

# Cop doesn't know how to stop

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By Mark Lasswell  
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**Vincent D'Onofrio mixes his *Law & Order* role with directing a film on Orson Welles.  
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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 *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, is not inhibited by television production etiquette. Ready to rehearse a scene being shot in a kitchen of New York's Waldorf-Astoria hotel, D'Onofrio, a Brooklyn native, quiets the crew with the gently intimidating authority one might expect of a former nightclub bouncer. He is similarly assertive as the production continues. Working opposite Chris Penn, a guest star playing a celebrity chef, D'Onofrio overrides the production team's suggestions on how Penn should handle a knife ("Let Chris do what he wants to do"), calls 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 announces when the scene has been sufficiently rehearsed ("All right, let's shoot")."

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I like to stick my nose in everybody's business," D'Onofrio says 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.

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' 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 performers being hospitalised with exhaustion, as D'Onofrio was, twice, in November.

Dick Wolf, the creator of the *Law & Order* franchise, 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," Wolf says.

Two other factors made D'Onofrio a candidate for fainting episodes that landed him in the hospital. One is the workload he carries. Hour-long 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; 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 towards the traditional single protagonist formula.

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, says, adding that "Vincent has a huge number of lines".

The other factor is a simple matter of personality. "To say that Vincent is hands-on would be an understatement," Wolf says. The producer could imagine the amount

of work that D'Onofrio was putting into editing and finishing the Welles project at night after long days filming this autumn, but "I didn't want to know".

When D'Onofrio was hospitalised and his health status unclear, Wolf confronted the possibility of having to change lead actors at a time when the show is being sold into syndication to the Bravo and USA cable channels for a record \$US1.92 million (\$A2.4 million) an episode. Replacing D'Onofrio was "a frightening prospect", Wolf says, 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 1990s and was scheduled to be a *Criminal Intent* guest star this month. Despite the anxiety about 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. D'Onofrio laughs about the report, accepting it as a sign of the show's prominence. (This week he also 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 US Secretary of State.

When 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 says. "I wouldn't dare put myself in the martyr position. I think my body just said: `Too bad.

We're going to rest for a while'."

As he speaks, D'Onofrio drags on a cigarette, undeterred by New York's strict anti-smoking laws. "That's the one thing about being successful," he says. "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. 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 recognise him from role to role. His resume includes playing the hapless Marine recruit who goes into a murderous rage in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* in 1987, an insect-like 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.