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Our favorite cop

Step aside, Sipowicz. Vincent D'Onofrio's fidgety, frustrated "Law & Order" detective makes police TV interesting again.

By Hillary Frey

Sept. 13, 2005 | Vincent D'Onofrio has frequently said he doesn't want to be a leading man, though he has spent 20-odd years in the public eye with roles big and small, in movies big and small. There was the broken, suicidal soldier ("Full Metal Jacket") and the alien in a farmer's body ("Men in Black"), Abbie Hoffman ("Steal This Movie") and pulp writer Robert Howard ("The Whole Wide World"). The towering actor (at 6 feet 4) prefers to disappear completely into his characters -- almost literally for his role of Pvt. Gomer Pyle in "Full Metal Jacket," for which he gained 70 pounds. So while you may have seen him dozens of times through the years, his shape-shifting abilities may have rendered his face familiar but not distinctive.

That's changed a lot, however, since D'Onofrio moved to TV and took over "Law and Order: Criminal Intent," the third incarnation of Dick Wolf's successful franchise. His oversize performance as Det. Robert Goren, an enigmatic, obsessive puzzlemaster on the major case squad, is so big, so engulfing, it sometimes risks spilling out onto your living room carpet, taking D'Onofrio's Method into madness. But he manages to walk that line brilliantly, creating a mesmerizing -- and often hilarious -- performance that stands out from the cardboard characters walking the beat on many other cop shows.

Take the time Goren stumbles around a five-star kitchen looking for clues in a chef's disappearance, lifts the lid to a pot of boiling water, and dramatically announces, "Steamy!" Or the episode when he, accompanied by his tiny but tough partner, Det. Alexandra Eames (Kathryn Erbe), heads out to Brooklyn to visit a motor-boat engine repairman suspected of training his son to kill. Goren chats up the guy while pretending to be taking his wife (Eames) out on the water, which leads to a discussion of kids, which offers Goren the perfect opportunity to question the guy about his own son. (Gotcha!) Crisscrossing the five boroughs, Goren goes where he must to psych out witnesses and accomplices with his mind tricks and uncanny ability to exploit the tiniest crack in a suspect's psychological makeup. He's ready to interrogate at any moment, has no sense of personal space, and knows just how to make the cookie crumble. (Sometimes it seems as if suspects confess just to get Goren out of their faces.)

But while episodes of the original "Law and Order" and its first offshoot, "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit," are split nearly evenly between cops and lawyers – find the perps, build the case, try them -- "Criminal Intent" focuses almost exclusively on the work of the detectives -- so there's *a lot* of Goren in each episode. And for D'Onofrio, that means a lot of work. Last year it proved too much; after putting in long days on the set, D'Onofrio fainted during filming and was briefly hospitalized for exhaustion -- leading to conspiracy theories that lit up gossip pages and political blogs alike.

So this season (which begins Sept. 25), will be a little different from years past. Instead of Goren and Eames doing all the heavy lifting for the major case squad, detectives played by Chris Noth (reprising his role from "Law and Order" in the pre-Mr. Big years) and Annabella Sciorra will pitch in, taking over on alternate Sundays. The shared billing is great news for D'Onofrio, who plans to pursue other projects with the extra time -- most important, directing, producing and acting in his own films. You can also catch him in two notable forthcoming films - - the just-released Sundance hit "Thumbsucker" (which Andrew O'Hehir [called](#) "an earnest, meticulous and beautifully acted exercise in suburban minimalism, with one of the most amazing casts put together for any recent American film") and next year's Vince Vaughn and Jennifer Aniston flick, "The Break-Up." Salon caught up with D'Onofrio by phone to find out if Bobby Goren will ever have a girlfriend, what he learned from Stanley Kubrick, and whether the prospect of four more years of George W. Bush really made him faint.

For so many years you acted almost solely in movies, taking television roles only sparingly. What was it about the character of Robert Goren in the "Law & Order" series that made you want to commit to TV?

It was what Rene [Balcer] wrote, and the way Dick [Wolf] pitched the idea to me. Dick promised to give me a lot of freedom and promised that I would be able to take what they wrote off the page and do what I wanted with it. So it was really Dick's attitude and Rene's script.

So how does that work? Do you take a script and manipulate it the way you want to? How does an episode come together?

Well, we're talking about two different things -- you're talking both about the initial development of the character from the first episode, and how I handle it on a daily basis now.

Let's start with the character.

They allowed me to make him Goren, the way I wanted Goren to be, with the way that he moves, the way that he talks, all the posture things he does and

how he's a bit dark sometimes, or how he's a bit bored sometimes, or how he can get a bit too energetic or over the top. They gave me a lot of freedom to develop this character. I was confident, but I guess their confidence levels had to go up because I hadn't done TV before, and we didn't know each other -- but I think that Rene and Dick knew we had a good thing after the first two episodes - - we all knew that it was going to be a good collaboration after those.

How did you decide to play Goren the way you do?

Originally I approached it exactly the way I would approach a film. I let the story influence me. I don't change the words or anything. I just kind of realize the story, in the true sense of the word.

The only detail we really know about Goren is the fact that his mother has schizophrenia. What does that mean for him?

What it does workwise for us, groupwise, on the show, is it allows us to give Goren a little more depth. When you think of Goren you don't want to just think of his daily routine that you see on the show, but you want to sink a little more deep than that, so we gave him one thing -- or a couple, there's the thing he has with the Olivia D'Abo Hitchens character -- just to add depth. That's what it's about.

Will there ever be anything else revealed about Goren? Will he ever have a girlfriend?

Hopefully not. I think he'll continue to flirt a lot, but I don't think he'll have a girlfriend. I hope not, because then it would be too soapy.

You know, Rene and I have to think about the end. That's not for a while, so we have to just keep on doing what we're doing. And then when we decide where the end is, there'll be a whole flux of things that will rise to the surface so that we can finish off Goren.

Is that in the works?

No. But just because we're creative guys we talk about it all the time. We joke about things that would be ridiculous ways to end it, and we talk about very serious ways to end it. We talk about it because the end is coming. I'm sure -- I mean, I don't want to put words in Rene's mouth -- but on a show like this, there's an end coming for everyone eventually. I don't think Rene is going to stay on that show for the rest of his career -- he's too good of a writer. And I'm definitely not going to. But I will stick around for a few more years, that's for sure.

Last year, you fainted on the set of "Law and Order." First, I wanted to ask if your health is better now.

Yes, thank you.

Also, am I correct in understanding that your health issues led to Chris Noth sharing this season with you?

For sure, yes.

How did you feel about the New York Post attributing your fainting to your shock over the election of George W. Bush as president?

I loved it.

Was there any truth to that at all?

No, no. I wish there was, though.

Where do you think they got that from? Do you think it had something to do with playing rabble-rouser Abbie Hoffman in "Steal this Movie"?

Maybe. But you know, around six months earlier, I had gone to the White House Correspondents dinner. I was invited by the Washington Post, and I sat at one of the Democratic tables. And my sisters told me that every time the camera was on me I didn't look very happy. It's the only time -- I mean, I feel strongly about the country -- but it's the only time there's ever been a picture of me in anything political, and I probably won't do anything like that again. It's just so hard to hide your feelings. I was watching these Republicans and listening to them talk, and listening to Bush talk, and he's a nice enough guy, but I'm a Democrat. And I'm like, What are you saying? My sisters said I maybe should have hidden my feelings ... But I'll never do that again.

It's the only thing I could think of where they could have gotten that from. It doesn't really matter, because it was really funny. We were sitting on set laughing about it, and we still joke about it.

Then you also fainted at home. And the second time you fainted it was supposedly because Condoleezza Rice was picked to be secretary of state.

[Chuckles.] Well, that's not true, but I do remember my jaw dropping when I heard that! It's just absolute nonsense that any fainting that happened was because of that. I wish it was that easy. I was in the hospital for two weeks and I wish the doctor had come in and said, "Well, it's politics."

They never found anything wrong. The neurologist and heart specialist just looked at me and said, "You're not going anywhere. You're staying in the hospital because you're tired and you need rest. That's it. And if we let you go home again, you're going to faint again." Fainting is kind of a weird way to put it -- it was more of a passing-out kind of a thing.

Can you describe it to me?

All I really remember about it is looking up at people looking back down at me. That's all I really remember.

But you didn't hurt yourself when you fell...

Yeah, I got banged up a bit. Nothing I want to be too specific about. But the cool thing was that I had my whole family around me, my sister came into town, my brother came into town, I have this incredible stepbrother, and the guys who bodyguard me on the set were at the hospital the whole time I was there. Everyone was ridiculously over the top about it. Everyone went out of their way to make sure I was OK, so that was nice. And it was a wake-up call for everybody. It was a wake-up call for me and for the company. If it wasn't for Dick Wolf, I wouldn't still be on the show.

Because he came up with the idea to bring in Chris Noth?

Yeah, because he came up with the idea. I talked to him after I was out of the hospital, and I didn't really have to say it, but I said, "I can't do it anymore." And he said, "Go away, go on your Christmas vacation, and when you come back I'll think of something."

So you're happy with this arrangement.

Oh God, yes, are you kidding?

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So you're happy with this arrangement.

Oh God, yes, are you kidding?

There's no competition?

God, no. My feelings -- and I've said this to Chris, to everybody, in public -- my feelings are that I hope that Chris' show makes our ratings go up and that the show does 10 times better. I'm not a competitive actor; I never have been. I'm a character actor. I've never done a leading man, I don't want to, I don't have that kind of competitive thing in me. If we were getting a really bad actor who was

going to ruin the show, then I would have something to say about it. But Chris can pull this kind of thing off. And I'm hoping that the audience can split in their mind, that they can watch him on Sunday and watch me another Sunday, because that's all they're going to get of me. I wish I could do more, but I can't; it's too much. And I have other things to do. I'm making my own films, and Dick knows that.

I mean, I really can't ever, ever complain again. That's the only problem. I can't ever open my mouth again, which is really hard for me.

How has doing the show affected your film career? Has it brought you different kinds of roles? Or allowed you to be choosier about what you do?

The one thing it has done for sure is that it's going to allow me to make my own films. It's a fantastic thing to have a new career at 46 years old. It's so exciting for me. I feel exactly the same way I did when I was in school, when I was like 19. I'm starting this whole new career in filmmaking and I'm so happy about it. My peers and everyone around me are really supporting me, and it's wonderful.

You've been working on a film about Orson Welles.

Well, I finished it. It got into the Venice film festival. And then I guess it will tour around to some other festivals. But I'm on to another thing, so I'm just going to keep making them. I'm also doing this television deal in Australia with Channel 10, to make movies for them.

Are you directing, producing?

Acting, directing, producing -- everything.

You mention that you've always identified yourself as a character actor and aren't interested in being a leading man. Is that because you aren't competitive, or was it a calculated career decision?

It doesn't interest me. That level of the business, as far as for my acting, doesn't interest me. I never wanted to be in the position to carry a movie, because it's too much business. You have to make people who work at the bank smile, and I can't do that. But I know that I can make people who watch movies smile, so I've always thought that the best place for myself was somewhere within the composition of the story, not the lead character. You get handed really good parts, so it's always the place I've felt most comfortable.

I read in another interview with you from a long while ago that Stanley Kubrick told you during the filming of "Full Metal Jacket" (1987) that "Being real is one thing, but being interesting is better." What did that mean to you?

I think he said it to me because I'm a Method actor, and my whole deal is about honesty and realism, and being honest in the part. He didn't know me at all.

Do you still think about when you made "Full Metal Jacket"? Or does it seem like a long, long time ago?

Both. I think about it a lot. But it was a long, long time ago. I think about it as being a long time ago. There are things that happened on that movie that, if I hadn't done that movie I would be a different actor. The other actors taught me a lot, Stanley taught me a lot, there are friendships that were formed on that movie that will never, ever end.

You have two big movie projects we're excited about, "Thumbsucker" -- which is out now -- and "The Break-Up," with Vince Vaughn and Jennifer Aniston. Can you say a little about your roles in those movies?

"Thumbsucker" is Mike Mills' project. He's an amazing guy. Then "The Break-Up" -- that's Vince's film. We play brothers. I guess the genius in that one was my agent, who said, you know, Vince is doing this film and it has two brothers in it, and you should be one of the brothers. And I just adore Vince. It was our third film together [in addition to "Thumbsucker" and "The Cell"].

Those guys, they lead a different lifestyle than me, but it's so nice to be their friends over so many years. It's weird, being a New York actor as opposed to a Hollywood actor. There is a gray area where there is a certain type of Hollywood actor I would never hang out with, and there's a certain type of New York actor I would never hang out with. But then there's this group of actors that, we all just get along, on whatever coast. And Vince is in that circle with me and other friends. He's just a good guy, and I'd do anything for him.

In the past you've not been shy about criticizing some films that maybe you weren't so excited to have done. But of some of the smaller projects you've done in the past, what would you want people who've come to know you as Robert Goren to see?

Very few. There are very few that I care about. My daughter's favorite is "Happy Accidents." I guess that's one of them. It's weird to think about things from this perspective. But I guess my daughter is right, because "Happy Accidents" is really good and Brad Anderson's a really good director. And Marisa [Tomei] is great in it, and I loved the story when I read it, so I think people would like that

one because it's really different from Goren. And "Thumbsucker," too. I play a father with all these issues. It's a great part, and I was lucky to have it. So that would be another one, I guess.

How has the show affected your daily life, in terms of people recognizing you? You've always prized your anonymity.

I was just talking to my daughter's mom about this the other day. It's OK, really. I go out less to restaurants. But that's really the only thing. You just have to know that when you go outside you have to sign autographs. You just have to be ready to go around the corner to buy some milk and sign an autograph or two on the way and on the way back. You just have to prepare yourself for it. And I do it. It's OK with me. I've never, ever turned one down. Gregory Hines taught me to be graceful about it, that it's really important. When you do theater, people get to stand up and clap at the end. But when you do film and TV, they don't get to do that. So people come up to you on the street. That's all they're doing, applauding you.

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