

Los Angeles

Blake's Attorney Known for Fierce, Tenacious Defense

Thomas Mesereau Jr., who has won respect in high-profile cases, is also a tireless lawyer in pro bono work.

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For the first time in nearly a year, actor Robert Blake will walk through the front entrance of the Van Nuys courthouse when he is arraigned today, instead of through a back door flanked by deputies.

The former "Baretta" star has been out of jail since March 14, a day after his lawyer, Thomas A. Mesereau Jr., persuaded a judge, who had just ordered the actor to stand trial for killing his wife, to free his client until trial.

Mesereau might have missed out on the celebrity case that vaulted him into the national spotlight had it not been for a trip to church one Sunday morning.

The lawyer, who once represented former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson and won an acquittal for newscaster Larry Carroll, volunteers at the First A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles, providing free legal services for the poor.

There, in the kitchen of the church's FAME Renaissance Center, Mesereau works side-by-side every other Sunday with Chuck Meyer, a lawyer in civil practice whose firm has provided business representation for the actor.

It was Mesereau's devotion to serving the underprivileged — from his work at the church to his success representing suspects facing the death penalty in the Deep South — that forged his connection with Blake, who is known as a difficult client. Two other lawyers quit his case after the actor declined to follow their advice about keeping silent.

Mesereau, with his broad shoulders and collar-length gray hair, beat the odds earlier this month when Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Lloyd M. Nash set bail for his client at \$1.5 million. The 69-year-old actor had been held without bail since his April 18 arrest on suspicion of fatally shooting his wife, Bonny Lee Bakley, on May 4, 2001, near a Studio City restaurant where they had dined.

Mesereau won widespread praise for his smooth courtroom demeanor, part gentility and part calculated tenacity, during the 10-day preliminary hearing. Even Nash, a former prosecutor appointed to the bench in 1989, called Mesereau "one of the finest lawyers I have ever seen."

He attacked the prosecution's case, trying to discredit the testimony of two Hollywood stuntmen who said Blake offered them money to kill his wife and cast doubt on the police investigation that he said was tainted by the presence of a book author.

And in a final rhetorical flourish, Mesereau persuaded Nash to reverse himself and set bail for Blake, whose release the lawyer argued was "the right thing to do, the humane thing to do."

Attorney Dana Cole said the public saw the Mesereau he has known since law school. "He just talks from his heart, and that's Tom at his best," he said, referring to the final five minutes of his argument before Nash. "And he's fearless. There is no situation that causes him to get overwrought, nervous or fearful."

Court TV commentator Rikki Klieman was so impressed with Mesereau's courtroom manner that she said she plans to use videotapes of the preliminary hearing in a trial strategies course she teaches at Columbia University. Her husband is Los Angeles Police Chief William J. Bratton.

"He is — if not the best — one of the best cross-examiners I



ANNE CUSACK *Los Angeles Times*

FOR THE DEFENSE: Earlier this month, Thomas A. Mesereau Jr. won the release of actor Robert Blake, who is slated to stand trial in the slaying of his wife Bonny Lee Bakley. The attorney regularly volunteers at First A.M.E. Church, providing legal assistance to the poor.

have ever seen," said Klieman, a former prosecutor and defense lawyer who has watched hundreds of trials in her 28 years as a lawyer. "He deserves all of the praise that he gets."

Mesereau was born in 1950 into a military family in West Point, N.Y. His father, Thomas A. Mesereau Sr., a close aide to Gen. Douglas MacArthur, was on the battleship Missouri with MacArthur when Japan surrendered, formally ending World War II.

When Mesereau's father, a lieutenant colonel, left the Army in the early 1950s, he joined his in-laws in the family business, Mama Leone's, a once-popular Italian eatery near the theater district in Midtown Manhattan.

To his paternal grandfather's dismay, Mesereau opted for Harvard University over West Point. After graduating, he studied international relations at the London School of Economics and got a degree from Hastings College of the Law.

After a brief stint in Washington, D.C., working on Capitol Hill and at a law firm, he joined the Orange County district attorney's office but quickly found the work unfulfilling.

In one of his first cases, Mesereau said he wanted to hug the 14-year-old accused shoplifter instead of trying to incarcerate her.

"There was pressure just to

convict whoever is before you," he said.

As a criminal defense lawyer, Mesereau represented former Compton Councilwoman Patricia Moore, who was sentenced to 33 months — 24 months less than federal prosecutors had sought — in prison for extortion and income tax fraud in 1997.

Two years later, a judge dismissed investment fraud charges against another Mesereau client, Carroll, a former KCBS-TV Channel 2 newscaster. And San Bernardino authorities declined to file rape charges against Tyson, who Mesereau represented during a 2001 criminal investigation.

But some of Mesereau's most notable courtroom victories came outside California, in the death-penalty cases he has handled for free in Alabama and Mississippi. A few years ago, Mesereau called Elisabeth Semel at the American Bar Assn.'s Death Penalty Representation Project and volunteered his trial services.

Semel paired him with two Alabama lawyers who needed help representing a 24-year-old Bessemer, Ala., woman facing execution for allegedly beating to death her 22-month-old daughter. She was convicted of manslaughter, a lesser crime.

The next time Mesereau traveled to Alabama he won an acquittal for a homeless black man in a racially charged murder case. Terry Wayne Bonner

was accused of killing a 21-year-old white woman.

A mentally ill defendant in Mississippi who confessed to murder during a home-invasion robbery escaped execution when Mesereau and other lawyers worked out a deal making him eligible for parole after seven years in prison. Mesereau is scheduled to return to Alabama next month to try another death-penalty case for free.

Semel, who now teaches at UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall law school, said the results in those cases are exceptional; death penalty cases rarely end with manslaughter convictions, much less acquittals. "One has to question whether

those results would have been achieved without his contribution," she said.

Former federal prosecutor John Potter went up against Mesereau in the Moore case and called him "a forceful and fierce advocate" who conveys to jurors "a sincere and deep-rooted belief in the innocence of his clients."

Mesereau's zealotry has sometimes landed him in trouble. Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge David M. Schacter has cited him for possibly "engaging in unprofessional personal attack on opposing counsel" during a Jan. 15 deposition in the civil wrongful death lawsuit filed by Bakley's four children. Despite their differences of opinion, Mesereau stayed on the case after Blake brushed aside his warnings and invited celebrity journalist Barbara Walters into the jail for his first televised interview.

"I decided that Robert Blake needed my support and representation. I also decided he was a good person who had been vilified and mischaracterized in the media for two years, and I felt that I could and should work to change that," Mesereau said.

Mesereau's performance in court in Van Nuys this month repeatedly impressed commentators on Court TV, which televised the hearing.

Times staff writer Hilda Munoz contributed to this report.