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# [Elliot Stabler Is Working on Himself](https://www.wsj.com/articles/christopher-meloni-law-order-organized-crime-elliot-stabler-11663708405?mod=e2twmag)

## Ahead of the ‘Law & Order: Organized Crime’ Season 3 premiere, actor Christopher Meloni talks about why his character is finally ready for therapy

Christopher Meloni will return to the screens as fan-favorite Elliot Stabler when the third season of ‘Law & Order: Organized Crime’ premieres on Sept. 22. PHOTO: WILL HART/NBC

By [Saira Khan](https://www.wsj.com/news/author/saira-khan)

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For more than two decades, “Law & Order” fans have watched detective Elliot Stabler lose his cool over perceived injustices, bend the law to serve his needs and refuse to open up in therapy, even when it was court-mandated. Now, he’s finally giving in.

“He’s a little more measured now, still very determined and bullheaded at times, but at the end of the day he’s fair,” said actor Christopher Meloni, who will return to screens as Stabler when the third season of “Law & Order: Organized Crime” premieres on Sept. 22.

Mr. Meloni’s Stabler first appeared on American television screens in 1999 when “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” premiered. The show, a spinoff of Dick Wolf’s highly successful series, surpassed the original “Law & Order” in ratings within four years. Key to its success with audiences was the chemistry between Stabler and his partner, Olivia Benson, played by Mariska Hargitay. (With Stabler’s wife Kathy deceased, this season, fans of “Bensler” are hoping the two detectives will finally end up together.)

Here, Meloni talks about playing Stabler on and off for more than 20 years, how his approach to the role has changed over time and what he hopes to see for his detective alter ego in the future.

**What drew you to “SVU” and the role of Elliot?**

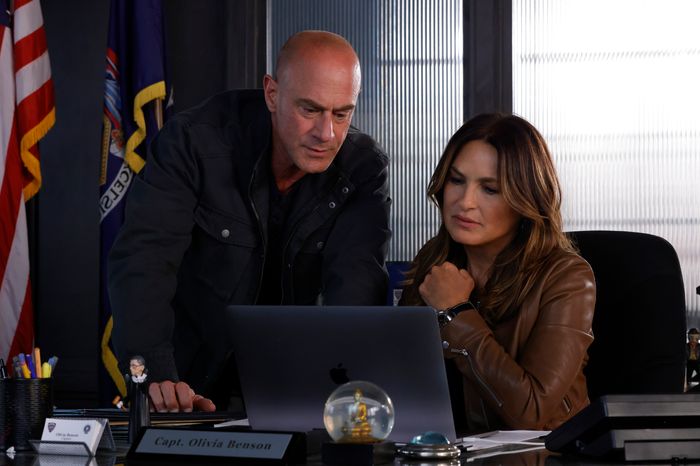
I read the pilot and it was pretty darn dynamic. I thought it was an amazing show premise. I had heard it was about a recently instituted unit of the NYPD.I felt like it was something cutting-edge or progressive for the moment. I saw him as a man with depression. I don’t know if I’d seen something like it on TV before. There was something about Stabler that appealed to me in that regard. I read the script and very clearly saw it as something I could build.

**You’ve been playing him for over 20 years, with a break in the middle, of course. When you play a tortured character like this for so long, how do you set boundaries between the character and yourself?**

I like to think that I leave him at work. When I was doing “SVU,” the stories were absolutely at times difficult to leave at work because as soon as you finished one episode about whatever tragedy that was going befall a child or a woman, a new one was going to be coming down the pipe. At the time, I was raising young children, so that could be very difficult, but I do like to think that I separate them… I say as I have another scotch!

**On that note, do you have any coping mechanisms when working on an episode like that?**

You know, honestly I’ve always coped with stress through working out. That’s why I’m so religious about it.

Fans of ‘Law and Order: SVU’ have long hoped for a romantic relationship between Elliot Stabler and Olivia Benson, played by Mariska Hargitay.PHOTO: WILL HART/NBC

**New York City has been through so much since “Law and Order: SVU” debuted. How do you think Elliot has evolved with the city as the backdrop?**

I think he is acutely aware of the changing times and he knows where he stands. For example, our knee-jerk reaction is to say things like “defund the police.” I, as in me personally, think that’s a poorly stated way of saying the police are overtasked. They’re asked to wear too many hats. We tell storylines like this on the show, where bad cops make it difficult for good police to do their job, and for the department as a whole to do their job. It hurts the whole image of the department. That’s how we reintroduce Stabler on “Organized Crime.” He has been out of America, and when he comes back there’s room for him to be a little bit shocked by how things have changed. And you know, he has the tools necessary to cope with it.

**Do you have a favorite memory from the “SVU” set?**

I just have these snippets of scenes because they either affected me emotionally or they were meaningful or they’re just really funny. I know that what has become iconic, at least amongst the people who want Benson and Stabler to be together, are the moments when we’ve touched or if we hugged, and I remember all of those clear as day.

In general, I mostly just remember the camaraderie. I loved it whenever we had squad room scenes because we’d all be together. I remember going to all these different places, especially the beginning, we would really investigate the city. We’d be on location in places I never would go to, certain station departments or the inside of a power plant.

**“Organized Crime” debuted about a decade after you left “SVU.” Did anything change about your personal approach to playing Elliot?**

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Let me put it this way: A young man who flies off the handle and doesn’t get therapy to understand the mechanism, it happens all the time. But an older guy flying off the handle all the time? It’s not so attractive.

I thought a lot about that for Stabler and now we’re getting to some of his issues, which is good. Let’s investigate all of this. There’s an episode in “Organized Crime” when Elliot is in therapy and reveals that he thinks the only time his father was proud of him was when he gave him his medal of honor. It broke his heart to a certain extent. That had a lot to do with his difficult relationship he had with his family. He’s investigating all of that now.

**What are you looking forward to most for Elliot?**

With Stabler, because he’s been in the audience’s consciousness for so long, as the series progresses, I know there’s going to be a sense of closure—whatever is left dangling in his life, I think there will be a sense of satisfaction for the end of his journey that we’ve followed on TV for many years.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*