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Good cop, odd cop
By **MARCUS CASEY**

Vincent D'Onofrio has brought intensity to Law and Order: Criminal Intent, writes MARCUS CASEY

Vincent D'Onofrio is halfway through an interview and he's hungry. So he picks up a knife and fork and cuts a slice of thick, rare steak and eats.

`` People say you shouldn't do this kind of thing in an interview," he says. `` But what the hell -- I'm hungry."

No problems here, mate. That steak does look good.

The Hollywood actor is a relaxed sort, but also one who does it his way and will speak his mind to get results he wants -- particularly pursuing his vision of quality performances from everybody on set.

He's been doing that for more than 20 years, seen in films including Full Metal Jacket, Mystic Pizza, The Player and a whole heap more.

For the first time in his career he's brought that intensity to the small screen, starring as Detective Robert Goren in Law and Order: Criminal Intent.

The third branch of the superb Law and Order franchise is in the middle of its second US season, which begins on Channel 10 from February 5.

Two weeks ago, the show -- which delves into criminal motive rather than the act and prosecution of it -- was the fifth-most-watched show of the week in the US. Success has come quickly.

But in another display of a creative edge he obviously keeps sharpened, that's bad news to D'Onofrio.

`` We're doing really well at the moment -- we're No 5," he says. `` But that stuff doesn't make me happy. I really just wish we would stay still. When I last looked we were 12. NBC and Dick [Wolf, the show's creator] won't agree with me but I'd be happy if the show stayed where it was [at No 12].

`` It doesn't need to be a No 1 show, it just needs to be good. The minute you start feeling like you've got it down, you know what you're doing, you're dead in the water.

`` I want every episode to feel like we still haven't done this right yet. Being No 5 has nothing to do with what happens on set. The fact that it's [being No 5] floating around in people's minds on set now -- I cringe to think about it."

It's a refreshing, repeated honesty. Talk to D'Onofrio about how film and TV differ and he'll tell you the latter is hard work -- and is frank about the results.

`` It's not digging ditches but it is hard work. At our best, it's a good experience but we do 22 episodes a year, so there are some clunkers."

His character on Criminal Intent is an oddball, a kind of good and bad cop rolled into one, with a Colombo-esque quiriness. Goren is a homicide detective who thinks like a killer but doesn't act like one. He doesn't act much like a cop either.

D'Onofrio and executive producer Rene Balcer created Goren on paper but only the actor could make him live -- unnerving for his new colleagues.

`` They were all interested in what I was going to do, because I'd never worked in television before," he says. `` They had this idea of the character but didn't know how he was going to turn out. They were curious to see, once Rene saw it, if I'd get away with the stuff I was getting away with.

`` People were a little nervous about Goren -- the way he speaks, the way he plays games with voice and posture. I approached the scenes without changing any of Rene's words but would (physically) improvise with something that wasn't on the page. It made people nervous. Half the time they don't know what I'm going to do. But I do talk with Rene beforehand, so he knows what I'm going to do and how it'll track through the story.

`` I'm pushing, pushing, pushing every day -- that's what I do."

The result is fine television, although Goren's character steals scenes and overshadows co-star Kathryn Erbe, who plays his offsider, Detective Alex Eames.

As with other Law and Order series, stories are often drawn from real life -- the first episode of the series is, in part, about a crematorium worker who dumps bodies instead of giving them proper funerals -- which happened in the US last year.

That, however, is where he says the connections between the other series ends. While the opening credits and narration are the same, Criminal Intent doesn't have the formal plot structure of crime, investigation, arrest and prosecution of the others.

`` We really don't band together and the shows are filmed separately in different places," he says. `` Our show is different, because it's not about law and order, it's about psychology, the intent of somebody.

`` It's a `whydunnit' and it has a character who's almost as weird as the bad guys. It's very different in that way."

Australian viewers got to know Goren when the series aired here last year and D'Onofrio has found himself recognised in the street since arriving.

He's in Sydney visiting his 11-year-old daughter to actor Greta Scacchi, whom he lived with in beachside Coogee for almost four years in the late '80s and early '90s.

`` It's always nice to come back here. I haven't been for a while but I can't tell you how much I love it."

Law and Order: Criminal Intent returns to Ten at 8.30pm on February 5. Repeats of Law and Order (Monday, 8.30pm) and Law and Order: SVU (Thursday 8.30pm) are now airing.

Caption: Lawman: Vincent D'Onofrio in Sydney this week and (above) with Law and Order co-stars Courtney B. Vance and Kathryn VanceBOB BARKER

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