

HEADLINE: LAW & D'ONOFRIO

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Watching **Vincent D'Onofrio** hug Lou Pucci, his young co-star in Thumbsucker (which opens Thursday at the Calgary Film Festival), is a reminder of how genuinely warm he is. On a set D'Onofrio can be withdrawn as he prepares for a role, but in person he's funny, charming and occasionally intense.

Now the 46-year-old actor, who despite a stack of critical raves for his work in Mystic Pizza ('88), Men in Black ('97) and The Thirteenth Floor ('99) has never quite made the jump to stardom, is finally getting there via the NBC series Law & Order: Criminal Intent.

D'Onofrio was uncomfortable with the thought of becoming a celebrity, but not long before accepting the lead role in Criminal Intent he admitted, "You start to think, 'How do you get the first shot at some things?' The answer might be that you have to become a star."

Now he's a star, all right, but D'Onofrio is still struggling with the price of fame. In November 2004 he collapsed while filming an episode of Criminal Intent and was rushed to a hospital.

Following the incident, there was word D'Onofrio was being difficult.

After months of silence, he's ready to tell his side.

First, he insists he simply fainted. "It crept up on me and it just put me down like a rabid dog. It didn't matter if I wanted to keep working. There were four neurologists and a heart specialist poking at me. They all did their tests, and it was not fun. I wanted to be back at work."

While at hospital, D'Onofrio says, he had an epiphany of sorts.

"Doing a TV series is not digging ditches," he explains, "but it's really, really hard work. I told the producers I was ready to give up every cent I'd already made to be able to leave. I told them straight out, '(expletive) you, I don't want it.' I knew they were starting to draw up a list of actors to replace me," D'Onofrio says. "Then Dick Wolf, who created the show, came up with the idea of alternating episodes, with me starring one week and Chris Noth the next. Dick said to me, 'You're a pain in the (butt), but you're worth it.'"

"It just changed everything," D'Onofrio says with a grin. "Now I have the cushiest job on television. I do 11 episodes ...You can't beat that."

And what about those reports of clashes between him and the production staff?

"I cannot work with those people," he says with a sudden intensity. "We can be friendly and we can talk with each other, but each of us has no idea what the other is saying. The only one that I can talk to creatively is Dick Wolf. I'll continue to work for him, but I'll never do another show for American television ever again, ever."

D'Onofrio may have some extra time now, but he's not using it to relax. The break from Criminal Intent allowed him to take a pivotal role in Thumbsucker. He and Tilda Swinton play parents trying to get their 17-year-old son (Pucci) to give up sucking his thumb.

"I think the film says simply that we are all always searching for who we are as we go through life, and that doesn't have to be what we define as 'normal,'" D'Onofrio says.