

= Zebras ( Law & Order : Special Victims Unit ) =

" Zebras " is the twenty @-@ second episode and season finale of the tenth season of the police procedural television series Law & Order : Special Victims Unit , and the show 's 224th episode overall . It originally aired on the National Broadcasting Company ( NBC ) in the United States on June 2 , 2009 . In the episode , an open @-@ and @-@ shut case against a mentally disturbed murderer , played by Nick Stahl , is blown when a forensics technician makes a technical error . As Elliot and Olivia investigate additional murders believed to be the work of the same killer , they uncover a plot within their own department .

The episode was written by Amanda Green and Daniel Truly , and directed by Peter Leto . It was the final appearance of Mike Doyle , who had played forensics technician Ryan O 'Halloran since 2003 and appeared on the show more than 50 times ; the character was killed by fellow technician Dale Stuckey ( Noel Fisher ) as part of a surprise twist conceived by executive producer and showrunner Neal Baer . " Zebras " also included guest appearances by Kelly Bishop , Judith Light and Carol Kane as Gwen Munch , the conspiracy theorist ex @-@ wife of Detective John Munch ; Kane had previously played the same role opposite actor Richard Belzer in a 1997 episode of Homicide : Life on the Street .

According to Nielsen ratings , " Zebras " was watched by 11 @.@ 34 million viewers , making it the highest @-@ rated show of the night and the series ' most watched episode in more than a year . The episode received higher ratings than Inside the Obama White House , a one @-@ hour special documenting one day in the White House of U.S. President Barack Obama , which aired earlier in the evening on NBC and was seen by 9 @.@ 1 million viewers .

= = Plot = =

A father and daughter rollerblading in Central Park stumble across the body of a woman with several lacerations hidden in a bush . Munch ( Richard Belzer ) and Fin ( Ice @-@ T ) learn Peter Harrison ( Nick Stahl ) , who was performing community service for a prior crime against a woman , left work early with a cut thumb around the time of the murder . Stabler ( Christopher Meloni ) and Benson ( Mariska Hargitay ) question Harrison , who spouts wild conspiracy theories about the police . During an interrogation , Harrison suggests he killed the woman in Central Park for taking photos of him before his attorney , Julia Zimmer ( Kelly Bishop ) , stops the questioning . Munch and Fin find a bloody knife during a search of Harrison 's apartment and forensics technician Ryan O 'Halloran ( Mike Doyle ) confirms the DNA matches the victim , resulting in an open @-@ and @-@ shut case against Harrison . However , Zimmer finds a technical error by forensics technician Dale Stuckey ( Noel Fisher ) in the evidence paperwork . Though Stuckey insists he made no mistake , Judge Elizabeth Donnelly ( Judith Light ) is forced to set Harrison free , and makes a harsh rebuke against Stuckey .

Shortly afterward , another woman is found murdered at Coney Island in a similar manner ; Stuckey finds a soda can with a bloody fingerprint on it , later confirmed to be Harrison 's . The police learn Harrison disclosed his hiding place to a friend on a conspiracy theorist website ; Munch recognizes the friend as his ex @-@ wife Gwen ( Carol Kane ) , whom he convinces to reveal Harrison 's location . After Harrison evades capture , Stabler and Benson ask for help from Zimmer , who said she has been taking care of Harrison since he lost his parents as a child . An unstable Harrison visits Zimmer , who calls Stabler and Benson to arrest him . As they are about to return to the precinct , Zimmer gets locked into her car and a poisonous gas is released into the air ; Stabler breaks her car window , but is unable to save her in time .

Later , Judge Donnelly is nearly killed when she sits on a needle filled with potassium chloride at her home ; she is saved when Stabler and Benson rush her to the hospital . O 'Halloran tells Stabler and Benson that a mosquito sucked the blood from the killer as he or she was rigging Zimmer 's car , and that the DNA from the blood will likely implicate Harrison . As the DNA is later being processed , however , O 'Halloran is stabbed and killed by someone in the forensics lab . Stabler arrives and sees on the computer screen that the DNA matches Stuckey just before Stuckey knocks him out

from behind . Stuckey then answers Elliot 's phone when Benson calls to say that Stabler went out for lunch and forgot his phone . He then ties Stabler to a chair and starts torturing him . Stuckey admits he killed the woman at Coney Island in order to frame Harrison , and that he attacked Zimmer and Donnelly for embarrassing him . Benson arrives and is held at gunpoint by Stuckey , but she convinces Stuckey that she , too , hates Stabler and is in love with Stuckey . While Benson kisses Stuckey to distract him , Stabler kicks him from behind , allowing Benson to knock Stuckey out and free Stabler . When Stabler asks how Benson knew he was in trouble , Benson says that Stuckey told her he went out for sushi , which she knows that he hates .

= = Production = =

" Zebras " was written by Amanda Green and Daniel Truly , and directed by Peter Leto . The surprise twist in the episode , in which forensics technician Ryan O 'Halloran is killed by fellow technician Dale Stuckey , was conceived by Neal Baer , the series executive producer and showrunner . Baer said the decision to kill the character in the story " just came to [ him ] one day " and thought that " this may be a really interesting way to bring [ the ] cast together and deal with this story point " . In particular , Baer said he wanted to kill a long @-@ recurring character so the show could " explore characters ' reactions to a death in an interesting way " . Mike Doyle , the actor who played O 'Halloran , was notified about the decision by Baer in a phone call a few weeks before the episode was filmed in May 2009 . Baer said Doyle and the rest of the cast took the news well because , in his words , " I think everybody knew that somebody was going , so they weren 't shocked . " During a May 2009 interview , Baer hinted at the twist by telling media outlets that the season finale would include a surprise ending : " One of our own is murdered . "

" Zebras " was the final episode for Doyle , who had been a recurring character since 2003 and had made more than 50 appearances on the show . The episode also marked the seventh on @-@ screen death for the actor , who had been killed in several films and television episodes , including on the HBO series Oz . Christopher Meloni , who also appeared on Oz , comforted Doyle about his character 's death by saying , " At least you 're not getting gang @-@ raped " , a reference to Doyle 's death scene from that show . The climax scene of " Zebras " , in which Dale Stuckey threatens Elliot Stabler as Olivia Benson tries to talk him down , was filmed on May 7 , 2009 , in a warehouse in North Bergen , New Jersey . A crew member shouted " dead man walking ! " to Doyle as he arrived on the set . The knife protruding from Doyle was staged by strapping to his chest a metal plate with a center slot holding the retractable blade of the fake knife .

Carol Kane played Gwen Munch , Detective John Munch 's conspiracy theorist ex @-@ wife . Kane played the same part alongside actor Richard Belzer in 1997 on the series Homicide : Life on the Street , which also starred Belzer as John Munch .

= = Reception = =

= = = Ratings = = =

The episode was watched by 11 @.@ 3 million viewers , making it the highest rated show of the night . It was the most watched episode of Law & Order : Special Victims Unit in more than a year , and was about two million viewers over its season average . It captured more viewers than the first one @-@ hour episode of Inside the Obama White House , NBC 's two @-@ part special documenting one day in the White House of U.S. President Barack Obama ; the show , which aired at 9 p.m. , one hour before " Zebras " , was seen by 9 @.@ 1 million viewers , the most of its time @-@ slot . The two shows made NBC , which had been experiencing poor ratings in recent years , the highest @-@ watched network for the fourth night in a row . " Zebras " received a 3 @.@ 5 rating / 9 % share among viewers aged between 18 and 49 , and a 2 @.@ 6 rating / 8 % share among viewers between 18 and 34 . E ! writer Joel Ryan , however , noted that Law & Order : Special Victims Unit had little competition other than re @-@ runs because it aired during the

summer season .

= = = Critical response = = =

Ken Tucker of Entertainment Weekly called the death of O 'Halloran and the twist involving Stuckey " very welcome , because they added a fresh element of uncertainty to a show that can be predictable " . Tucker also praised the return of Kelly Bishop as an attorney . In writing of the episode , Nick Zaino of TV Squad said : " Overall , a well @-@ paced , well @-@ written episode , and a whole lot of creepy fun " , and said the scenes with Kane and Belzer were " laugh @-@ out @-@ loud funny " .