

Forensic Shift

WITH **WILLIAM PETERSEN'S** DEPARTURE, *CSI* TRANSITIONS INTO A NEW ERA WITH **LAURENCE FISHBURNE**

★ In real life, Las Vegas' crime lab has a very high burnout rate. "It's a very difficult, intense job," *CSI* showrunner Carol Mendelsohn explains. And now, she confirms, the turnover phenomenon is about to touch her fictional crime lab as well, when *CSI* star William Petersen makes his exit from the show's regular cast in this season's 10th episode, airing in early 2009.

At the end of last season, the show's eighth, Mendelsohn and her fellow executive producer, Naren Shankar, began working with the actor to devise the perfect transition for a character whom Shankar calls "an icon, one of those classically memorable television characters." And so, after the death of Gary Dourdan's Warrick in this season's premiere, Grissom started to unravel. The death was a catalyst, the writers explain, that begins a voyage of self-discovery for a puzzle-loving crime solver who has always approached his cases with emotion at arm's length. Now this season, the writers note, the tragedies start getting to Grissom. "He feels like he's changing inside, but isn't sure why, or what the ramifications are going to be," Shankar says.

With Grissom sidetracked by self-discovery, the *CSI* team will be joined in the season's ninth episode by new character Ray Langston, a research pathologist and professor. To fill the important role, *CSI* producers tapped into Hollywood's A-list, ultimately landing an actor they refer to as their "dream choice," Laurence Fishburne. Nicknamed, appropriately, "The Professor," Langston joins the team not at the top but as a low-level CSI-1 investigator. "We're not a show that blows things up, so the quality we were looking for in our newest cast member was a deep intelligence," Shankar explains. "When you look at Fishburne's work, he's always brought that sensibility to his material. He's a perfect fit for *CSI*."

Fresh from a Broadway run in George Stevens Jr.'s one-man play *Thurgood*, Fishburne says he's in great shape for the grind of series television, and



Laurence Fishburne is joining the *CSI* cast this season, playing a new role as a research pathologist and professor.

excited to join a show already in motion. "The thing for me to remember is not to mistake my presence for the event," the actor explains. "The event is *CSI* the show. Everyone has a responsibility to bring their unique talents and gifts to it, and that's what I'm going to do. I'm coming to work with people who are wonderful and have made great television for nine years—that's a gift. So all I can say is, I'm excited and I'm ready to play."

In a season-long story arc, the *CSI* team will start connecting seemingly unrelated crimes to realize that a spreading wave of violence, or "murder posse," is plaguing Las Vegas, contributing to Grissom's darkening worldview and leading to his departure. Unlike on some past shows that have undergone cast changes, "we're not going to forget the DNA of the show," Shankar stresses. "Some shows transition and end up going from being a procedural to a soap opera. That's not going to happen here."

And unlike Liev Schreiber's agent Michael Keppler, shockingly killed off after only four episodes in '07, Grissom will still be out there. So don't be surprised to see him again someday. "Billy has always said that if a storyline needs him creatively, he'll come back," Mendelsohn says, adding that "Billy will continue to be an executive producer until, as he says, the last light is turned off on *CSI*." — *Jim Colucci*

PRODUCERS TAPPED INTO HOLLYWOOD'S A-LIST TO FILL THE IMPORTANT ROLE. THEY ULTIMATELY LANDED AN ACTOR THEY CONSIDER THEIR "DREAM CHOICE."

CSI AIRS THURSDAYS
AT 9 P.M. ET/PT ON CBS.