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Split cast makes for unified front

Two-tier approach allows writers to take characters in different directions

By **MICHAEL SCHNEIDER**

"[Law & Order: Criminal Intent](#)" star [Vincent D'Onofrio](#) knew something had to give.

The stress of starring in the [Dick Wolf skein](#), maintaining a movie schedule and spending time with his family finally pushed him to the edge in November 2004.

After a stint in the hospital, D'Onofrio decided to change his priorities.

"I was finished," he says. "I couldn't do it anymore, and I didn't want to do it anymore. I was burning out. I hate to say it, but they were making lists to replace me."

D'Onofrio decided he couldn't quit "Criminal Intent," and the show's producers didn't want to see him leave either.

"We all realized at the same time that Vincent was wearing out," says Peter Jankowski, president and chief operating officer of [Wolf Films](#). "He was shooting every day and needed some relief. We were concerned about the coming year."

That's when Wolf and company came up with an unconventional solution: Splitting the show in two, with separate but equal casts sharing the episodic caseload. Rather than appearing in all 22 episodes, D'Onofrio would only be on the fence for 11.

"Dick Wolf is a straight shooter," D'Onofrio says. "He's the only one who talked to me man to man about it. He asked me if I was willing to take the financial cut, and I said it was saying, 'Take your money. I need my family and I need my health.'"

The decision to split the show's focus was a risky one. It was also necessary, according to Kathryn Erbe, who plays D'Onofrio's partner, Det. Alexandra Eames. Erbe contends the combination of the show's intense production [sked](#) and D'Onofrio's perfectionism made for an untenable situation, a burden affecting more than just her co-star.

"It's amazing I've let him live this long," jokes Erbe. "Every day I remind him how lucky he is. That's my job: to keep him humble, to keep his feet on the ground." Joking aside, she adds, "I'm sure he knew I was annoyed (by his perfectionism). It can be a real burden to want to do things well all the time."

But things are better now. "We devote energy to the scenes that really matter," says the actress. "Vincent's let go of a lot of that pressure to control. It's been a great thing watching him grow, learning to let go."

It didn't take long for Wolf and "Criminal Intent" exec producer Rene Balcer to come up with D'Onofrio's counterpart: "[Law & Order](#)" vet Chris Noth, who had already resurrected the character Det. Mike Logan in the [telepic](#) "Exiled: A Law & Order Movie."

Balcer had already written for Noth's character on "Law & Order," which made the transition easy as well.

"It's really like a whole new series," says Balcer.

The change also gave D'Onofrio's co-star, Erbe, a chance to spend more time at home with her young family. Annabella Sciorra was tapped to star opposite Noth in his episodes.

Noth is happy about his onscreen partnership with Sciorra, and thrilled with the one-on/one-off timetable of shooting episodes.

"I'm at the point in my life where I couldn't be doing that every week," says Noth. "The schedule in TV is unrelenting. You have to be strong. You have to be in shape." He laughs. "I don't mind not working."

"The Chris and Annabella thing couldn't be nicer for Kate and I both," D'Onofrio says. "Kate's the mother of two, a very young little boy and a 9-year-old daughter. She works the same hours I do, the same amount of days. How she did it before, I don't know."

Under the new format, the cast is on set for eight days then get 12 days off. The acting teams appeared in one cross-over, two-hour episode that required 16 days straight from both of them, but that was a rare instance.

Jankowski says the switchover has reinvigorated D'Onofrio and given the show a breath of fresh air.

"This year it's remarkable how good Vincent is and how good Chris is," Jankowski says. "Chris breathed new life into the show, while Vincent's performance really improved."

It's also given the crew a chance to stretch their legs.

"There's a new spice in the crew, too," Jankowski says. "They get to mix it up every eight days. The crew can get exhausted too. It's amazing when you stop and think about how these guys work. Anything to shake it up is welcome."

The two-tier approach also gives the show's writers, led by Balcer, a chance to take the characters in different directions. Jankowski notes the difference between the two characters: Noth's Logan is a little more emotional and instinctual than D'Onofrio's Det. Robert Goren, who's more intellectual.

"Our scenes are a little longer in Vincent's episodes and tend to be more Sherlock Holmesian," Jankowski says. "The aria takes place in what tends to be a longer scene. Chris's episodes tend to use the streets a little more. That's where his character comes from."

"In many ways, (the writers) are writing a different show each week," he says. "But there's a consistency in quality. I think the audience knows no matter which half they tune into, they'll get a good show."

Jankowski admits there was some early concern in changing the show up, considering that it had been running along just fine since its 2001 launch.

But in the end, D'Onofrio says the change has helped him recover from a stressful situation.

"I feel better about everything," he says. "I can pay attention to the 'Criminal Intent' scripts now. It's all working for the better. It's great, I can't tell you. I'm making my own films, spending more time with my son and daughter. I can't imagine it happening with anyone else but Dick."