

Law and Disorder

*By: Jason Gay
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When the actor Vincent D'Onofrio leaves his apartment in the East Village, he can walk down the street in almost any direction and, in a matter of minutes, come across his face in an advertisement for Law & Order: Criminal Intent, the new television series he stars in for NBC. It was once a New York thrill, of course, having one's visage plastered all about town, announcing a show or product launch. Yet in the days since Sept. 11—as the city's bus stops, subway walls and plywood walkways have been blanketed with thousands of photos of other, absent, less famous residents—those promotional posters have felt suddenly worthless and embarrassing, especially to people in them, like Vincent D'Onofrio.

“As an actor, I feel completely insignificant,” Mr. D'Onofrio, 42, said on a recent afternoon. He was sitting on a park bench in Tompkins Square Park, his long, blue-jeaned legs stretched out before him. “I feel completely useless. I feel like a fool. I feel that what I do for a living has so little to do with anything that is good for us as a people. I can't believe that anything I have done or will do as far as my acting will ever help anybody or ever serve us in any way that is helpful. I just feel silly.”

Mr. D'Onofrio fumbled with a pack of Camel Lights and lit one. The air outside was damp, muggy.

“I was supposed to do the Today show next week and I have pushed everything back,” he said. “I was supposed to do lots of press for [Law & Order: Criminal Intent] right before it came on, but I told them I can't do it, I feel silly. I feel silly trying to sell anything on TV. I can't do it. It's going to have to wait until I can do it, and I don't know if it will affect the show. The truth is, I don't care. I'm contracted to do this show and I'll do it, but this thing is bigger than a contract, and bigger than any of us can fathom.”

Just a month before, Mr. D'Onofrio had been in a different mood. The tall, brown-haired, baby-faced Bensonhurst native—who has co-starred in films such as Full Metal Jacket, Ed Wood and Men in Black—has never been a Robin Williams-style extrovert, but back on a rainy day in August in his apartment, he talked excitedly about his new television show, about being back in New York, about being closer to his family, about a movie he was developing about the late rock critic Lester Bangs.

He also spoke that day about a planned Law & Order miniseries that would integrate all the performers from the three Law & Order shows. The miniseries was about a bioterrorist attack on New York (plotted by Osama bin Laden, it turned out). Mr. D'Onofrio promised the miniseries would be scary. “I can't really talk about it,” he said.

Now it was more than a month later, and that miniseries idea was, of course, kaput. And Mr. D'Onofrio—an actor who had spent much of his career trying, decidedly, not to be an actor schmuck, resisting fame, resisting big paydays—felt like, well, a bit of a schmuck. It all seemed so dumb. As a kid, he had worked as a bouncer alongside dozens of New York City firemen; in recent years, he'd worked out with a local fireman friend when he needed to be in shape for a role. That fireman was O.K., he said. But others . . .

“This [movie] company, they want to meet with me about a film tonight,” Mr. D'Onofrio said. “I don't know what to talk to them about.”

Mr. D'Onofrio said that in the aftermath of Sept. 11, he had considered leaving the city with his wife and young son. He said if it weren't for his deal to do Law & Order, they might have left, moved someplace else.

“It's something so unfathomable—to have no control over whether your child is going to survive or not,” he said. “The people who were on their planes with their children sitting next to them, flying to their deaths. A couple with a 2-year-old kid. I can't even . . .”

Mr. D'Onofrio paused. "I make a living because of my imagination, but I can't even come close to imagining what the hell that would be like."

A man approached Mr. D'Onofrio and bummed a cigarette. Behind, a group of men listened to a portable radio loudly playing thrash metal.

"The reality of it is that I am involved in the entertainment business," Mr. D'Onofrio said. "I'm sure that people who like these shows are going to be entertained by it—and I hope they are. If it takes their mind off what has happened to us, all the better. But I am not going to pretend that right now I am enthusiastic about my career. All of my attention and all of my focus right now is on our country and what our next move is going to be."

Mr. D'Onofrio smiled. "You wanted to interview me after this attack," he said. "And this is what you get."

"There is no way for me ... not to feel affected by this thing," he continued. "Talk to me three months from now, and hopefully America will be in a better situation. I'm going to feel differently; I'm going to be gung-ho about what I do for a living again. We all are, hopefully."

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