

‘JUST ONE MORE THING...’

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

He wore a crumpled raincoat every day — never mind the fact that it rains so rarely in Los Angeles. He constantly smoked a cigar and was always rummaging through his pockets for a pencil or for notes he had written to himself.

His way of talking — and, evidently, thinking — was not exactly linear. In fact, he could be downright annoying. Which paid off, from time to time, when murderers, exasperated by his mannerisms, accidentally revealed their crimes.

But Los Angeles Police homicide detective Lt. Columbo established a perfect record of solving unsolvable crimes. “Columbo,” one-third of the rotating NBC Mystery Movie series, debuted on Sept. 15, 1971 — 55 years ago.

THE ORIGINS OF TV’S MOST CONFOUNDING DETECTIVE

Richard Levinson and William Link first met on the first day of junior high school in 1946 in Philadelphia. They discovered they were both huge fans of Ellery Queen mysteries and loved various types of puzzles that challenged their mental abilities.

The two became fast friends and lifelong writing partners, starting with short stories and radio programs and, eventually, TV scripts.

They decided to create murder mysteries that began with the crime itself. The story would then be the inverse of a standard murder mystery:

less of a “whodunnit” and more of a “howcatchem.” They said they were partially inspired by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment” character Porfiry Petrovich and G.K. Chesterton’s Father Brown mysteries.

Levinson and Link wrote a short story, “May I Come In?” that was published as “Dear Corpus Delicti” in the March 1960 issue of Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine. The detective’s name in that original story was Fisher.

They were then hired to adapt their story into a TV script for the anthology series “The Chevy Mystery Show”

that aired on July 31, 1960. By this time, the detective’s name was Columbo — still, with no first name — and played by Bert Freed.

Levinson and Link then adapted their story yet again into a stage play they called “Prescription: Murder” that premiered in San Francisco on Jan. 2, 1962. Thomas Mitchell opened the run as Columbo but the 70-year-old actor died of cancer while the production was on tour.

A few years later, NBC asked Levinson and Link for a two-hour version of their story as a TV movie. The network

wanted Bing Crosby to portray a smooth, refined Columbo, but Crosby declined, saying the work would take too much time away from his golf game. NBC’s second choice, Lee J. Cobb, also declined.

Peter Falk — at 39, much younger than the character Levinson and Link had envisioned — was hired to play the part.

“Columbo” episodes rotated with episodes of “McCloud” starring Dennis Weaver and “McMillan & Wife” starring Rock Hudson and Susan Saint James on “NBC Mystery Movie.”

COLUMBO’S LIFETIME

“Columbo” lasted seven seasons on NBC. After an 11-year hiatus, it returned to ABC for another three seasons plus specials.

1971-72 SEASON 1 7 episodes 10 Emmy nominations 4 wins	1972-73 SEASON 2 8 episodes 5 Emmy nominations	1973-74 SEASON 3 8 episodes 3 Emmy nominations 2 wins	1974-75 SEASON 4 6 episodes 5 Emmy nominations 3 wins	1975-76 SEASON 5 6 episodes 2 Emmy nominations 1 win	1976-77 SEASON 6 3 episodes 2 Emmy nominations	1977-78 SEASON 7 5 episodes 3 Emmy nominations	1989 SEASON 8 4 episodes	1989-90 SEASON 9 6 episodes	1990-2003 SEASON 10 and SPECIALS 14 episodes
BROADCAST BY NBC							BROADCAST BY ABC		

‘I DIDN’T COME TO ASK ANY MORE QUESTIONS. I CAME TO ARREST YOU.’

Lt. Columbo was first portrayed on TV in 1960, on the anthology TV series “The Chevy Mystery Show.” While actor Bert Freed portrayed Columbo’s chomping on a cigar and his way of solving a mystery piece-by-piece, the character was decidedly less annoying and relatively well-dressed. The rumpled look and behavior would come later.



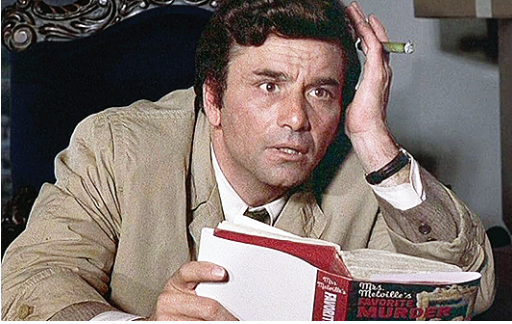
Falk’s uneven gaze was caused by losing his right eye to cancer at age 3. A movie executive once rejected Falk for a role, saying, “For the same price, I could get an actor with two eyes.” Levinson and Link were deliberate in never revealing Columbo’s first name. When asked in one episode if he had a first name, Columbo said, “I do, but usually only my wife uses it.”

NBC asked Levinson and Link to adapt “Prescription: Murder” into a two-hour TV movie that aired on Feb. 20, 1968. The success of that movie caused the network to spring for a pilot episode that was broadcast March 1, 1971. After Crosby turned down the role, Falk saw a copy of the script, called Link and told him he’d “kill to play that cop.”



When it renewed the show for a second season, NBC asked Levinson and Link to give Columbo a sidekick — a young police trainee, perhaps. Instead, they decided to have Columbo adopt a dog. Falk, too, resisted the idea until he saw the lethargic, drooling basset hound that had been rescued from a local pound. Columbo named the dog “Dog,” of course.

Levinson and Link brought in writer Steven Bochco — who’d later create “Hill Street Blues” — to write the first episode, “Murder By the Book.” They advised Bochco to write for Falk and to trust him to use his instincts. The episode would win an Emmy for Best Writing. It was directed by Steven Spielberg — at the start of his own career and just 25 years old.



A list of actors playing murder victims and murderers on “Columbo” reads like a list of who’s who on 1970s television: Dick Van Dyke, George Hamilton, William Shatner, Robert Culp and Patrick McGeehan each appeared four times and Jack Cassidy played three different characters. Martin Landau played identical twins in one episode.

As the series took shape, Falk began wearing a shabby raincoat from his closet at home that he had bought for \$15. He also expanded on the “just one more thing” in the scripts and began ad-libbing additional quirks into his performance — in part to frustrate and annoy his co-stars to help generate an authentic “get to the point” moment.



ABC broadcast “Columbo” specials sporadically through the 1990s and 2000s. In 2007, Falk announced he had chosen a script for one final episode. Before production could begin, however, Falk was diagnosed with dementia. Within two years, he reportedly couldn’t even remember playing the character. Falk died in 2011 at age 83.