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HEADLINE: Intent on supporting the stars: Law & Order's Vincent D'Onofrio doesn't crave the spotlight

By Katherine Monk

"I am not a leading man," says Vincent D'Onofrio, explaining more than his career path over the past 20 years. The apparently self-effacing statement seems to sum up his entire approach to life, and demonstrates a high degree of self-knowledge, but it's not a line the actor throws around lightly.

"I'm a supporting actor. I am happy being a supporting actor and personally, there's nothing more rewarding than telling a story. It's what I want to keep doing," D'Onofrio, 46, says.

Currently shooting a new season of Law & Order: Criminal Intent, in which he plays recurring character Det. Robert Gorin, D'Onofrio says it gets tougher and tougher to find good supporting roles.

"It's all about script and story and if they aren't there, you can do everything within your power to make it great, and it still won't be good. Then again, you can find a great script and surround yourself with great people, but there's still no guarantee it's going to work and be a great movie. It's a constant challenge."

D'Onofrio says he's been lucky, having landed the Law & Order gig as well as a recent supporting role in Mike Mills' Thumbsucker, an offbeat coming-of-age movie in which a young man has a hard time giving up his sucking addiction to his opposing digit.

"Tilda [Swinton] was already on board with Thumbsucker when I saw it - and with Tilda on board, you kind of think it might not be a bad idea to sign on. She makes really interesting decisions and I admire her a great deal. It was actually a big deal for me to get this movie," D'Onofrio says.

For those who've followed the actor's path since he first emerged on the big screen as the oversized private in Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket in 1987 (D'Onofrio gained 32 kilograms for the role), you may have a hard time buying into so much humility. After all, D'Onofrio also appeared in signpost-for-an-era movies such as Mystic Pizza, Crooked Hearts, Dying Young, JFK, The Player, Ed Wood, Men in Black and That Championship Season, but he's never been the kind of actor to parlay his credits into screen time in meaningless movies.

"I want to tell a story and to work with interesting people. Just being on set with the people on Thumbsucker was a great experience. It's not about any romantic

notions of art or anything like that, it's about really working with the best and improving my craft as an actor. You go about your work as you would any other day, but when you're acting with great actors, you get an extra boost. That rarely happens in film. It rarely happens in this business at all," he says.

"I've learned something from everyone I ever acted with. I'm still learning. There are great actors on Law & Order: Criminal Intent and I still learn from myself, from my mistakes and where I find myself struggling. You can tell when things aren't working."

D'Onofrio says his desire to be a supporting actor is nothing new. It's something he set his sights on when he started in the business because it afforded him greater range, and the ability to shift tone from project to project.

"I think I'm incredibly fortunate. I've been a working career actor for half my life," D'Onofrio says.

He says he's come to understand a large part of his fascination has to do with building a character and understanding its component elements.

"Acting is about the human condition and that's a universal. We all have a very similar set of feelings that we're all grappling with all the time. That's interesting to me," he says.

"I remain in this business because it's the only thing I really want to do. If I'm going to take responsibility for my life, and the decisions I've made, I'm going to do what gives me the most pleasure and chase my passion. Every part of me loves acting. I grew up with an arts background and the idea of being able to express myself and tell a story and be around other creative people... I can't think of a better way to spend my life."