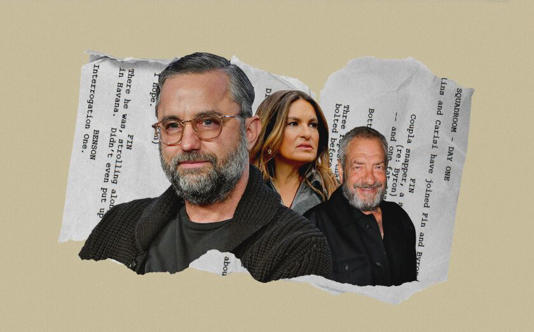
# [**'Law & Order: SVU' showrunner accused of mistreating women, support staff on multiple shows**](https://www.msn.com/en-us/tv/news/law-26-order-svu-showrunner-accused-of-mistreating-women-support-staff-on-multiple-shows/ar-AA1534t0)

Story by Stacy Perman • 11h ago

In June, David Graziano was given the keys to one of the most valuable fiefdoms in television when he was named showrunner of “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” (“SVU” among fans) ahead of the NBC drama’s record-setting 24th season.



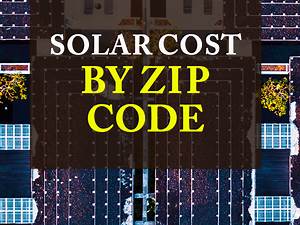
(Illustration by the Los Angeles Times; Getty Images; NBC)© (Illustration by the Los Angeles Times; Getty Images; NBC)

Graziano, known as “Graz” to friends and colleagues, is a prominent television writer and producer with a lengthy string of credits to his name including stints on the recent adaptation of Neil Gaiman's “American Gods” on Starz and the Amazon Original “Tom Clancy’s Jack Ryan.”

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None of his previous shows, however, can claim “SVU’s” enduring popularity — it is the longest-running prime-time live-action series in history, shown in 250 territories worldwide.

In September, the series kicked off its new season with a bang: a three-hour crossover “event” with the trio of currently airing "Law & Order" dramas. The special was the most watched on network television, demonstrating how strongly "SVU" still connects with loyal viewers who remain invested in this “elite squad" of NYPD detectives.

But trouble was brewing behind the scenes.

Not long after Graziano took the helm of “SVU,” the show’s script coordinator — who works closely with the show's writers — quit.

After the position was posted on a listserv that circulates widely among script coordinators, it triggered warnings from other individuals who had previously worked with Graziano.

“The new showrunner, David Graziano, is a very unprofessional, ego-centric, and immature man. I have been in this industry a long time, and I have never experienced such pure, white-male misogyny,” wrote Haley Cameron, the script coordinator who had exited the show.



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Under Graziano, the production was “an absolute unorganized nightmare," she continued, cautioning, “I urge you — especially women — to think twice before putting yourself in a position that could end as badly as mine did.”

Cameron did not detail the conduct that she found to be unprofessional in her listserv remarks. She declined to comment to The Times.

In a statement provided by his spokesperson, Alafair Hall, Graziano said that Cameron worked for less than a month on the show in an "entry level position" and that her claims about him were "false" and undermined by the fact she was "about to be fired" over concerns he had raised about her "unprofessional" job performance — including making unapproved script changes.

"The implication that Mr. Graziano created a hostile work environment, or is sexist, inappropriate and unprofessional is false," Hall said.

A source close to NBCUniversal said it investigated Cameron's claims and the studio found that Graziano was not operating outside of professional expectations.

Graziano, whose conduct has been called into question by a number of his former colleagues, was placed in charge of a series whose subject matter routinely deals with sexual and domestic violence, as well as abuse of power.

The allegations against Graziano occurred in the wake of the #MeToo movement, which sparked a series of anti-harassment laws and workplace policies intended to weed out the kind of abusive behaviors that dethroned the likes of mega producer Scott Rudin and celebrity showrunner Joss Whedon.

Although it can be difficult to disentangle personality clashes and conflicting claims in the workplace, Cameron's assessment of Graziano was echoed by more than a dozen individuals who have worked with him previously on several other shows. They described him variously as a volatile and bullying boss who rage-fired underlings, left staffers in tears and made inappropriate and demeaning comments toward women, support staff and people of color. Many spoke to The Times on condition of anonymity for fear of personal or professional repercussions.

Hall said Graziano was "proud of his leadership skills on SVU," adding that there has been no turnover in the production offices on the show since he took over almost six months ago.

Julie Martin, an executive producer and writer on "SVU," did not respond to a request for comment.

The complaints about Graziano highlight concerns among victims’ advocates that some showrunners wield too much unchecked power as they move from show to show, and that much work remains when it comes to Hollywood’s commitment to equality, inclusion and safety in the workplace.

As long as Hollywood has existed, bullying has been ingrained in the culture. But Graziano's conduct stood out, according to many of those who worked for him.

“Bullying in this business is a matter of degrees. There is a problem in this business,” said one of the television writers who worked with Graziano in the mid-2000s and has gone on to work on other shows.

During its time on the air, “SVU” has helped transform the national conversation around sexual assault and abuse. “We’ve been doing #MeToo for 20 years,” "Law & Order" creator [Dick Wolf told The Times in 2018](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-ca-st-law-order-special-victims-unit-season-twenty-me-too-20180921-story.html) as the show headed into its 20th season, calling actress Mariska Hargitay "the [mother of #MeToo.”](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-ca-st-law-order-special-victims-unit-season-twenty-me-too-20180921-story.html)

Off screen, Hargitay, who plays Det. Olivia Benson and is an executive producer on the series, has long championed victims. She founded the Joyful Heart Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to changing society’s response to sexual violence and supporting survivors. In 2017, she produced  [“I Am Evidence,”](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-mariska-hargitay-hbo-20180407-story.html) a documentary about the rape kit backlog.

Hargitay did not respond to a request for comment.

The news that Graziano was tapped to run “SVU” left several stunned.

When Amy Hartman, who worked as a script coordinator under Graziano on the 2021 drama “Coyote,” saw the listserv, she was shocked. Adding her voice to the growing thread, she wrote, “Graz is super toxic and I’ve never run from a job so fast in my life as I did when I SC’ed for him. Stay away.”

“Every day I was in fight or flight,” was how she described her time with the showrunner to The Times. “I was completely floored that he was working again and working on that show.”

In his statement, Graziano acknowledged that he was "a difficult person to work" with during the production of “Coyote,” citing pain he endured as a result of three collapsed discs in his neck.

But he denied making any inappropriate comments about women or people of color, adding that any remarks he made about women's bodies or other sensitive topics were always in the context of creating a story, characters or dialogues.

“Though it would be easy and convenient, I refuse to blame some past behavior on the abuse I suffered as a child at the hands of a Catholic priest, as well as at home," Graziano said in the statement. "Anyone who has worked in a writers’ room will know it is a matter of course to draw upon and use your own experience for the good of the show. Unfortunately, I have a lot to draw from — and with it comes a great deal of emotion, pain and deeply felt personal history. All any of us can do is evolve and grow. Real change is hard, and I continue to work on myself daily.”

"Coyote" producer Sony Pictures Television, NBC, Universal Studio Group and Wolf Entertainment declined to comment.

A source close to Universal Television, the NBCUniversal studio that produces "SVU" in association with Wolf Entertainment, said a request had been made to the studio's human resources department to replace Cameron. However, before the studio could weigh in, the job was posted while the script coordinator was still employed — which the HR department acknowledged was an "embarrassing" mistake, according to a copy of a July 19 email viewed by The Times.

After Cameron left, she sent an email to HR expressing her concerns regarding Graziano; around the same time, her comments appeared on the listserv.



David Graziano was named showrunner of "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" in June. He previously was the showrunner of the 2021 drama "Coyote." (Chris Pizzello / Invision / Associated Press)© (Chris Pizzello / Invision / Associated Press)

David Graziano, 50, grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y. He gained early notice in 1998, when his 10-minute play “Acorn,” a romance conducted over a backyard clothesline, was performed at the Humana Festival in Louisville, Ky.

Graziano has said that he has an affinity for television procedurals and crime shows. After he took the "SVU" job, he said in an interview for the "[Today" show’s website](https://www.today.com/today/amp/rcna43579) that he had “always been obsessed with well-wrought cop shows,” and “SVU” in particular. He also said that he'd written a script for the series when he was a student at NYU. In a display of youthful moxie, he confessed, he'd even called the show’s production offices, pretending to be the actor Michael Madsen, and sent in his script.

The script went nowhere, but Graziano went on to produce and write for a mix of network and cable series, largely hourlong dramas and procedurals, including “Southland,” on TNT in 2010.

When Graziano was tapped as "SVU's" showrunner, the studio received positive feedback from colleagues who had worked with him previously and was not made aware of any claims or issues concerning Graziano arising from his earlier productions, according to the studio insider.

“SVU” is the highest-profile, biggest hit to land on Graziano’s resume.

The show, which spun out of the original “Law & Order” in 1999, is now the crown jewel in the Wolf Entertainment empire, which encompasses nine hours of network prime time on CBS and NBC.

At a time of diminishing ratings on the networks, “SVU” has reliably turned in respectable, moneymaking numbers. Last season, it drew an average of 6.8 million viewers. In the vital 18-to-49 age demographic among advertisers, the series tied with "Grey’s Anatomy” for 11th place, according to Nielsen.

People who know Graziano described him as a charming but complicated and unpredictable figure, a talented writer who was also quick to react in anger to any perceived slight. Several individuals who have worked with him said that he portrayed himself to them as someone not to be trifled with.

“He’s very charismatic and a great storyteller and pitcher, which was very disarming to me and other writers," said one former colleague. "There’s a lot to admire about him as a writer,” but in order to work with him, they said, one had to “build up armor and really protect yourself emotionally.”

Graziano liked to regale colleagues with stories about his self-described rough past. In the same Today.com interview he recounted seeing “a murder happen in front of me when I was a teenager, and it got me obsessed with why people do the things they do — particularly with respect to criminality and human nature, the dark parts of human nature.”

Four former colleagues during the course of several years said that he also shared stories of engaging in physical altercations with people, although they said they were skeptical the incidents actually occurred.

“I think it was a form of warning, don’t f— with me, there’s physical jeopardy here,” said a writer, who worked with him on a drama series.

"The implication that Mr. Graziano characterized himself as threatening, or reacted in a threatening manner, is false," Hall said, adding that in "pursuit of storylines," Graziano shared his experiences of "growing up in rough-and-tumble neighborhoods in New York City."

In September, Graziano’s bio on his Instagram page said, “duking it out with lifelong #cptsd,” which stands for “complex post-traumatic stress disorder.” The trauma-based condition, from which [Joss Whedon has also said he suffers](https://www.vulture.com/article/joss-whedon-allegations.html), can lead to anger, difficulty controlling emotions and self-destructive behavior. By October, Graziano had replaced the line with #cptsdrecovery and a month later with #cptsawareness.

Graziano's rise through the ranks of television was accompanied by complaints that he fostered hostile workplaces, which he contests. These included claims of punishing underlings, throwing tantrums when he felt his authority or power were challenged and disrespecting women. Two people described the experience as "traumatizing."

During a casting session for the Fox mystery “Lie to Me,” which starred Tim Roth and ran from 2009 to 2011, Graziano became enraged when a junior writer disagreed with his choice of an actor to portray a doctor in an episode, according to two individuals who were present and a third who heard about it the next day from other show staffers.

Graziano stood up in front of a roomful of colleagues and screamed that he was "the showrunner and that [the writer] needed to keep his mouth shut,” recalled one. Then he fired him on the spot, telling him to “pack his things and get the f— out.”

“I’ve experienced bullying a few times in this business and this was a more egregious example of it,” said another individual who was in the room at the time.

In a statement, Hall rejected this description of the incident, denying that Graziano yelled or cursed; he "told the insubordinate staff writer in a firm voice to leave the room."

A person close to Graziano said he was concerned that remarks the writer allegedly made about who would be cast as a doctor on the show were racist. Two other sources disputed that account.

Former associates said Graziano objectified women, discussing them in tasteless, sexualized terms.

“He would talk in the writers’ room about how he might hit on women and how he would do it,” said a male writer who worked on "Lie to Me" with Graziano. The writer said Graziano used to run a line he'd use on women in bars in front of both sexes in the room, saying that "because we're all just animals, one of the biggest indicators of sexual compatibility is actual smell." He then would demonstrate his technique, asking a woman to breathe in his scent and then offering to let her reciprocate.

“There was definitely a blurring of what’s appropriate and what was not at work,” he said.

Graziano, through his spokesperson, said that it was "false" to imply that he was "sexist, inappropriate and unprofessional."

"When Mr. Graziano spoke about women's bodies, their appearance, sexuality, race and other sensitive topics, it was always in the context of creating a storyline, imagining characters and writing dialogue with the other writers," Hall said.

Complaints about Graziano's behavior date back at least a decade.

A former assistant who worked with Graziano between 2009 and 2012 said she was so distressed by her encounters with him that she took to writing down incidents in a journal, as well as discussing them in emails to colleagues and others, excerpts of which she shared with The Times. The former assistant, who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals, also confided in a close friend, describing many of the events as they occurred, this person later confirmed to The Times.

"It’s upsetting because I looked at him as a mentor and considered him as close as family, but the amount of manipulation and gaslighting and bad behavior broke my trust,” the former assistant said. "It did a number on my self-esteem."



"Law & Order" star Mariska Hargitay and creator Dick Wolf attend a 2019 event in New York. (Dimitrios Kambouris / Getty Images)© (Dimitrios Kambouris / Getty Images)

Related video: Law and Order SVU Season 24 Episode 9 Promo (Dailymotion)

The former assistant and Graziano first met in 2009 on the USA Network drama “In Plain Sight,” about a U.S. marshal who juggles relocating federal witnesses with her dysfunctional family life. She was the show’s writers’ assistant and Graziano was a co-executive producer.

During their time together, she recalled that he “talked about women’s bodies and the things he'd want to do with them.” The two conducted breakfast meetings at Square One Dining on Fountain Avenue, where, she said, he flirted with waitresses, offering to look at their scripts, then told her he would sleep with them if he wasn't married. Graziano denied the claim.

Graziano, she said, directed similar sexualized remarks her way. She said he joked “about him wanting to hook up with me,” saying that "'our relationship could’ve been very different. We would have had a passionate night of sex with our clothes on the floor, but we would instantly have regretted it because we are like brother and sister.'” It was a line she said she heard him use to describe other women, including some others he worked with as well.

Graziano "would have never uttered such a personal and intimate statement" to his former assistant and denied that he made similar comments about others, Hall said. She said the assistant would have overheard conversations in the writers' room about sexual and sensitive topics relevant to the show.

On another occasion, the former assistant said, Graziano told her that he designed the logo for his production company Pagoda Pictures "'specifically because it resembled a woman's vagina.'"

“He talked about that for years,” the former writer on "Lie to Me" confirmed.

Hall rejected the allegation, saying that Graziano "created a logo out of ink drops that he intended to look like a pagoda."

The former assistant said she felt she had no choice but to tolerate the behavior.

"He was my boss," she said. "My salary was dependent on him and he was promising me that I would get my shot at writing, which is what I wanted."

The former assistant said tensions grew when she told him she had been groped by a producer they worked with in 2011. Graziano, she said, told her that he confronted the producer, who said, "She wore a cute red dress, what was I to do?" She claimed that instead of backing her, however, Graziano relayed to her that a studio executive told him that the person she accused was an “important showrunner” while she was a “nobody,” and that she should just not go into the office anymore. So, she stayed away. “I felt that three men ganged up on me and told me that I was a nobody,” she said.

Graziano said his boss, the showrunner, told him the incident was an accident, that he did not have the power to fire the producer and he reported the matter to the studio.

By May of 2012, the former assistant had had enough. None of the promises of writing opportunities had materialized. In addition to being Graziano’s personal assistant, she had taken on the role of nanny to his twins in order to make more money.

Then one evening, she said, as she fed his kids while simultaneously working on his script outlines, he threw a pair of jeans at her and demanded that she buy him five more pairs. Shortly after, she quit.

A person close to Graziano acknowledged that the former assistant worked for two months as his children’s full-time nanny. At the time, his studio development-only deal was ending and her position as his studio-paid assistant was as well. She left on good terms to work as someone else’s assistant, the source said.

In a statement, Hall said that Graziano "mentored" and "offered advice" to his assistant but never "vowed to hire her on a show," saying that was ultimately a studio's decision. Hall also denied that “he threw any objects at her, let alone a pair of jeans."

“Mr. Graziano has never thrown an object at an employee,” according to the statement.

During the following three years the former assistant found some work on different shows. But in 2015, she said, she had yet to move above an assistant’s job, and she was unemployed. She called Graziano for career advice.

They met for breakfast at the Beachwood Cafe. She had recently worked on a soapy web series about women who pay their bills by stripping online. Graziano, she said, suggested she could do the same.

His advice, she said, was to charge showrunners and "let them do whatever" in exchange for money. When she asked him to explain what he meant by “whatever,” she said, he cited the web series and laughed. “He implied that I would do sexual favors for them. I was stunned.”

Shortly after the breakfast meeting, she shared the incident with two friends, who confirmed to The Times that she had told them about the meeting.

Although Graziano recalled meeting with his former assistant at the cafe, describing it as a friends' catch-up in which he also discussed her career, according to a person close to him, he did not recall making such a suggestion to her and said that it sounded like a poor attempt at humor.

At least one former television writer who worked with Graziano during this period characterized her time with him differently.

"I did not have a negative experience with him," said Jessica Butler, who worked with Graziano on her first television show, "In Plain Sight," for one season. But Butler, who no longer works in television, added, "I don’t want to say anything that discounts the experience of other women."

## 'The worst job I've had in Hollywood'

In 2019, Graziano became the showrunner of a new drama series, "Coyote," that aired on CBS All Access (later rebranded Paramount+). On "Coyote," Graziano's behavior made numerous staffers uncomfortable.

Several individuals described their time working on the series in Hobbesian terms as nasty, brutish and short.

David James, who started working as a script coordinator on “Coyote” in the fall of 2019 after working on “Homeland,” said the misery on the show was palpable.

"'Coyote’ was easily the worst job I’ve had in Hollywood,” he said. “I thought after this show no one would give [Graziano] another show to run.”

Rather than lean on staff for help, he berated them, erupting and shouting them down, James recalled.

“There was so much crying in that office; it was daily," James said. "We had mostly glass walled offices, and it seemed like a lot of people were upset and having a hard time. People constantly needed a moment,” he said.

Hall, in a statement, said that Graziano "admits he was a difficult person to work for on the series" because he was in "excruciating physical pain."

"Mr. Graziano snapped at people and was generally in a bad mood," and "while he does not view his pain as an excuse, it is an explanation and he regrets lashing out."

“Coyote” starred Michael Chiklis as Ben Clemens, a retired U.S. Border Patrol agent forced to work for a Mexican cartel. The series was billed as a nuanced, character-driven conversation about hot-button issues of the day: drug trafficking, migrants and illegal immigration from both sides of the border.

Graziano raved about the drama after it first streamed in [the Television Academy's Emmy magazine](https://www.emmys.com/news/features/side-side). "I could not get the pilot out of my head," he told the show's creators, according to the magazine. "There's something here that's pulling me in."

"Coyote" was planned as a 10-episode, weekly series.

However, by the time COVID-19 torpedoed production in 2020, only six episodes were finished. The episodes were broadcast, but the series was not renewed.

Paloma Lamb said she felt “lucky to get her foot in the door” when she was hired as a writers' production assistant on "Coyote" in July 2019. She was just turning 24 and it was her third television job after graduating from college a year earlier. Lamb knew the position largely entailed running errands, picking up lunch and doing “grunt work,” she said, but she viewed it as an opportunity. “I always wanted to be a writer.”

Looking back, she recalled the experience as “emotionally and verbally abusive.”

According to Lamb, Graziano was often absent at the show’s Sunset Boulevard offices, usually arriving late and leaving early when he was there — but he set the tone and culture. She said he was unpredictable and short-tempered.

In addition to being "consumed by pain," Graziano's "leadership was compromised" because he had to be in Mexico for much of the production, Hall said.

Lamb said his lunch order became the subject of numerous outbursts. If the order was wrong, he became apoplectic. But he also complained when the order was correct, telling Lamb, "I don’t even want this." To mitigate his tirades, Lamb said that she took to ordering the same lunch as his as a backup. “If his tortilla chips were wrong, he’d be pissed. So, I gave him mine. Lots of times, I stopped eating lunch.”

According to an individual close to Graziano, he didn't recall this particular incident, but said his physical pain contributed to his short fuse during "Coyote."

Early on, Lamb said, she noticed that Graziano treated women differently from the men on the show.

Not long after she started, she recalled a meeting during which Graziano introduced the women by discussing their looks. “He described the women as 'beautiful,' but he would introduce the men as 'smart' or 'badass.'”

“He always commented on women’s appearances.”

In a statement, Hall rejected the idea that "Mr. Graziano created a hostile work environment or discriminated based on gender or race," calling the claims "false."

"Any statement related to race, ethnicity or gender by Mr. Graziano was made in the context of creating the storyline, characters, and dialogue," she added.

Lamb also found herself navigating his demands.

After working a 16-hour day on the show, Lamb said, she got a call from the showrunner's assistant around 11 p.m. "'Graz needs you to go to his house right now,’” she was told.

Lamb drove from her place in East Hollywood to the Arts District in downtown L.A., where Graziano was living. Once there, she said, she had to sit in her car alone and wait 30 minutes until he came down. When he did, he showed up with a baggie full of jewelry.

“It was his ex-girlfriend’s stuff, and he wants me to return it for him in the middle of the night, driving to Pasadena,” she said. Graziano instructed her to put the baggie in a specific spot in a mailbox and to take a picture to prove that she did so. By the time she got home it was 1 a.m.

To cope, Lamb found herself rationalizing. “I was new in Hollywood and I knew Hollywood to be tricky. I wanted to be a writer and I was like, OK, he’s not sexually assaulting me. This is probably good.”

Others said Graziano's comments about women crossed a line.

When a staffer near the end of her pregnancy had to be hospitalized for complications, her co-workers took up a collection to send her flowers. That’s when Graziano complained about being asked to contribute and cracked, "We should be collecting money for an abortion," according to two writers.

“It was such a casually cruel comment,” one said.

The assertion that "Graziano seriously meant that the staff should collect money for an abortion for a hospitalized pregnant writer is absurd," Hall said. A source close to Graziano said the abortion comment was made in jest as part of a plot discussion.

Multiple staffers say they existed in a constant state of anxiety because of Graziano's erratic behavior.

“He was friendly one day and very angry the next. He really kept us unsure about which person we were going to engage with,” a writer on the series said.

One day without warning Graziano brought a stun ring device into the office and began zapping it around the writers' room, according to three people who were there. “It was crazy,” said one of the writers who observed the behavior. “It was very discombobulating.”

Graziano owned a stun ring that he began carrying when he lived in downtown Los Angeles, Hall said. He "pulled [it] out in the writers' room" while they were "brainstorming on a plot point" and "suggested they incorporate the stun ring into a plot and demonstrated how it worked by pressing its button," without "administering a shock to anyone in the room."

Another time Graziano became so incensed about his lunch order, he fired an assistant on the spot.

According to three people who witnessed the October 2019 incident, Graziano arrived at the show’s offices, late and unexpectedly. Once there, he demanded to know why his lunch was not waiting for him and insisted it appear immediately.

Amy Hartman, the script coordinator, was so unsettled by his seven-minute explosion over his lunch that she texted the unfolding scene in real time to her husband.

“Where’s my lunch. What am I eating?” Graziano yelled, according to screenshots of the texts viewed by The Times. "And I want it now, I don't want to wait."

“Someone needs to figure out what I’m eating and when I’m eating everyday, Ok? This is part of your job.” Graziano then went into his office, slamming the door behind him.

After a few minutes, Graziano came out of his office and began screaming that his lunch still wasn’t delivered. “I’m sick of the attitude and the ineffectuality,” he said, and fired the assistant over it, telling him to leave and throwing in some F-bombs, according to another individual who saw it play out.

“It was so weird it was nuts,” Hartman said. “His mood swings were intense and crazy, he came in mad and fired his assistant. He said, OK, if you’re not back in five minutes with my tacos you’re fired and he fired him.” Hartman said she quit soon after.

A person close to Graziano said that he fired his first assistant on the series when he failed to successfully perform key tasks.

Support staff weren’t the only ones who found Graziano to be an intimidating and belittling presence. The writers’ room came to be viewed as a combustible hothouse, where women and people of color said they came in for regular mistreatment.

Several writers described the room as one in which Graziano treated them as stenographers rather than colleagues and teammates, they claimed. It was a place where his volatility and disrespect collided and where he viewed creative differences as personal attacks.

“He routinely put down pitches in a disrespectful way that did not foster collaboration, to say the least,” said one of the writers, who added that the stress of pitching to Graziano, who usually cut them off mid-pitch, eventually made them and others give up altogether. “I felt everyone was afraid to pitch for fear of being yelled at.”

Under Graziano, said another writer, “the culture of the place was a very masculine work arena,” adding that “he took more liberty shutting down ideas with female writers than male writers.”

During one contentious session in the room, described by three writers, the showrunner announced that he wanted to take a male character, a violent narco leader who had murdered others and had a history of beating his girlfriend, and turn him into a romantic lead.

However, when the writers, particularly the women in the room, objected, saying the evolution was too abrupt and the audience would not believe the character change, they said Graziano recoiled and moved to shut down dissent.

“It was a tough discussion,” said one of the female writers. “When we began questioning him, he dismissed [us] as having a ‘feminist agenda,’ and saying we were too political and not story-driven. We were four to five writers concerned about what was happening. We were fighting in the room and for the characters to have dignity and agency and that wasn’t welcome at all.”

"Mr. Graziano adamantly denies discriminating against, mistreating, or being dismissive of female writers," Hall said. "He is now pain free and proud of his leadership skills on 'SVU.' "

Things broke down further over the show’s premise. Graziano “did not seem interested in telling a story about migration, or illegal immigrants," James said. "He wanted to tell a gangster story set in Mexico.”

Latinx writers and consultants from the U.S. and Mexico were hired to safeguard authenticity, but tensions soon flared, according to three individuals who felt that their input was ignored and that they were sidelined.

Those three said that when some of the writers discussed widening the scope of a migrant character, Graziano’s response left them stunned.

“Towards the end someone pitched a story about migrants, not one of the main characters, and David didn’t like it,” recalled a writer on the series. “He called migrants ‘widgets.’ He said migrants are just ‘widgets.’”

"It was offensive and dismissive talk," and it was "demeaning and dehumanizing," recalled another writer who was present.

“The most frustrating thing was there was a whole team of Mexican writers to ensure this would be a dialogue between two cultures,” said another of the writers, who witnessed the alleged "widget" episode.

“In the end, that part of the conversation was absent. That was because of David Graziano. This is not something easily said. We are taught not to speak of bad experiences, or we will be blacklisted. But it is important. It has to be raised, especially now in rooms that are constructed to have representation and diversity."

Hall said Graziano championed the hiring of Mexican writers on a show that addressed racism against Latino immigrant communities, never made disparaging statements about immigrants and afforded all of the writers "the same respect."

"The whole point of Coyote was to address racism against Hispanic immigrants to the United States," Hall said.

## Graziano 'regrets lashing out' on 'Coyote'

Despite the implementation of zero-tolerance policies and sexual harassment and misconduct training, many say behavior that falls short of egregious sexual harassment in the entertainment industry is often overlooked.

At the same time, some believe that there are few options to safely and easily report any kind of bad behavior, especially for assistants and junior support staff, who often fear that reporting someone will harm their fledgling careers.

“We have whisper networks and listservs,” Hartman said.

Liz Alper, a television writer and co-founder of #PayUpHollywood, a grassroots organization that [advocates for better treatment of entertainment industry support staff](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2019-11-02/la-et-ct-hollywood-assistants-revolt), said Hollywood has "repeatedly failed to protect victims in their workforce, especially assistants."

"We’ve seen numerous exposés describing how HR departments rush to protect abusers, who themselves work to discredit the victims," Alper said. "The Hollywood assistant community has historically been targets of harassment and abuse by their supervisors and/or employers, and this abuse has been glamorized for years as part of the Hollywood assistant experience."

Among those who spoke to The Times about Graziano, only one person — a writer on "Coyote" — said they reported their concerns about him and the atmosphere he created to executives.

At the start of the series, Sony, the studio behind the show, gave the staff harassment training and instructed anyone with a grievance to report it to their supervisor. “I followed protocol. They talked about harassment, but what about scenarios when you didn’t feel safe?” the writer said.

This individual said they went to their supervisor, a producer, to make a formal complaint. The producer invited his superiors to listen as they outlined a list of grievances surrounding Graziano’s behavior and conduct. According to the writer, the supervisor followed up to assure them that they had contacted Sony and would send the complaint to the appropriate people.

It was just before the winter holidays and the writer said that the show went on hiatus and ultimately it was never picked up. The individual said that they were not contacted by HR and they do not know whether any action was taken, as the complaint was anonymous.

"Sony HR conducted an investigation, and Mr. Graziano was immediately cleared of any wrongdoing," Hall said in a statement.

Sony Pictures Television declined to comment.

Two years later, Graziano was running “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit.”

*Times staff writer Meredith Blake and researcher Scott Wilson contributed to this report.*

This story originally appeared in [Los Angeles Times](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2022-12-08/law-order-svu-showrunner-faces-complaints).