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An Exhausting Season for an Implacable TV Cop

By **MARK LASSWELL**

“Quiet, please.” It’s a common enough request on the set of a television show. Usually, however, it booms out from a disembodied off-camera voice, not the star.

But Vincent D’Onofrio, 45, who plays Robert Goren, the implacable know-it-all detective on NBC’s Sunday-night series “Law & Order: Criminal Intent,” is not inhibited by television production etiquette. Ready to rehearse a scene being shot in a kitchen of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel this week, Mr. D’Onofrio, a Brooklyn native, quieted the crew with the gently intimidating authority one might expect of a former nightclub bouncer.

He was similarly assertive as the production continued: Working opposite Chris Penn, a guest star who was playing a celebrity chef, Mr. D’Onofrio overrode the production team’s kibitzing on how Mr. Penn should handle a knife (“Let Chris do what he wants to do”), called for rethinking a bit of business with a plate (“It would be nice for him actually to have something to do. Let’s figure it out.”), and announced when the scene had been sufficiently rehearsed (“All right. Let’s shoot.”).

“I like to stick my nose in everybody’s business,” Mr D’Onofrio said during a break in a Waldorf reception room, explaining both his own boundary-blurring approach to filming and his affinity for Orson Welles, who also was hardly a production wallflower.

Mr. D’Onofrio portrayed Welles in the movie “Ed Wood” in 1994, and last summer began working on a short film about Welles, which will feature the actor as co-producer (with his business partner, Ken Christmas), director and star.

The film, based on an event taken from Welles’s life, is the sort of demonstration tape that Hollywood often requires of actors aspiring to direct feature films. It is also the sort of demanding project that can dismay their bosses - particularly when the moonlighting contributes to the performer’s being hospitalized with exhaustion, as Mr. D’Onofrio was, twice, last month. Dick Wolf, the creator of the “Law & Order” franchise, said he was “not thrilled” to learn earlier this year that the linchpin of “Criminal Intent” was spending the hiatus after the show’s third season working on the Welles film. “You really need all of the strength you can get in the down time,” Mr. Wolf said.

Two other factors made Mr. D'Onofrio a candidate for fainting episodes that landed him in the hospital. One is the workload he carries. Hourlong television drama series are so notorious for their 14-hour days that lead actors sometimes have contracts stipulating that they will appear in a maximum of about 14 scenes per episode; Mr. D'Onofrio, a movie character actor with little television experience before signing up for "Criminal Intent," does not have that contract provision. While "Law & Order" and "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" spread the work among an ensemble of actors, "Criminal Intent" leans more toward the traditional single-protagonist formula. Mr. D'Onofrio and his co-star, Kathryn Erbe, who plays his partner, Detective Alexandra Eames, appear in about 28 to 30 scenes per episode, the show's executive producer, Rene Balcer, said, adding that "Vincent has a huge number of lines."

The other factor was a simple matter of personality. "To say that Vincent is hands-on would be an understatement," Mr. Wolf said. The producer could imagine the amount of work that Mr. D'Onofrio was putting into editing and finishing the Welles project at night after long days filming this fall, he said, but "I didn't want to know."

When Mr. D'Onofrio was hospitalized and his health status unclear while tests were being run, Mr. Wolf confronted the possibility of having to change lead actors at a time when the show was being sold into syndication to the Bravo and USA cable channels for a record \$1.92 million an episode. (Both cable channels are owned by NBC Universal Inc.) Replacing Mr. D'Onofrio was "a frightening prospect," Mr. Wolf said, because it would have meant tampering with the mysterious chemistry that bonds a show with a large audience. Nonetheless, he made a list of candidates, "as anybody in their right mind would have." One of the possibilities included actor Chris Noth, who was a "Law & Order" regular in the early 1990's and was scheduled to be a "Criminal Intent" guest star in January.

Despite the anxiety about Mr. D'Onofrio's health, a certain element of comedy was injected into the situation by a gossip report tying his collapse to his emotional devastation over the outcome of the presidential election. Mr. D'Onofrio laughed about the report, accepting it as a sign of the show's prominence. (This week he was chuckling over the January issue of Mad magazine, which features a parody called "Lewd & Disorder: Criminal Malcontent.") When he fainted a second time, a running joke on the set chalked it up to Condoleezza Rice's nomination as secretary of state.

When Mr. D'Onofrio was given a clean bill of health, albeit with a medical scolding, the crisis about finding a replacement for him passed. He was sheepish when discussing the experience. "I work a lot of hours and I get paid well for it," he said. "I wouldn't dare put myself in the martyr position. I think my body just said: 'Too bad. We're going to rest for awhile.' "

As he spoke, Mr. D'Onofrio occasionally took a drag on a Camel Light cigarette, undeterred by New York's strict antismoking laws. "That's the one thing about being successful," he said. "They let you smoke anywhere you want. Which is not good for your health."

As a television star, he may be free to smoke but he is not so free to move around his hometown without being stopped by "Law & Order" fans. Mr. D'Onofrio was less likely to be waylaid for autographs

during his nearly two decades as a movie character actor, not least because it was often hard to recognize him from role to role. His résumé includes playing the hapless Army recruit who goes into a murderous rage in Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" in 1987, an insectoid creature in "Men in Black" in 1997, Abbie Hoffman in "Steal This Movie" and a serial killer in the science-fiction thriller "The Cell," both in 2000.

He had already been acting for several years, Mr. D'Onofrio said, before he realized why he seemed to have a knack for slipping easily into characters. His parents divorced when he was young, and he divided much of his time between living with his mother in Florida and his grandfather in New York. "When you're a child, you're able to assimilate so easily into any situation," Mr. D'Onofrio said. "You even start talking like the people you're around. I wasn't conscious that I was so good at that until I started to truly feel like an actor."

His newest role is as the television star who avoids overextending himself. That may prove a challenge. With "Criminal Intent" shutting down for a holiday break, Mr. D'Onofrio dutifully planned a vacation in Australia. But he vowed that, once the airplane trip halfway around the world was out of the way, he was just going to lie on a beach.