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Crime lab: The Dilbert dynamic

By RICK CASEY

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It could be a serialized TV drama — not *L.A. Law* but *Houston Lab*.

It couldn't miss being a hit, combining the intensity of a cop show, the idealism of science and the unfolding morality play of how the District Attorney's Office handles thorny issues.

It would be based on true-life situations inside the Houston Police crime lab.

Nah, it wouldn't work.

A good TV drama requires a minimum of one hero and a reliable sidekick.

OK. It could be a dark comedy.

But starring whom? The cast of *M.A.S.H.*?

No. Same problem: too many sympathetic actors.

I know. Monty Python, an acting ensemble skilled at black humor featuring not a single member who isn't bumbling, nonsensical and outrageous.

And I know who should write the screenplay.

Scott Adams. Only the creator of the *Dilbert* comic strip can capture the bureaucratic dysfunction that defined the Houston Police lab for the 15 years leading up to its public disgrace in 2002.

These Hollywood thoughts were provoked by the inelegantly named "Third Report of the Independent Investigator for the Houston Police Department Crime Laboratory and Property Room."

Science-on-the-cheap

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Michael Bromwich, the independent investigator hired by the city to investigate the lab after District Attorney Chuck Rosenthal refused to allow a special prosecutor to do so, yesterday issued the surprisingly readable 83-page report. (You can find a link to it at www.chron.com.)

If they allowed blurbs on reports such as these, I'd be happy to provide one.

"A gripping tale of what happens when science-on-the-cheap feeds production-line justice."

Or: "Dostoevski meets Kafka in this absurdist account of pseudo-justice based on pseudo-science."

Through vivid detail, Bromwich tells the story of a bastard child of a department that sinks into despondency as advances in forensic science place more and more demands on it.

Streets get paved because voters demand it. Stadiums get built with tax money because business leaders rally behind them. And police officers get raises because they have a union.

But the crime lab is without a daddy. Who's to advocate for it over the long term? Convicts? They are an ineffective lobby.

Headless DNA section

Bromwich describes a department that is stunningly undernourished.

Roof leaks plagued the lab for more than six years, possibly contaminating samples. Even after Tropical Storm Allison flooded the facility, the leaks weren't fixed.

The backlog of sexual assault kits waiting for analysis reached nearly 20,000. When the department won a grant to reduce the backlog, the police chief vetoed a recommendation to hire additional DNA specialists. He didn't want to have to seek funding for them after the grant money ran out.

The department saved money by replacing sworn police officers in favor of lower-paid civilians. At one point, however, when the brass recommended classifying more of the staff as police officers so they would be paid more, 24 laboratory analysts objected, partly because they would be required to meet police physical fitness standards.

After years of poor performance and guerilla warfare with his boss, the head of the DNA section was given a newly created position in another area. But because there was no budget for a new DNA line supervisor (a budget slot specifically rejected by the chief of police in 1999), the section went without such supervision for an incredible six years, until it was shuttered in a 2002 scandal.

Many staffers were so poorly paid that they moonlighted. And some were so poorly trained that they described taking books home at night to try to figure out how to do their jobs. The result was horrendous morale, infighting and errors.

In the most egregious cases, staffers simply made up results without performing the tests, a procedure called "drylabbing," which Bromwich described as a "hanging offense" within the scientific community.

Throughout, Bromwich describes a pathetic department in which it is difficult to advance and nearly impossible to get fired. Even in the two drylabbing cases, one offender was allowed to resign and the other kept his job.

Management, it seems, was as dispirited as the line workers.

The scariest thing about Bromwich's report is that the underlying forces that led to neglect have not changed. The scandal brought about by public exposure has led to new, more competent leadership and even to accreditation, meaning that the lab now meets minimum standards.

But the department is still without a daddy. Once the memory of scandal fades, about the time a new round of arenas and stadiums are built, there is no reason to think the lab won't once again have lost the fierce competition for funding.

And a new round of scandals will surface.

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