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## **LV lawyers leave their mark on 'The Defenders'**

### **Las Vegas lawyers the inspiration for 'The Defenders,' starring Jerry O'Connell, Jim Belushi**

By CHRISTOPHER LAWRENCE  
LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Plenty of people are rooting for CBS' new Las Vegas legal drama, "The Defenders," which premieres at 10 p.m. today on KLAS-TV, Channel 8.

Among them, Michael Cristalli and Marc Saggese, the local lawyers on whom the series is based, and viewers ready to embrace something on CBS other than crime procedurals -- and spinoffs of crime procedurals.

But perhaps no one is hoping the series is a hit more than co-star Jerry O'Connell.

"This show better be successful," he says, "because if we keep shooting in Vegas, and my wife keeps coming up there, I'm gonna be dead-ass broke.

"I tried to steer her toward Planet Hollywood, toward that H&M and toward the Urban Outfitters, but no," he adds, in mock wonderment of his missus, supermodel-turned-actress Rebecca Romijn. "Everything goes toward the Palazzo. And my gosh, in the Aria, when she got in the Aria, that's it. It was over for me."

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"The Defenders" is flashy, funny and irreverent -- think of it as a buddy lawyer show -- that takes itself fairly seriously despite the presence of a new associate ("Friday Night Lights" 'Jurnee Smollett) who stripped her way through law school and Clyde (Bruce Jarchow), "the best adult film lawyer in the business."

The project began as a documentary by Harry Gantz and Joe Gantz ("Taxicab Confessions," the Pahrump-based "Pleasure for Sale") then morphed into a proposed reality show starring Cristalli and Saggese before CBS began developing it as a scripted series. And the lawyers don't seem to mind not being on camera.

"When I heard that Belushi got cast, I was very happy," Cristalli says. "I couldn't imagine that we would've gotten a star that big. It was over and above what I anticipated."

And the actor was passionate about "The Defenders" from the beginning. O'Connell says during his first meeting with Belushi, a get-together he expected would be a quick how-ya-doin', great-to-meet-ya, Belushi asked whether he'd seen the documentary. The next thing O'Connell knew, he was watching the hour-and-40-minute film.

"I have a sitter that's on the clock, and I'm sitting there watching this documentary, and Jim was acting out the documentary next to the TV."

Cristalli spent several days with Belushi, letting the actor study his personality and mannerisms.

"We totally hit it off," the attorney says. "I mean, he's just a super, super guy. I really like him a lot."

The feeling, it seems, was mutual.

"I love his bedside manner with clients and the confidence he gives someone when he's talking to them about how he's going to take care of it," the actor says of Cristalli. "And I approach my scenes with the visual of Michael in my head."

"The Defenders" isn't the attorneys' first brush with fame -- among their more celebrated clients were accused Ted Binion killer Sandy Murphy and bodybuilding murder defendants Craig Titus and Kelly Ryan -- but Saggese still can't believe the good fortune of seeing the scripted version of himself.

"You don't get much cooler than Jerry O'Connell, and I think he is a great guy and a great actor," he says. "I'm honored. I'm like, 'Me? Jerry O'Connell's going to be playing me?' It's still sinking in."

O'Connell spent almost a week shadowing Saggese. Taking in a 51s game. Playing a round of golf. "God, there's so many cool spots downtown!" he gushes. But it was all in the name of research.

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Cristalli and Saggese's involvement didn't end with prepping the actors to play them. The cases on "The Defenders" are based on ones they've handled. One or the other of them is in contact with the show's writers almost daily. And the duo travel to L.A. for a couple of days every week or two, either to visit the set or the writers' room.

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Still, first and foremost, "The Defenders" is entertainment, so creative liberties were taken.

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They've had such a good time together, the actors and their inspirations, they all filmed one of those I'm-not-a-lawyer-but-I-play-one-on-TV commercials. Belushi sounds nearly as proud of that as he does "The Defenders," laughing as he describes his time spent rattling off the number for potential clients to call.

A jazzed O'Connell, who still has a boyish enthusiasm despite already having spent a quarter-century in the business, raves about the spot as well.

"I cannot wait. Late-night Vegas TV, I'm gonna be in my hotel room, and I see a Cristalli & Saggese commercial come up with the Beloosh and I. I'm waiting for that moment. That's gonna be a highlight of my life."

While the four of them obviously are profiting from "The Defenders," the city stands to gain as well. Every episode plays like a pricey, 44-minute commercial for Las Vegas with Oscar-winning director Davis Guggenheim having set the visual tone. And billboards in New York and L.A. that show the actors alongside a showgirl-costumed Lady Justice, with the tag line "In Vegas even justice is hot," tout the city as much as the show.

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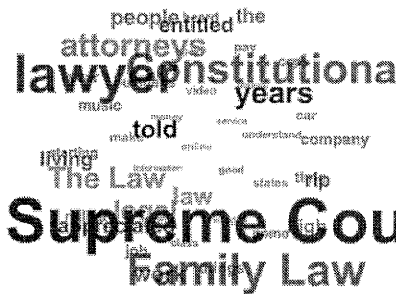
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by ExploreTheLaw on Wednesday, September 22nd, 2010 | No Comments

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