Sam Waterston Brings 'Law & Order' as Jack McCoy

5,840 words
9 December 2008
NPR: Talk of the Nation

NEAL CONAN, host:

This is Talk of the Nation. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. For more than a decade now, Jack McCoy has prosecuted pedophiles and murderers, reckless gun manufacturers, corrupt cops and serial killers. He's survived death threats, Supreme Court appeals and countless ethics reviews. Even more improbably, he survived the NBC broadcast standards department, the whims of half a dozen vice presidents of programming, and the harsh glare of the Nielsen ratings. And after all of that he got a promotion. After his last TV boss left to run for president of the United States, yes, in real life Jack McCoy was elevated from his long niche as chief executive assistant to take the corner office as New York district attorney on "Law & Order."

The longest running star in one of the longest running and most successful shows in television history, Sam Waterston does have a great deal more in his life. He's done distinguished work on stage, on TV and in films. He's active on a number of issues. He's here in Washington today on behalf of Oceana, a conservation group that works to protect the oceans and fisheries. So, today we want to hear from prosecutors, lawyers, cops. If you watch the show, what do they get right? Has it taught the rest of us the right lessons? Our phone number is 800-989-8255. Email talk@npr.org, and you can also join the conversation on our website. Go to npr.org click on Talk of the Nation. Later in the program, Bill Carter of the New York Times joins us to talk about NBC's decision to put Jay Leno on at 10:00 five nights a week. But first, Sam Waterston joins us here in Studio 3A, and welcome to Talk of the Nation.

Mr. SAM WATERSTON (Actor, "Law & Order"): Thank you very much.

CONAN: And I have to ask you about that news. That's your time slot, isn't it?

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, I don't know how to react, because all I know is what you know.

CONAN: It's - the idea that they're going to put one-hour Jay Leno show at 10:00 Monday through Friday and go down from, what, I guess, 23 hours of prime-time TV on NBC to 17?

Mr. WATERSTON: It's all news to me.

CONAN: OK, well, the newspapers are pretty interesting today.

Mr. WATERSTON: Yes.

CONAN: This is the start of your 19th season. You still have, and only get, one-year contracts; is that right?

Mr. WATERSTON: Yes, I think once or twice I might have signed a two-year contract, but usually just one, and it's always - it's been a - psychologically a terrific thing, as far as I'm concerned.

CONAN: Why?

Mr. WATERSTON: Because I've never felt imprisoned.

CONAN: Never felt imprisoned? I've often wondered when you're on a show for as long as - that, you know,
in one hand, it's great because it's - you know, you get something a lot of actors don't get in their lives, which is, you know, reliable income.

Mr. WATERSTON: Employment.

CONAN: Yes. Nevertheless, there must be an awful lot of stage projects and movies that you've had to turn down.

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, that's the other side of this that's been so nice is that they've kept a loose rein and I've been able to do plays and television and other movies. And so I've - it's been a full, rich life.

CONAN: Prosecutor Jack McCoy brings a lot of passion to his job and fairness in the law. Do you ever find yourself getting caught up in that same passion, not just as Jack McCoy, but as a Sam Waterston?

Mr. WATERSTON: I think Meryl Streep said this first, and I think it's absolutely true. They pay you to care. And so yeah, I do get wrapped up in my stuff. And actually, in the first years when I was doing it, I had a bit of a rough time because it's bad news every week. Something bad has happened, and the way you work it out to try to get fairness done and justice done and all that of that good stuff is sometimes raw and depressing in itself. So...

CONAN: Your visitor's badge is rubbing up against the mic. You might want to - if you just take that off, and you know, I think you won't be thrown out of the building now that you're here in the studio.

Mr. WATERSTON: It's possible.

CONAN: I think so.

Mr. WATERSTON: Here, I'll put it on my water bottle.

CONAN: And we'll put up on eBay.

CONAN: The character, did he appeal to you? What is it about him that you like?

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, I liked the merry attack-dog aspect of him from the beginning, and I don't know whether he's been - people tell me when I see them on the street that they wish I would smile more. So, maybe I haven't been as merry externally as I think I am on the inside, but that's what I've liked, just the ferociousness.

CONAN: As you suggest it's hard to be merry sometimes when you're...

Mr. WATERSTON: There's a lot of grim stuff.

CONAN: There's a lot of grim stuff that you're talking about. Here's an email we got from Patrick in San Francisco. I preface this question with the fact that I am and have continued to be addicted to "Law & Order" - the original, of course - however, doesn't Jack McCoy's arrogance and self righteousness bug you a little? He sometimes is so arrogant he sees his own hypocrisy from previous episodes. Maybe, he suggests, this might be better address to the writers.

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, no. I think that's one of the things that maybe I don't like that so much about the character, but I like it about the show, that all the people on it have feet of clay. Nobody is right all the time. The audience is invited and sometimes forced to draw their own conclusions. I think that's what keeps the show interesting.

CONAN: Let's see if we can get a caller on the line. Jack, he's calling us from Charlotte, North Carolina.

JACKIE (Caller): Hi. How are you?

CONAN: Well, thank you.

JACKIE: I just want to call and say I am a criminal defense attorney in Charlotte, and your show has made my life a lot more difficult because a lot of my clients see DNA results and drug tests results coming back in 20 minutes, and they want to know why they're sitting in jail for two or three months waiting for test results to come back. So, I've has some fun trying to explain that real life is not "Law & Order," and I can't get your results back by the end of the hour.
Mr. WATERSTON: No, and there are no commercial break either.

JACKIE: No, no. Keeps me going straight.

Mr. WATERSTON: Yeah.

CONAN: Jackie, you enjoy the program?

JACKIE: Very much so. I've been watching for years and very much - you were my 3-a.m., up-with-the-baby show when my kids were young. "Law & Order" was on a 3 a.m., and that's what I sat and watched while we had to do middle-of-the-night feeding.

Mr. WATERSTON: Yeah, we do - we help insomniacs, too.

JACKIE: Yes. Yes.

CONAN: Thanks very much for the call, Jackie.

JACKIE: Enjoyed it very much. Thank you.

CONAN: Bye-bye.

Mr. WATERSTON: Thank you.

CONAN: And let's see if we can go to Jim. And Jim is calling us from Phoenix, Arizona. Jim, are you there? Jim has apparently left us for now. And let's go instead to Boyd. Boyd, calling us from Milwaukee.

BOYD (Caller): Hi, Neal. Good afternoon. Hello, Sam.

Mr. WATERSTON: Hello.

BOYD: Sam - my - you know, I'm a big admirer of the show, and I always enjoy watching it. I guess, and maybe Neal sort of addressed this previously, do you ever see a little bit of Jack McCoy in your own personal self, in terms maybe how, if you did decide to take a path in the law, would you have done things what he did, or would you have taken a different path? And then just one additional question, was there ever - and I'm sure there's been a lot - but was there ever one particular episode you did where they touched off on an issue or on a case that really was, like - maybe struck a chord with you? Where it was, like, this was really hard for you to do, because maybe there was some personal emotion attached to it, if you don't mind me asking?

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, to answer the first - second question first, emotion does come attached. That's the job of the actor, is to come caring. And your first question was?

CONAN: How much of yourself do you see in Jack McCoy?

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, I made a fortuitous - I think it turns out to have been a fortuitous decision early on, not to feel any kind of particular affiliation between myself and the character, not the ever make objection in the script reading, saying I would never talk this way. This isn't what I think. You can't do this, because my principles are being contradicted by what Jack McCoy is doing. Jack McCoy has a life of his own, and I guess the place where I realized that I would have to that was around the death penalty, because I don't believe in it. So, that kind of became an across-the-board decision, and its served me well. He does what he does.

CONAN: Am I wrong, but did the character's opinion about the death penalty evolve as well when you started as Jack McCoy, the state of New York did not have the death penalty and then it came into force, and of course, you didn't have to prosecute death-penalty cases at the beginning, but then did later?

Mr. WATERSTON: There was a great episode that Steven Hill - when Steven Hill was the D.A., and he was a well-established opponent of the death penalty. And it now exists in New York state, and he did a show in which there was an execution, and we went to witness it. And in the same show, his wife, who had been comatose for a long time, they took her off of life support. So, the two things happened side by side. And I'll never forget the last scene where he just sat there by his wife's bed. I thought it was great.

CONAN: He is a wonderful actor.
Mr. WATERSTON: He is a wonderful actor. He is one of the best actors I've ever work with in my whole life. In the top three or four.

CONAN: In that role as a D.A., I mean, sometimes he would have, you know, three or four lines a week, and yet he had such presence in the program.

Mr. WATERSTON: He couldn't put a foot wrong. It doesn't - he's just the best natural actor.

CONAN: Boyd, thanks very much for the phone call, appreciate it.

BOYD: You betcha. Thank you, Neal.

CONAN: All right. Bye-bye. And do you do the same thing that the rest of us do - I mean, when we read some case, we open the newspaper in the morning, ah, it's...

Mr. WATERSTON: It's a "Law & Order."

CONAN: There you go.

Mr. WATERSTON: Sure I do.

CONAN: Every scene, and half the time you're right.

Mr. WATERSTON: And half the time I'm right or else we already did the show, which happens sometimes.

CONAN: Yeah, yeah. The ideas of stories ripped from the headlines.

Mr. WATERSTON: We're predicting them.

CONAN: Predicting them. Yes, indeed, but nevertheless, it's always curious to how the writers do a take on the story, because it's the straight-on approach. It seems to be part of the story or the beginning of the story, but it's never really where the story ends.

Mr. WATERSTON: But they shuffle it all up and they make crimes be attached to civil issues and all of that stuff. It's not - it's inspired by the headlines, but it's not about the lead story.

CONAN: Here's an email from Lorain - Lauren, excuse me - in Lansing, Michigan. Although I am a huge fan of your character on "Law & Order" and I followed your roles since I saw you portraying Nick Caraway in "The Great Gatsby," my very favorite role is that of Forest Bedford in "I'll Fly Away." Can you talk a little bit about how you think that show influenced television and perhaps your perspective as well?

Mr. WATERSTON: I loved that show. It greatly influenced my attitude towards television itself, because I was a little bit of a snob about television, I think, before I did that. And the response by people whose experience it reflected was so heartfelt and so genuine, and it made a link between me and them unlike anything I'd ever experienced before in my life from any play, movie or anything that I've ever done.

CONAN: And it convinced you that maybe this medium was worth working in.

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, it makes you - it reminded of me of its power, and then it was such a good-hearted show. The spirit of that show was so high-minded and generous and warm and it had a family at the heart. And it was about reconciliation. It was good, really good.

CONAN: We're talking today with Sam Waterston, D.A Jack McCoy to those of us who are fans of "Law & Order." He will stay with us to take more of your calls. So, prosecutors, lawyers, cops, if you watch the show, what they did they get right? Has it taught the rest of us the right lessons? Except the part about those DNA results coming back so quickly. Give us a call, 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. And stay with us. I am Neal Conan. It's the Talk of the Nation from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: This is Talk of the Nation. I am Neal Conan in Washington. Sam Waterston is our guest this hour. He's in town in connection with his work for Oceana, an environmental and conservation advocacy group. Of course, to many of us he is District Attorney Jack McCoy, and he stop by Studio 3A to talk about his work in "Law & Order" and the many roles he's played on stage, TV and film. If you are a lawyer, prosecutor or cop,
what does "Law & Order" teach the rest of us about what you do in real life? 800-989-8255. Email talk@npr.org. You can join the conversation on our website. Go to npr.org and click on Talk of the Nation.

"Law & Order" is hardly the only legal show on TV. Last night, "Boston Legal" broadcast its finale. And Sam Waterston, I want to play a clip from the penultimate episode last week, where lawyer Carl Sack, played by John Larroquette, argues in a civil suit that broadcast networks discriminate against older people, because they don't program to viewer over the age of 50.

(Soundbite of TV show "Boston Legal")

Mr. JOHN LARROQUETTE: (As Carl Sack) The baby boomers now all over 50 earned two trillion in annual income. That's trillion.

Unidentified Man: Madison Avenue is after the discretionary spenders.

Mr. LARROQUETTE: Yes. And people over 50 account for half of that, too. Choose your statistics, go ahead. I've got you. We've got more money. We spend more money. We watch more television, go to more movies. We buy more CDs than young people do, and yet we're the focus of less than 10 percent of the advertisers. All the networks want to do is skew younger. Kids shows for kids. But the only show unafraid to have its stars over 50 is - I can't say it would break the wall.

CONAN: A clip from David Kelly's "Boston Legal." Sam Waterston, I wonder if you wanted to take the broadcast network to a TV court for, I don't know, murdering the medium.

Mr. WATERSTON: No. And actually speaking of ageism, I think this is a sort of unique experience that I am having where I am allowed to grow older and change jobs within the same fiction. Yeah.

CONAN: And I made a mistake earlier. I think I called you the longest running character, S. Epatha Merkeson, as the lieutenant - police lieutenant has been on the show longer than you.

Mr. WATERSTON: That's absolutely right. I should have corrected you.

CONAN: And also, you had the chance to work with this evolving cast of some really wonderful actors, including for many, many years, of course, Jerry Orbach, as one of the police lieutenants.

Mr. WATERSTON: Yeah, a great friend and a wonderful man and an absolutely fabulous actor. Irreplaceable on the show, although he's been replaced, but it's like Steven. I've replaced Steven after a couple of other people in between. Nobody is going to replaced him.

CONAN: It must have been astonishing, though, when Fred Thompson came to the show to replace him and then, well, there was another person in between but

Mr. WATERSTON: But Dianne Wiest (unintelligible).

CONAN: (Unintelligible) a terrific actress in her own right. But then he goes up to run for president for the United States.

Mr. WATERSTON: I know. Who'd a thunk it?

CONAN: And so if the show goes off the air, do you get to run for president next?

Mr. WATERSTON: I suppose. It's open to anybody.

CONAN: Let's see if we can get this email in from Greg in Cazenovia in New York. For Sam Waterston, what qualities did Jerry Orbach bring to the show? What role do the personal lives of the characters play in "Law & Order"? It seems they try to intentionally distance the viewers from the personal lives of the characters.

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, I don't know that they distance people from the personal lives the characters. But they don't take them up much, that's for sure.

CONAN: There was his daughter in - a fictional daughter was sort of a running thread through many episodes.

Mr. WATERSTON: Yeah. But they didn't spend a lot of time on it. And I don't know, I think that the thing that - the essential thing the people bring, and Jerry brought it in spades, was just credibility. He seemed like a
New York cop. He had affect and the wait and the time and the sense of humor of somebody who had seen everything.

CONAN: And the timing.

Mr. WATERSTON: The good timing.

CONAN: Yeah.

Mr. WATERSTON: Too bad we never got to hear it, but he could sing.

CONAN: And dance.

Mr. WATERSTON: Oh, my Lord.

CONAN: Let's get Dale on the line. Dale calling us from Elkhart, Indiana.

DALE (Caller): Hi.

CONAN: Hi, you're on the air. Go ahead, please.

DALE: Neal, I just wanted to let you know, I am probably the only person in the nation who misses your dispatches from the minor-league ballpark.

CONAN: Well, thank you very much. That's very kind of you to say.

DALE: Mr. Waterston, I greatly admire your work. I am not a lawyer; however, my father was, and I've noticed that in several of the characters that play policemen, they kind of circumvent or bend the laws to their will in order to catch the bad guys. And that I find that happens in real life as well, and one thing I've noticed about your character is you started out as kind of a straight arrow, and you actually have become jaded to an extent as the years progress. Is that - am I correct in that?

Mr. WATERSTON: I hope I haven't become jaded, but I think from the beginning, Jack McCoy was always pushing the envelope, and that part of the deal between him and Steven was somebody controlling, somebody a little apt to shoot from the hip.

CONAN: And always looking for the loophole to see if he could...

Mr. WATERSTON: Looking for some edge.

CONAN: Edge to put somebody in...

Mr. WATERSTON: To put a bad guy away.

CONAN: Put a bad guy away, yeah. And there was a famous episode where there was a - I guess, they're all famous because they run a million times - the famous episode where the guy got drunk off the plane and you were suppressing evidence that, in fact, that he was drunk enough to have actually gotten off and eventually, halfway through the trial, you end up blowing up your own case.

Mr. WATERSTON: One of the things that the show asks people to think about it all the time is how powerful prosecutors are and to ask themselves what the limits of that ought to be and what control there is over the prosecutors' power to prosecute.

DALE: Well, I want to thank you for your time. I'll be brief, but my wife is not going to believe that I have spoken to you.

Mr. WATERSTON: Say hi.

DALE: I appreciate your work, and thank you very much for all the joy you've given us.

CONAN: And keep going to those minor-league ballgames, Dale. Here's an email from Blake in Indianapolis. Mr. Waterston, my girlfriend and I have the pleasure of attending the Indianapolis Prize, where you were one of the presenters. Is wildlife preservation your major interest? And are there charitable organizations you lend your time to?
Mr. WATERSTON: I do. Principally, three. Refugees International, I've been on the board of Refugees International for a quarter of a century, ever since I did "The Killing Fields," really. And Oceana and all the ones that I've become involved in, more recently with Clean Campaigns, which is an issue that I hope this new Congress will take up. They all have one thing in common, which is that they are a kind of litmus test for how much we care about a given issue. Refugees International is a sort of litmus test of how much we really care for the humanitarian side effects of the international situation. Oceana is a kind of litmus test for how much we care about a sustainable planet and not exhausting the Earth and having it shrug us off. And Clean Campaigns is a real test of how much we're interested in good government. So, the three of them sort of across the board or are measure of the kinds of things I care about.

CONAN: Got another caller on the line. This is Hannah, Hannah with us from Charlotte, North Carolina.

HANNAH (Caller): Hi.

CONAN: Hi. You're on the air, Hannah. Go ahead, please.

HANNAH: Well, I just wanted to let you know, I've been watching "Law & Order" since possibly I was ten. I'm 18, right? So, you know, been awhile for me, and I am thinking about going to law school, and I wanted to know on "Law & Order," exactly how much attention did y'all try to make to kind of - staying really loyal to actual, like, legal decisions or, like, actual legal language and stuff like that?

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, we try very hard. We have a lot of lawyers. We have lawyers who review what we do and judges and a police adviser. One thing I should warn you, in case you haven't been listening to the program here before us, that nothing happens that fast in real life. But apart from that, we do try to respect the facts.

HANNAH: Thanks.

CONAN: Thanks for the call, Hannah.

HANNAH: All right, bye.

CONAN: You must have grown up as I grew up watching "Perry Mason" on TV. Are there any TV lawyers who you've admired over the years, whose work you look at?

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, "The Defenders" was...

CONAN: Oh, yes, I remember that one.

Mr. WATERSTON: EG Marshall and - I liked him a lot. I didn't watch a lot of TV when I was a kid because my father was no big fan of it. Especially in the summer time, he didn't like radios, (unintelligible). Thought we should try to figure out some way to amuse ourselves. It was really - it was a good idea.

CONAN: The formula - I finally figured it out for "Perry Mason" - the character with the fewest lines in the first half hour...

Mr. WATERSTON: Will be the bad guy.

CONAN: Always the guy who did it. And Perry always won all of his cases. Anyway, Daphne in Sacramento really loves Mr. Waterston's performance. He does a great job for thing a fundamentally ethical but dogged advocate. I am a practicing attorney who really appreciates his portrayal. Thank you for your work. P.S. Some of us use "Law & Order" to practice trial evidence issue spotting skills.

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, that's a high complement.

CONAN: It is, now let's get to...

Mr. WATERSTON: And that's a great description of the character, I think.

CONAN: Janice. Janice is with us from Jacksonville, Florida.

JANICE (Caller): Hi. I appreciate you taking my call. I am a forensic psychologist and I work at the state hospital with patients who have been determined either incompetent to proceed or not guilty by reason of insanity and have been hospitalized until they're no longer manifestly dangerous. And one of our jobs is to
try to bring those who were found incompetent to proceed up to competence. And I often used examples and sometimes clips from "Law & Order," because you do such a wonderful job of portraying the law and the roles of individuals in the courtrooms to help bring - sometimes some very psychotic and a mentally disturbed individuals who can at least follow along with a dramatic TV show and help them to learn the process so that maybe they can go back and take care of their own charges.

And I just - obviously the laws change between, you know, Florida and New York and there are certain case law that doesn't pertain, but overall I found it very, very helpful in getting those who were more difficult to train to understand some of the role in the process if.

Mr. WATERSTON: I'll take this report back to the writers in case they're not listening to the program right now, which they ought to be.

CONAN: They ought to be.

JANICE: They should be, and I am honor to get a chance to talk to you. And on the personal note, I have always admired the way that you've both been able to stay actively working as an actor and participating in the projects that are important to you as far as community service and reaching out to those that are in need and those that are underserved our world and population.

Mr. WATERSTON: Though, you're nice to say so, but I think it's a big privilege just be able to point at things that matter.

CONAN: Thanks for the call, Janice.

JANICE: Thank you.

CONAN: An email from David in Goodyear, Arizona. My sister-in-law - I don't know if it's pronounced Yana or Jana - Sheldon played your wife on the terrific Oppenheimer series. Any chance this could be rebroadcast? I would love to see it again.

Mr. WATERSTON: I would, too. Write your local congressman. I'd love it.

CONAN: Have you ever lost, do you think, any parts because, you know, a movie producer said, you know, people going to ask what's Jack McCoy are doing up there?

Mr. WATERSTON: I have no idea. You never find out about what you don't get.

CONAN: Yeah.

Mr. WATERSTON: Which is probably a blessing.

CONAN: It is probably, but you don't fear that you've been typecast as New York district attorney?

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, somebody said once that I - did I fear being typecast is Lincoln? And I thought if I'm going to be typecast as Lincoln that would not be such a bad fate. Typecasting is terrible.

CONAN: It could be a growth industry, too. We're talking, of course, with Sam Waterston. You recognized the voice. He plays Jack McCoy on "Law & Order." And as we've heard, has distinguished himself with roles on stage television and movies as well. You're listening to Talk of the Nation from NPR News. And let's get Theresa on the line, Theresa calling us from St. Louis in Missouri.

THERESA (Caller): Hi. I'm, number one, a huge, huge, huge fan. I've been watching the show for years.

Mr. WATERSTON: This is good.

THERESA: But my question is this, you know, I love your ADAs over the years and my favorite - I'm sorry - my favorite has always been Angie Harmon's character. And of course, I'm drawing a blank now on names, but my question is, which one of your ADAs do you think fit Jack McCoy's character better? My issue - well, always for Angie Harmon character was the passion and the fierceness. And she was just - she fit the passion of Jack McCoy's character for the law and for justice, I think, more than any of the rests of them ever have. And I'm just curious as to what your opinion is.

Mr. WATERSTON: I guess I would say that you're welcome to your opinion. But I love them all equally.
THERESA: Oh, OK.

Mr. WATERSTON: I - because I have to go back to New York after this.

THERESA: Oh, OK. I got you.

CONAN: That's another thing - and thanks very much for the call, Theresa - this program and its brethren have provided a lot of work for a huge number of New York actors.

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, actually, the only thing that I really miss about my being promoted is that I no longer see these really extraordinary people that come in, except - or much more rarely do I see...

CONAN: Because all of your scene are with District (unintelligible).

Mr. WATERSTON: Because the big (unintelligible) in the courtroom and in the conference room. I don't participate in the way I used to. And you see these unbelievable forces; week after week after week under the terrific pressure of time and people come in and stand and deliver. It's just wonderful.

CONAN: And so, now you display to a very much smaller cast of characters pretty much the DA.

Mr. WATERSTON: Yeah. I see - I'm in the office.

CONAN: And you have a successor who - now you're trying to reign in. You're the wise gray head.

Mr. WATERSTON: Well, I don't know. I think one of the things that made this interesting is that they've left Jack's character, and they've given a new job, and there are some conflicts between impulses of the character and the nature of the job that make life interesting and interesting for me as an actor.

CONAN: Anne wrote this email. As the previous caller noted your portrayal, Nick Carraway is as dear the role of Jack McCoy is compelling and hot, I might add, though I would never say so. By the way, hundreds of teens also loved you as Nick Carraway, or students watched Gatsby every year after we read the novel and there are many high-school girls pining after the deep and lonely Nick Carraway. Thank you for your work. My husband and I frequently invoke the spirit of John McCoy in the course of life's injustices.

Mr. WATERSTON: Very nice.

CONAN: What lessons do you think the program is going to leave us with after all of these years, all of those wonderful hours of television?

Mr. WATERSTON: I don't know. I always think that there's - its closest similarity is to "MASH," that you hear the theme song, and you know there's a trouble coming, and then you see a bunch of descent people trying to do the best they can in an impossible chaotic and violent situation. It's the people at work. So, I think that the - I think that probably what would be left is a respectful work especially for work in the law.

CONAN: And these people, though, as you say, we don't get that many glimpses into their personal lives, but you do see a lot of them at work. And we see them a lot and we do get those glimpses and over the years, we've come to know Jack pretty well. I think we like him.

Mr. WATERSTON: Oh, that's nice of you. Thank you.

CONAN: And we appreciate your time today.

Mr. WATERSTON: Thanks.

CONAN: We have been talking with Sam Waterston, the actor, the star of "Law & Order," now in its nineteenth season. He was, of course, first the assistant district attorney. Now, he is the district attorney of the New York County, and running for reelection, I think. Aren't you?

Mr. WATERSTON: I am, yeah.

CONAN: Yeah, well, I don't know if you're going to get the votes. We'll have to see.

Mr. WATERSTON: I don't know.
CONAN: We'll have to get your opponent on and give him equal time.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: Coming up next, we're going to talk with Bill Carter of the New York Times who broke up a pretty interesting TV story about the fact that Jay Leno is going to get a strip of - a talk show at 10 o'clock on NBC Monday through Friday. So, "Law & Order" may be migrating to a little earlier in the evening. We'll find out about that. Stay with us. I'm Neal Conan. It's the Talk of the Nation from NPR News.