

ESCAPE INTO ENTERTAINMENT

watch!

WELCOME
BACK
POTTER:
Daniel
Radcliffe's
New Spell

DAYTIME'S
BEST
**BAD
BOY**

SNOW JOKE:
MAKE
COLD
HOT
THIS
WINTER

THE
RIGHT BITE:
VAMPIRE
DIARIES'
IT GIRL
**NINA
DOBREV**

—THE—
Good
LIFE

The Good Wife's **MATT CZUCHRY**
and **ARCHIE PANJABI** sizzle in Paris

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **ELLEN VON UNWERTH**
AT LE MEURICE

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icons

A TOAST TO TELEVISION'S BEST

SHIRLEY, YOU JEST!

Producers recall Leslie Nielsen's path to *Naked Gun* fame

You could point out Leslie Nielsen as that guy from the TV soap *Peyton Place* or the western *The Virginian*. You could refer to him as the captain from the film *The Poseidon Adventure*. Just whatever you do, don't call him Shirley.

By the time he was cast in the seminal 1980 comedy *Airplane!* as a deadpan doctor spouting some of the silver screen's silliest-ever lines, Nielsen had spent decades in Hollywood. "He was a veteran of hundreds of episodic television appearances and yet he wasn't really a 'name,'" says David Zucker, who with his brother Jerry and friend Jim Abrahams wrote and produced the film.

Tall and with a stentorian voice, Nielsen had played mostly serious parts. But with his riotous roles in both *Airplane!* and its producers' first TV venture, the 1982 comedy *Police Squad* (see story, page 104), "it became obvious not just to us but to everyone that this guy was some kind of comedic genius," Zucker says.

After Nielsen's death in 2010 at age 84, Abrahams says he was reminded just how strong was the silver-haired actor's comedic legacy. "I was talking to a friend who said that when he heard Leslie had passed away, his first reaction was to smile," the producer explains. "Because when you hear his name, you think of all the funny stuff he did. I think Leslie would be pleased to know that."

— Jim Colucci

FRANKLY SPEAKING

Read more about
Leslie Nielsen
and *Police Squad*
on the next page.

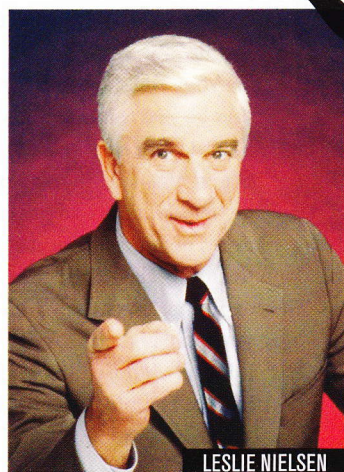




In the *Police Squad* pilot, Detective Frank Drebin (Leslie Nielsen) and Capt. Ed Hocken (Alan North) investigate how a bank employee (Kathryn Leigh Scott) ended up shooting a would-be robber.

HIT SQUAD

Police Squad flopped 30 years ago, but its star and creators had the last laugh



LESLIE NIELSEN

In the spring of 1982, movie producers Jim Abrahams and brothers Jerry and David Zucker decided to bring their successful brand of big-screen parody to television. After the big box office of their film *Airplane!* two years earlier, the trio cast one of that film's breakout stars, Leslie Nielsen, as the lead of their hotly anticipated new half-hour comedy. And sure enough, *Police Squad* turned out to be ... a pretty resounding failure, actually. Until six years later, when it ended up spawning one of Hollywood's most triumphant comeback stories.

EVERETT COLLECTION

SHADES OF GRAY

The three began to hone their unique style of humor by making short films in the Zucker family basement in Milwaukee. After college, they opened the comedy showroom Kentucky Fried Theater in Madison, and eventually relocated to Los Angeles. On stage, the partners combined showings of their short films with live action sketches. The gags they devised—often involving stern authority figures like politicians or newsmen, clueless to the chaos breaking out around them—would show up in their later work, including their first film, 1977's *Kentucky Fried Movie*.

"During the 1950s and early '60s, every show or movie was literally and figuratively in black and white," says Abrahams. "There were good guys and there were bad guys, with no shades of gray. In *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, families had rules and everybody obeyed. But what Dave and Jerry and I had in common was this sense that those shows didn't really reflect real life. We

realized, 'You don't really have to take this stuff seriously.'"

In their work, the three parodied the self-serious films and shows of their formative years. They acquired the rights to the 1957 suspense film *Zero Hour* and, by making fun of it scene by scene, turned it into *Airplane!*

ended with the cops all smiling in a freeze frame—in at least one instance, allowing the criminal to steal the key to his handcuffs and escape.

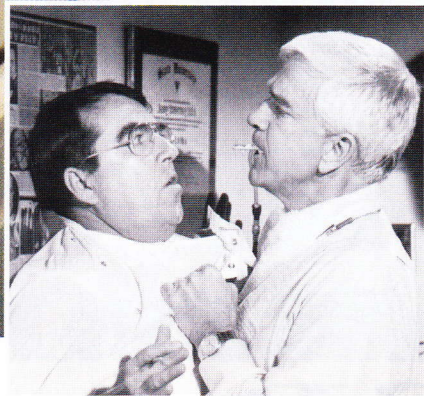
TV SO GOOD, YOU ACTUALLY HAVE TO WATCH IT

Police Squad's plethora of puns and pratfalls filled every corner of the screen—and ironically may have doomed the show in the ratings. In the early '80s, David Zucker theorizes, TVs were too small to fully convey the show's magnificent madness. The series was canceled after its initial six-episode run; network executives surmised that *Police Squad* was so detailed, audiences disliked having to watch the show so closely.

As the show ended its run, "we actually had mixed emotions," Abrahams remembers. Whereas *Airplane!* had been written and then refined over years, TV had a demanding weekly production schedule. "With *Police Squad*, we were in over our heads, and ended up accepting jokes in Weeks 5 and 6 that we wouldn't have accepted in Week 1," he says.

Nielsen, however, wished Drebin could stay on the beat, and continued to nudge the producers to think about bringing the concept to the big screen. Finally in 1988, the actor got his wish, as Paramount greenlit what turned out to be a high-grossing movie trilogy. "When [the retitled] *Naked Gun* was a hit, it was very vindicating that we could say that from our failed TV series came these hit movies," Zucker remembers. "I can't think of any other time that has happened, or was even attempted."

Today, with *Police Squad* available on DVD from CBS' vast library and viewable on big flat screens, audiences can fully appreciate a series that was in many ways ahead of its time. "Along with *Airplane!* and [their 1984 spy spoof] *Top Secret!*, *Police Squad* has somehow lingered," says Abrahams. "So I guess whatever those jokes were, they had an enduring quality. And each of the three of us feels lucky when we hear that the show stays with people." — *Jim Colucci*



The Zuckers named an orthodontist character Robert Zubatsky (Terrance Bensor) after a neighbor in Milwaukee.

ENTER FRANK DREBIN

For their first foray into TV, they remembered the hard-boiled 1957–60 Lee Marvin cop drama *M Squad*, tracked down copies of six episodes and handed them off to their *Police Squad* writers to spoof. As a direct nod to earlier detective programs like CBS' *Barnaby Jones*, where an announcer would herald the week's guest star, *Police Squad* did the same—except the latter show made sure to violently rub out said big-name guest within the opening credits. Florence Henderson, for example, died in a hail of bullets in her kitchen while frying up some Wesson chicken.

Police Squad trafficked in slapstick and silly wordplay, as it morphed Marvin's macho Detective Frank Ballinger into Nielsen's clumsy Detective Frank Drebin. Zucker, Abrahams and Zucker stocked the show with the sight and sound gags that have always been their hallmark: Voiceovers wouldn't match the words on screen. And each of *Police Squad's* six episodes

