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Freshman Favorites: Vincent D'Onofrio

By **MICHAEL YESSIS**

A 1998 guest appearance on "Homicide: Life on the Street" garnered Vincent D'Onofrio an Emmy nomination, but that wasn't all the 15-year movie veteran took from the spot. "It reminded me that there could be good writing on television," he says.

So, when "Law & Order" creator Dick Wolf approached him with the lead part in the third installment of his acclaimed NBC franchise, "Law & Order: Criminal Intent," D'Onofrio listened. The star of the films "Chelsea Walls," "The Cell" and the upcoming "The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys," liked what he heard enough to sign up for his first-ever small-screen skein.

"Dick pitched my character as a contemporary Sherlock Holmes, and I kind of liked that," D'Onofrio says. "I liked his ideas, and I liked (executive producer and showrunner) Rene Balcer very much. I just felt safe in their hands."

D'Onofrio plays Robert Goren, a hyperintuitive New York detective with an uncanny knack for getting inside the heads of perps. That psychological aspect of the show has resonated with viewers -- "Criminal Intent" has joined its predecessors as a ratings success, earning it renewal and a 4.0 Nielsen Media Research rating among adults 18-49.

It also resonated with D'Onofrio. He thrives on the challenge of portraying a character whose defining strength is deductive reasoning.

"At first, I think (the producers) were a little scared about that, and I just insisted through my performance that the only way that this can work is if you see this guy thinking," he says. "I look at it more as playing a game than playing a cop. I think that's what's been most fun about it for me so far."

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