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TV STORY

The intense Mr D'Onofrio 11 January 2005

Emmy-nominated and acclaimed feature film actor Vincent D'Onofrio returns for his fourth season as the smoothly intuitive Detective Robert Goren in Criminal Intent, despite being hospitalised recently for exhaustion.

In November D'Onofrio, 45, collapsed while rehearsing what a show rep called a "strenuous" stair-climbing scene on the Brooklyn set of Criminal Intent.

He was hospitalised and remained off the set for the rest of that week. Then, a day before he was set to return to work, D'Onofrio passed out at his New York home, prompting a second visit to the emergency room.

Doctors subjected him to several tests, including an MRI, but didn't find any serious health problems, and put his fainting down to exhaustion.

Those closest to D'Onofrio put his exhaustion down to three main factors. The actor spent the hiatus after Criminal Intent's third season working on a short film about Orson Welles, for which he was co-producer, director and star.

The film is the sort of demanding project that can dismay their bosses – particularly when the moonlighting contributes to the performer being hospitalised.

Dick Wolf, the creator and producer of the award-winning Law and Order franchise which includes Criminal Intent, said he was "not thrilled" to learn that D'Onofrio was spending his break from the show working on the film.

"You really need all of the strength you can get in the down time," Wolf says.

Another factor was D'Onofrio's workload. 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 does not have that contract provision. While Law and Order and Special Victims Unit spread the work among an ensemble of actors, Criminal Intent leans more toward the traditional single-protagonist formula.

D'Onofrio and 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, said, adding that "Vincent has a huge number of lines".

The other factor was a simple matter of personality.

"To say that Vincent is hands-on would be an understatement," Wolf says.

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 recent presidential election.

D'Onofrio laughed about the report, accepting it as a sign of the show's prominence. When he fainted a second time, a running joke on the set chalked it up to Condoleezza Rice's nomination as secretary of state.

D'ONOFRIO is 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'."

Criminal Intent chronicles the life and crimes of the elite Major Case Squad of the New York City Police Department, with an additional dimension of exposing major crimes from the criminal's perspective.

Criminal Intent begins from the point of view of one of the major participants in the crime: the criminal, a witness, or even the victim. By integrating a psychological component, the police procedural mysteries allow viewers to get an up-close and personal look at the criminal justice system.

"Bobby Goren takes you through a different story every week," says D'Onofrio.

"Sometimes it's a whodunnit or sometimes a whydunnit. The fun and interesting thing about our show is that the audience knows things my character doesn't and, as the story moves along, will realise that I know things that they don't. The whole story is a game and we all get to play."