

# Law unto himself

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By Darren Devlyn

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EXPOSED to the camera, Vince D'Onofrio projects a startling magnetism. Some might suggest D'Onofrio has that rare, hard-to-define "it" factor - a seemingly effortless ability to light up the screen.

It's a theory that under-estimates D'Onofrio's extraordinary commitment to his craft.

He is able to dissolve into character because he tackles roles through vigorous preparation and faith in his instincts.

Take, for instance, his first feature film, Stanley Kubrick's war epic *Full Metal Jacket*.

D'Onofrio gained 20kg to bring a realistic edge to the role of the unstable army recruit who goes on a murderous rampage.

Capable of being a leading man or a character actor, D'Onofrio has shone in a long list of films including *The Player*, *Ed Wood*, *Malcolm X* and *The Cell*, in which he played a serial killer.

He has also created one of the small screen's most potent characters with his portrayal of the idiosyncratic and implacable cop Robert Goren in Channel 10's *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*.

D'Onofrio's passion for the job has come at a cost.

TV dramas are renowned for keeping actors on set for up to 14 hours a day. In an ensemble cast, you're likely to be appearing in about 14 scenes an episode.

But in the case of *Criminal Intent*, the workload is never spread evenly and D'Onofrio and co-star Kathryn Erbe (who plays Alex Eames) must appear in up to 30 scenes an episode.

The downside for D'Onofrio is the struggle to balance the demands of his professional and private lives.

It hurts him that he can't spend more time with daughter Layla, 13, from his marriage to actor Greta Scacchi, and five-year-old son Elias, by Carin van der Donk.

"It's impossible," D'Onofrio says of trying to find equilibrium in his life at and away from work.

Sinking into a sofa in the boardroom of Ten's South Yarra headquarters, he adds: "There is no time to work on the family part of my life and that's why Chris Noth has been brought in to help out.

"Four years of being absent from family has been too much and I recently decided I couldn't do it this way any more."

In the *Criminal Intent* series in production in New York, D'Onofrio is sharing leading man duties with Noth. It has cut D'Onofrio's workload in half - and also his salary.

"I have taken a huge cut in fees, but so what," D'Onofrio says, tugging on an ear, then running his fingers through his grey-tinged hair.

"I've been saying for two years that I don't care about money and nobody believed me."

There is more to his decision to reduce his workload than spending time with his kids.

At the end of last year, D'Onofrio was admitted to hospital twice after collapses triggered by his physically and emotionally punishing schedule.

When D'Onofrio's health was under a cloud, his close mate, *Criminal Intent* creator Dick Wolf, was forced to think about writing the actor out of the show.

"I was exhausted and I went down," D'Onofrio, 45, says.

"I was doing too much and collapsed, ended up in hospital and a neurologist said, 'Take this medication and sleep for a week'. And that's exactly what I did."

As tests on his health continued, was D'Onofrio scared he'd been struck down by a serious illness?

"There is always some fear, but I'm not a doom and gloom kind of person who was sitting around thinking the worst," he says.

"I had known there was an exhaustion issue before all that happened, but I'd put myself in a situation where I couldn't take a break. Dick Wolf knew I was tired and had to figure something out with my schedule because the last thing he wanted to do was replace me. If not for Dick, I would have quit or been replaced, no doubt about it."

### **FEW DRAMAS IN THIS CAPER**

HE MAY be renowned for the searing intensity he brings to the role of Detective Robert Goren in *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, but Vince D'Onofrio reckons there are plenty of laughs to be had on the set of the Channel 10 drama.

"It's a great workplace and I take a lot of responsibility for ensuring it stays that way," D'Onofrio says.

The only time life has been unpleasant on *Criminal Intent*, he says, was when Andrew McCarthy was signed for a semi-regular guest role.

There were rumours D'Onofrio and McCarthy didn't get on and that McCarthy left the show after D'Onofrio threatened him with physical harm.

Asked about the rumours, D'Onofrio cannot suppress his laughter.

"I can't tell you what I think of him," D'Onofrio says of McCarthy, whose credits include *Class*, *Fresh Horses* and the comedy classic *Weekend at Bernie's*.

His smile disappearing, D'Onofrio says: "Thank God for witnesses (cast and crew who worked with McCarthy).

"The great thing about that experience is that it brought me and the crew together in a way we hadn't been.

"This is not a guy I want to spend time with for the rest of my life. He wasn't very nice to us.

"I brought him to my dressing room to try to sort out the problem, but he just didn't want to be there on the show.

"The suggestion of physical threats is unbelievable. What am I going to do, a big guy (193cm) like me. My shadow could knock him over. I had to keep away from him. He didn't want to be there and eventually he got his wish."