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Blake verdict seen as celebrity justice

LOS ANGELES: When Robert Blake's jury found him liable for his wife's murder after he had been acquitted in a criminal trial, former football star O.J. Simpson said he and Blake had been subjected to double jeopardy.

But legal experts believe it just may be an example of celebrity justice.

"This was absolutely a celebrity verdict," said Loyola Law School Prof Laurie Levenson. "This was O.J. all over again. The jury is saying, 'You got away with murder in the criminal case. Now we'll make you pay big time.'"

On Friday, a jury ordered the former *Baretta* star to pay US\$30mil (RM113mil) to Bonny Lee Bakley's four children, saying Blake "intentionally caused the death" of his wife, who was gunned down in 2001 in the actor's car outside a restaurant where the couple had just dined.

Simpson was also acquitted of killing his wife and her friend but was assessed damages of US\$33.5mil (RM126mil) in a civil case. He has paid almost none of it to the victims' families.

I couldn't have paid US\$1 (RM3.76) or US\$1mil (RM3.76mil)," said Simpson, who spoke by phone from his Florida home.

Simpson said he believes those involved in the Blake case will write books in order to make money they cannot collect from Blake.

Kathy Kellermann of the Los Angeles office of Trial Behaviour Consulting has done research on public reactions to the two-trial system.

She said it is favoured by members of the public who feel that the criminal justice system "is broken" and cannot handle wealthy or famous defendants when asked to find guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

The civil system requires a lower standard of proof, a finding that it is more likely than not that the person is responsible for the crime.

"The criminal justice system struggles with fame and fortune," Kellermann said, adding that the remedy of a civil suit usually kicks in when there are "rich people with high-profile trials where a wrong is perceived to have happened."

She said her research on reactions to the Simpson verdict showed the public overwhelmingly believed that the prosecution had not proved its case beyond a reasonable doubt.

"But a large percentage of the public also thought he was guilty," Kellermann said and they supported revisiting the case in civil court.

She also said those who believe strongly in the rights of due process feel the civil trial is a form of double jeopardy and is unfair.

In the Blake case, jurors didn't indicate what specific evidence caused them to find Blake responsible but felt US\$30mil was appropriate.

M. Gerald Schwartzbach, the attorney who represented Blake in his criminal trial, said the actor had disclosed that he was broke and owed more money to the Internal Revenue Service.

He tried to settle the case but the family refused, he added. – AP