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**" Why I had to take a break form Goren"**

BY Penelope Cross

Suffering exhaustion gave Criminal Intent's **Vincent D'Onofrio** a chance to re-evaluate life  
Vincent D'Onofrio is going behind the camera

Just like his television counterpart, **Vincent D'Onofrio** in person is nothing if not unpredictable.

The Law & Order: Criminal Intent star goes from garrulous to introspective to curious in one fell swoop while being interviewed by Seven Days until suddenly, we're being interrogated - Detective Robert Goren-style.

"What's the matter?" he asks, tilting his head ever so slightly. "Why are you squinting?"

"I ... um ... was just thinking about what you were saying," comes the uneasy reply.

"Oh. Good," he says.

And just as quickly as he arrived, Goren is gone.

Spontaneity is everything to D'Onofrio, both on and off screen.

It's the key to why Goren is so memorable, what motivates the 46-year-old as an actor and it's a characteristic of D'Onofrio's that Law & Order creator and producer Dick Wolf was aware of when he hired him for the lead role in Criminal Intent, the third series in the franchise.

Hence why D'Onofrio says it didn't come as a surprise to Wolf when he told him that for the show's fifth season (Channel 10 is now airing the fourth), he couldn't do the full 22 episodes.

"In the first conversation Dick and I ever had, he promised me that I would still be allowed to have some freedom," he says. "He knows I'm a very spontaneous kind of person. I'm not the typical actor who shoots for the stars. I just do what I want."

As a result, Goren and partner Det. Alexandra Eames (Kathryn Erbe) will only feature in every second episode in next year's series.

The other 11 will be centred around Det Mike Logan (played by former Law & Order star and Sex And The City's Mr Big, Chris Noth) and Det Carolyn Barak (Annabella Sciorra).

D'Onofrio says the pairs won't be crossing paths though.

"I don't want to cross [Noth's] path," he says. "It's his own show. Dick and I are giving him the opportunity to do it and make it a success."

While eventually stepping away from Criminal Intent was always D'Onofrio's plan, being so immersed in playing Goren has meant the decision has taken longer than he thought.

"The show was so exhausting for me for the first few years that I had to be really careful with how much I did other than that," he says.

"It's taken me four years to figure out how to do that job and other things that I really want to do. I'm kind of slow.

"And I love acting so much that it's hard to be kept away from it."

The catalyst for change was when the star fainted twice last November - once on the set of the series and again at home five days later.

The diagnosis: exhaustion. Not, as some reports suggested at the time, the result of his devastation over the result of the US presidential election.

"I wish it was that," he laughs. "Everybody knows that I'm a really big Democrat and we all kind of metaphorically fell over [when John Kerry lost to George Bush]."

His exhaustion stemmed from a combination of 14-hour days on Criminal Intent and his work co-producing, directing and starring in a short film about Orson Welles.

"I found out the hard way how to get my projects developed at the same time I'm doing the show - I ended up in hospital," he says.

But he is happy with his subsequent change of lifestyle, especially since he has two children: a daughter Leila, who's 13, and a son Elias, 5, the products of his now-dissolved marriages to Greta Scacchi and Carin van der Donk respectively.

"I'm friends with the mums and I love my kids - they spend a lot of time with me," he says.

"So this is how it has to be. And I'm at a really good point in my life where I'm ready to make an ass of myself all over again - like when I was a kid. Take chances, you know? And I want to do that with filmmaking this time rather than acting."

The Criminal Intent star finished post-production on his short film about Welles in May but it was a labour of love he'd been planning for several years.

D'Onofrio actually played the late actor in the 1994 film Ed Wood, but had been wanting to revisit Welles as he was never satisfied with his original performance, partly due to the fact he only had three weeks to prepare for the role.

His next project is a western.

"There's a particular story about my life that I want to tell and it's set in the late 1800s when the railroad was being built in America," he says.

"I think putting it in another setting is the best way to tell it without it seeming autobiographical."

But D'Onofrio isn't making any guarantees about his future as a director.

"I'm only going to direct stories I want to tell," he says. "I'm not going to direct something that somebody gives me. Look, I may never direct again."

Either way, for a guy who prior to his small screen success was a respected character actor dubbed "the human chameleon" and most famous for playing Private Gomer Pyle in Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket, the role of the erratic Goren seems a perfect fit.

"It's worked out well," he says. "But it was all a plan. I didn't want to get bored so I make sure that [Goren] is not easy to follow."

But moreover, there's a method to Goren's madness in that it doesn't put D'Onofrio in a box.

"It sets a up a precedence for the audience to understand that I'm not just one kind of guy. I'm several kinds of guys.

"It reminds people that I'm an actor so when I have other parts in films and stuff, they're going to accept me because they know Goren is a lot of things - he's Vincent, the actor."

## **THE WRITE STUFF**

Stepping inside Rene Balcer's mind is a little scary. After all, the man has carefully planned out literally hundreds of murders and serious assaults in his time as Law & Order's senior scriptwriter, the driving force behind one of television's most successful crime franchises.

A former journalist and documentary-maker, Balcer (pictured) joined the original Law & Order production during its first season in 1990 and remembers the pressure of that period well.

"When it first started we were just hoping to get through the first year," Balcer says.

"I look back and I remember that back then we were like, 'How are we ever going to get 22 episodes out of this?'.

"Now it's 350 episodes later with Law & Order and 93 episodes later with Criminal Intent."

Balcer left Law & Order five years ago to develop Criminal Intent, the highest rating of the stable here in Australia.

The show has spawned two other spin-offs, Special Victims Unit and Trial By Jury. The latter was dropped by NBC earlier this year but still airs on Ten.

So is there a limit to the expansion of Law & Order?

"Well, one of the problems is that the crime rate in the US has dropped, so we're all picking over the same crimes and there's some danger of duplication," he says.

"Ultimately, I don't know how many variations of the franchise can be sustained. But certainly two or three ... because the storytelling is fairly complex ... and it's not just about solving crime, the shows are about human nature and the complexities of psychology behind the crime."

And that's where, according to Balcer, the shows have an edge over the various CSIs, which he doesn't hide his disdain for.

"CSI only has one permutation, they just change the city.

"I'm not a fan. It's kind of empty calories.

"It's a show you can watch while you're doing something else. You can be doing the laundry, you can be doing the ironing, you can be splitting the atom," he deadpans.

"The stories are fairly easy to follow. With Law & Order, if you look away for 30 seconds you're lost, which is the good and bad thing."

Balcer says he still plays a major role in developing each Criminal Intent script.

"Usually I work one on one with a writer and together the two of us will break a story. Then the writer goes off and writes the dialogue, then I do a rewrite."

Overseeing each script is demanding and after 15 years on the case, Balcer says the end is nigh - for him, not the show.

"It'll be sooner rather than later," he says.