



## **'Chicago Fire' Creators on 'Classic' Storytelling, Avoiding the Procedural Trap and 'Hoping' for Longevity**

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Film veterans Michael Brandt and Derek Haas preview their new NBC drama with THR, including the pressure of launching a new series: "There are good shows that people just didn't watch and we don't want to be one of them," Brandt admits.

NBC is revisiting the classic TV drama with *Chicago Fire*.

Centered on a group of Chicago firefighters and paramedics, the latest series from *Law & Order* producer **Dick Wolf** came partially from a desire to fill a void left by another firefighter-centric show, FX's *Rescue Me*. That's where seasoned feature writers **Michael Brandt** and **Derek Haas** (*Wanted*, *3:10 to Yuma*, *2 Fast 2 Furious*), who had never dipped their toes in scripted TV before, come in.

Talk to the duo for a few minutes and it quickly becomes apparent their intentions. "We came in with a very strong feeling of wanting to do a classic NBC ensemble drama in the vein of *Hill Street Blues* and *ER*, shows that we liked," Brandt, who created *Chicago Fire* with writing/producing partner Haas, told [The Hollywood Reporter](#). "We came at it wanting to do a show like *ER*; that's what we intend to do." Whether that turns out to the case, remains to be seen.

*THR* caught up with Brandt and Haas to discuss the series' genesis, why they didn't expect to stay on, the importance of the Chicago locale, not understanding the TV ratings system and why they believe *Chicago Fire* is so much more than a procedural.

**The Hollywood Reporter: I know you guys are knee-deep in production. How are you feeling about the premiere of *Chicago Fire* finally in sight?**

**Derek Haas:** It seems like we've been working on it so long with no feedback, other than our own internal feedback so we're very excited. A year ago, Mike and I first visited

a fire station in Chicago and here it is, about to debut into the world. We couldn't be more excited and anxious and all of those things.

**THR: How did you come up with the concept for the show? Was it that visit to the fire station that piqued both your interests?**

**Michael Brandt:** We were approached by our agent and they said that NBC and Dick Wolf decided that they wanted to do a firefighter show. They didn't have any concept beyond that. They just knew FX's *Rescue Me* was going off the air, Dick was looking to do something totally different and they were looking for feature writers. That was part of the pitch that the Wolf company had made NBC. We got a phone call asking if we would want to do television; I think feature writers get that call every year. Historically, the networks ask for too much from us, in terms of the number of years they want us to be on the show and this was different. It was have a strong concept for the show, write a great pilot and then it's up to you whether you want to stick around or not. We came in with a very strong feeling of wanting to do a classic NBC ensemble drama in the vein of *Hill Street Blues* and *ER*, shows that we liked. Because of *Law & Order*, the procedural has taken over television -- particularly network television -- and in our minds, in network television right now there aren't a lot of great character shows. They're either fun, soapy, campy shows or they're right-down-the-middle procedurals. We came at it wanting to do a show like *ER*; that's what we intend to do.

**THR: Why Chicago?**

**Brandt:** We picked the setting of Chicago from a process of elimination because in New York, Sept. 11 is still a big subject there, and L.A. doesn't have enough weather for what we want to do. Chicago is a cinematic city: It's got a river, it's got a lake, it's got high-rises, it's got rough parts of town, it's got subways, it's got elevated tracks. In terms of action in a city, Chicago is pretty hard to beat.

**THR: You mentioned paying homage to the "classic" NBC drama, which Dick Wolf has mentioned before, with *Chicago Fire*. With that comes a procedural element that plays into each episode in some way, shape or form. How will you differentiate this show from becoming too formulaic?**

**Haas:** What impressed us when we were visiting the firehouses -- Michael and I were on 24-hour shifts -- you would get a call and the alarm would go off, and there would be minimal information about what you were heading to. If it said man down from unknown causes, you don't know if that guy has fallen off the L track or if it's a drunk in the middle of the street or a guy who's been mugged. You would roll out to these scenes [not knowing what to expect] and then you would have to respond. We thought, "Well,

that's our show." And then they all come back -- people with different personalities, all from different walks of life -- and end up in the same firehouse where they're like a second family. We wanted to show what it's like when they leave the firehouse, when they're there and when they're out on the call. I don't know if that's a formula but that's what we wanted to do.

**THR: As the series progresses, how conscious are you that the viewers may grow tired if they start to see patterns in the storytelling, for example fires of the week in every episode?**

**Haas:** When you're in the firehouse, you realize no two calls are the same. There's such an array of jobs that have nothing to do with fires that you can get called out to. We're very conscious when we write that if you shot the same fire, the same guys with masks and their turn-up gear through a fire with their hoses down on it, of course that would get boring. When we write action scenes, it's not just about getting from point A to point B, it's how does what they're doing in this episode affect the character and their story line all the way through.

**Brandt:** You actually see that there's a sense of pressure put on the characters, based on what they're emotionally going through in their lives.

**THR: What can viewers expect in terms of where the characters may be headed?**

**Brandt:** It's strange being in a firehouse. One minute, you're laughing so hard your sides are splitting, and the next, you're hearing a story that's incredibly heartbreaking. What we found in writing the show -- we're now shooting episode seven or eight -- the humor comes naturally; it's guys and girls in a pressure-cooker situation and that's the only way they can emotionally get through the day. What people can expect is fun, ensemble humor but also people putting their work hat on, coming across something serious and seeing how they deal with it.

**THR: Most of your experiences have been in the film world, so how would you compare writing and producing scripted television to that?**

**Haas:** With a TV show, what we've found is that you get to write chapters in a book. You can close one store, but when you do it, you're going to open up three more. Maybe people will want to keep wanting to come back each week. Churning 13 episodes, running characters through the gauntlet and having story lines that take up three, four or five episodes while others get shut in one or two. Thankfully, Brandt and I had Dick Wolf and **Matt Olmstead**, our showrunner, who helped crack all of the codes.

**THR: Was there an aspect to writing TV that you didn't quite expect going into it?**

**Brandt:** We fully expected to write the pilot and then go back to features. We spend a lot more hours during the week writing because it's just an avalanche that never, ever hits the bottom of the mountain. We expected to write the pilot, but our relationship with Dick and Wolf Films ended up being so good -- and they kept saying yes to us -- we realized we were working for a medium and a company where the writer is king. And that's just not the case in features. I can understand why feature writers are jumping into TV because it's so much more satisfying.

**THR: What's keeping you guys up at night -- an obstacle or challenge that you're facing?**

**Haas:** It's not the production, it's not the actors, it's not our staff, it's not the network, it is 100 percent are the people that we're trying to write the show for going to show up and watch. We've done everything we can, we think we have a great show and that's the one thing we can't control at all.

**Brandt:** There are good shows that people just didn't watch and we don't want to be one of them. We're hoping people tune in and give it a couple episodes to see what it's about because the show's been marketed in a way that it feels like it's a lot of guys with their shirts off -- hunky firefighters -- which we have, but that's not what the show is about at all. I want people to give it a chance.

**THR: Has NBC given any idea as to what they're expecting in terms of ratings or any indication as to what they're hoping for?**

**Haas:** We're feature writers so we only think about box office. We have no idea how the ratings system even works. We're hoping someone's going to come in Thursday and pat us on the back.

**THR: What specific story lines can you tease?**

**Haas:** Lieutenant Casey (**Jesse Spencer**) comes upon a drunk driving scene and it turns out that the drunk driver is the son of a crooked cop. We play that out over the first half of the season. Firefighters write reports based on what they see and the report could really set the kid off the river, the crooked cop tries to put a little pressure on Casey.

**Brandt:** There's another story line in episode two where Lieutenant Severide (**Taylor Kinney**) is put in a possible situation where he's rescuing a construction worker (*The Walking Dead's* **Jeffrey DeMunn**) and Jeffrey does an unbelievable acting job.

**THR:** How about an episode down the line?

**Haas:** Can't wait for episode seven, which Michael and I wrote, and it's the Thanksgiving episode. It all takes place in one shift.

*Chicago Fire* premieres 10 p.m. Wednesday on NBC.