

Variety  
January 11, 2006

## Measure of a man

D'Onofrio's offbeat detective grounded in relationships with auteur helmers

By [DAVID MERMELSTEIN](#)

---

One can imagine [Vincent D'Onofrio](#) as many things: a suicidal recruit ("Full Metal Jacket"), a troubled auteur ("Ed Wood"), a kindly priest ("The Dangerous Life of Alter Boys"), an ineffectual dad ("Thumbsucker").

But one role that may not leap to mind is that of Det. Robert Goren, the brainy cop at the center of NBC's "Law & Order: Criminal Intent." And yet the actor has not just tackled this potentially one-dimensional role, he has played it to a fare-thee-well over five seasons -- complete with nervous tics, bizarre stares and plenty of ah-ha! moments. In fact, D'Onofrio's Det. Goren has become one of the most distinctive figures on TV, a sort of Columbo for the 21st century.

He took the role because he saw a chance to play a different kind of cop.

"It was Dick Wolf really, his pitch," says the actor. "The creative freedom, the idea that there was no soap in it. No nonsense. No romantic stuff. I've just never seen a TV show that reminded me of real life that way.

"I've set him up right from the start as an odd character. I set it up with my execution so that I didn't have to explain things, the moods, how he talks or walks or what's going on behind his eyes. People just assume he's got something going on, that he's weird. And that's nice."

D'Onofrio's career has been filled with offbeat characters, maybe none more so than the one that helped launch his film career. He played psychotic Marine Leonard Lawrence (aka Private Gomer Pyle) who shoots the gunnery sergeant played by R. Lee Emery in director Stanley Kubrick's 1987 masterful "Full Metal Jacket."

It's a film career in which D'Onofrio has partaken in both big studio pics and indies, while working with several iconic filmmakers: [Oliver Stone](#) in "JFK," [Robert Altman](#) in "The Player," [Spike Lee](#) in "Malcolm X" and [Tim Burton](#) in "Ed Wood."

"It's like when Scorsese or Spielberg work with an actor, then all the other directors want to work with that actor, too," he says. "It was my good fortune to work with Kubrick, and I think that's why all the other directors were drawn to me.

"I was very spoiled at the beginning, and it took me a long time to get used to the idea that not every film you do is like ("Full Metal Jacket")."

"There are two kinds of directors. The first is the kind who will cast his movies, and that's where they do half their work. They don't talk about the story with the actors. They're very good to work with.

"Then there's the other kind of director, who does know about acting and wants to be involved. ... The problem is in between, the directors who talk in metaphor. That's nonsense. Nobody deals with that in real life."

In TV or film roles, D'Onofrio has a reputation for eschewing the easy route, yet locating material that stimulates is often difficult.

"I used to pick parts for the fear, whatever would scare me," he says. "I would think, I could never get away with that. But I've done so many films now, I find it really hard to find stuff that interests me."

To help solve that problem, the actor formed his own production company, BrooklynHazelhurst. He has a Western planned for summer, and his short film "Five Minutes, Mr. Welles," which he directed and stars in as Orson Welles, has been making the festival rounds.

D'Onofrio has played the great actor-director before, in Tim Burton's "Ed Wood" (1994). But he insists he wasn't happy with that performance.

"I don't think I did a good enough job for Tim," he says. "It's always bothered me. I just wanted to get it right."

"So I did it to make myself feel better. And now it's out of my system."

Yet something always seems to be nipping at this actor's heels. "It's a nonstop juggling thing," he admits. "You have to keep yourself happy as an actor, a father and an employee of G.E."