NBC president Fred Silverman and programming chief Brandon Tartikoff to talk about Silverman's notion of a new-style cop show, set in a neighborhood with a "heavy ethnic mix." Zinberg suggested MTM as the company, and Bochco and Kozoll as the producers. NBC decided to give them a commitment to write a pilot and invited them to lunch to talk particulars.

Tartikoff, Zinberg, Bochco, Kozoll, and MTM's Stu Erwin met at Beverly Hills' La Scala for one of those long sessions that one Hollywood producer calls "renting a booth." Bochco and Kozoll had their own idea for a series set, as Kozoll remembers, "someplace like the Hyatt Regency, where you were at the heart of a little world." Tartikoff remembers it as "'Love Boat' set in a San Francisco hotel." In the mysterious Hollywood manner that brings forth not only banalities and monsters but also wonders, Tartikoff said to Bochco and Kozoll, "You guys are good at cop shows, with 'Delvecchio' and all. We would like to do a cop show that is not a standard cops-and-robbers show. A little bit of 'M\*A\*S\*H,' a little bit of 'Barney Miller.'"

Kozoll, no lover of network meetings, did not take kindly to the hybrid talk: "They knew it was a dangerous choice of words with us, because we're not going to rip off somebody else's television show. We don't think of ourselves as creative

bank robbers." So the meeting ended with what Bochco calls "a qualified no." They were reluctant to do a cop show at all, and the unsatisfying grind of "Paris" had devoured their enthusiasm for episodic television.

Still, as soon as they left the restaurant, they began to ruminate. Ideas came forth. Characters they had been carrying around in their heads for years began to take shape. Also, they were encouraged by something that had been said at lunch. "They were talking about giving us carte blanche to do what we wanted to do within that genre," Bochco recalls, "the likes of which I had never heard from a network before. That was, for me, real seductive. On the other hand, neither one of us is a virgin. There's a big difference between sitting around a lunch table, and then dealing with the realities of, say, Broadcast Standards, which can devastate a show."

So Kozoll and Bochco decided they would do the series under two conditions: in Bochco's words, "that the programming people would genuinely leave us alone, and before we ever put a pen to paper, we demanded a meeting with Broadcast Standards, to see whether the things that we were talking about were going to die there. Because if they were, our attitude was: 'Why bother.'" Tartikoff said yes to both demands.

Bochco and Kozoll met with NBC West Coast Broadcast Standards chief Jerome Stanley in a spirit Stanley remembers as amicable. Bochco says, "We yelled at them for an hour." Kozoll adds, "We let them know that they were going to have a war with us." Stanley thought the show had "a built-in problem: the treatment of ethnic minorities. The criminal element at this particular precinct [loosely based on the South Bronx] was almost a hundred percent black or Chicano. The only whites that live in that kind of neighborhood are either too old or too poor to move away. Our quarrel with them, if you want to call it that, was you're simply going to have to fictionalize it to say that all the criminals are not black, that there are some white criminals." Eventually Stanley was mollified by Bochco and Kozoll's determination to put a mixture of ethnic types in the station itself.

When they sent the pilot script in, Broadcast Standards checked back. "We have problems, big problems," Bochco recalls them saying. After negotiations, a walkout, and yet more negotiations, Stanley was still not happy with "the depiction of police as being casually indifferent to

the law." The pilot had Officer LaRue breaking a Laundromat coinbox to get a dime for a phone call to a prospective date. That went. Standards was also unhappy with the stereotyping in a scene in which Officers Hill and Renko were called to settle a family fight that started when a woman discovered that her husband had been sleeping with his stepdaughter—the family was black. Standards was persuaded that the show would balance iniquity. The junky who shot Hill and Renko in the show's stunning climax was white.

In any event, NBC's programming executives were true to their word and left Bochco and Kozoll alone. And when they screened the pilot in New York, Michael Zinberg says, "the majority of the people in the room said it was as fine a pilot as they had ever seen on any network, at any time." It tested badly with sample audiences, as startling shows usually do, but, as Tartikoff recalls, "we said if we can't take a chance of getting this on the air, we're in the wrong business." And after a bumpy first season, NBC ordered thirteen new episodes of what is possibly, in Greg Hoblit's words, "the lowest-rated show renewed in the history of television."

**H**ill Street Blues" spent most of last season on the move, roaming over four different nights and five time slots. During the new season, it may rest at 10:00 P.M. Thursdays, after four straight half hours of sit-coms, no great audience lead-in. But by all accounts, Fred Silverman loved the show, and at NBC last season his gut was the gut that counted. One factor which may also have contributed to "Hill Street's" half-season renewal was that NBC was not exactly brimming with surefire backup series. Meanwhile, critical acclaim was near universal. Despite the fact that the show ranked eighty-third in a field of ninety-seven last year, would it have served NBC to dump its only critical success? "Hill Street" had found its devotees, people who were even willing to be home Saturday nights at ten.

Incoming NBC chairman Grant Tinker can also be expected to give "Hill Street" a break or two. It will be fascinating to watch what he does about the bargain Silverman's NBC exacted for renewal. The network told Bochco and Kozoll to build each episode around a single story line, complete with beginning, middle, and end. "I see the validity of that," Bochco says, putting on a brave face. "I

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hate having to do it, in a sense, because I loved the freedom we had last season with our stories. It can be done, but I would be very reluctant to change anything else."

Still, Bochco, Kozoll, and Hoblit are mindful of other criticisms; they listen, for example, to their cast of winning, intelligent actors. Michael Warren (who plays the black officer Hill) has been critical of unintended racial stereotyping in the scripts, but he also appreciates Bochco and Kozoll's wit in writing against type. In one scene, where Hill and Renko were called to break up a family fight, the neighbors were black, but the gigantic wife who's run amok was white. "I loved it that she was white," says Warren. "It shows a certain sensitivity you don't normally see."

They have heard more than once from fans and friends that Frank's ex-wife, Fay (Barbara Bosson), is too predictably hysterical, that Howard Hunter (James B. Sikking) is too much the S.W.A.T. caricature, that Joyce Davenport is never seen working as a public defender, that Lt. Ray Calletano (Rene Enriquez), the only distinctly Hispanic character on series television today, needs a fuller identity.

Now that the characters are familiar to a few million viewers, the writers' challenge changes: to keep them from shrinking into their signatures. Bochco and Kozoll have created a hard act to follow: their own. What works in their favor is that the characters were, from the start, committed to transformation. The show is populated with characters who've come back from a darkness, reflecting that many of the show's actors have been around the proverbial track, working at everything from the post office to little theater and commercials. As Grant Tinker says, "There are about ten people in that show who I'd like to spend time with." And Grant Tinker is a man of taste.

**L**ast spring, a few days after the renewal was announced, Kozoll and Bochco were in a playful mood; but like their characters, they were also given to lugubrious reflections on the ways of the world. "I sometimes wonder," Kozoll said, "if we aren't a little out of fashion with the rest of the country." "It's very probable," Bochco added, "and that could be a source of some of our ratings problems. Because there's no other explanation for why people aren't watching us in droves. We're

funny, we're dramatic, we have wonderful actors, we have good stories."

"We're liberal, probably unfashionably liberal," said Kozoll. "I guess we all feel that the government should be doing more to ameliorate terrible social situations. I don't think we're cop lovers at all [although the letters "Hill Street" gets suggest that many cops love the show]. At the same time, we do have that kind of compassion for the hopeless situation those people are in. And I really think that's the strongest point of view that comes through 'Hill Street.'"

Bochco added, "I think what Michael means when he says that we are unfashionably liberal is in our perception that those simple, easy answers don't yield simple, easy results, and never have. The bureaucracy is too cumbersome. The system is too complex. I think people sit at home, and they want to be entertained, they want to laugh, and when it's all done, they want to feel that all is right with the world. Even though somewhere back there they know it's not really true. That's a very attractive notion that they would like to see reinforced. We don't do that. We don't solve problems, by and large. We're constantly dramatizing the frustrations and limits of power. I'm not sure that's the way to easy, quick success."

The talk turned to the show's style. "Maybe our biggest problem on 'Hill Street,'" Bochco said, "is that it is a show that demands to be watched. And most people do not watch television; they simply are in its presence. They use television as a narcotic. And when television grabs you by the throat and says, 'Wait a second, pay attention to what's going on here,' you're gonna get remarkable resistance. And I think we do."

"People aren't comfortable with us," Kozoll said. "We are speaking, remember, of a world in which fifteen million households tuning in adds up to catastrophic ratings." But Bochco and Kozoll are delighted they are not producing *Dirty Harry*, or "Strike Force," or "Today's FBI." "Win, lose, or draw, our curse and our blessing is that format," Bochco said, "and we've just got to go with it. You can make little minor adjustments here and there, hopefully. But I would rather see the show go down than to change it so drastically that it's no longer the show we created and produced this season." ■

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