



The 3rd Degree: Creator Dick Wolf and his crime-time players shoot for another successful Law & Order spin-off. But will CRIMINAL INTENT hold up in the court of public opinion? (television programme)

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law & order: criminal intent nbc, 9-10 p.m. debuts september 30

Looking every bit the old-school TV producer in his navy suit, bright yellow shirt, and gold cuff links, Dick Wolf strides onto the set of his latest NBC spin-off, Law & Order: Criminal Intent, and watches as costars Vincent D'Onofrio (Full Metal Jacket, Men in Black) and Kathryn Erbe (HBO's prison drama Oz) shoot an arrest scene in an out-of-business Greenwich Village bookstore. Suddenly, sirens blare from the street--a fire has broken out several stories above them. A hook-and-ladder truck from FDNY Company 147 ("Da Pride of Flatbush") arrives, and firefighters rush inside the building. All the while, the cameras keep rolling. "It's just another normal day on the set for Wolf Films," the company's founder deadpans.

With a resume reaching back to Hill Street Blues and Miami Vice, Wolf is an old pro at putting out fires on sets. (Luckily, no one was injured in today's real-life incident.) But the question is, Can Criminal Intent blaze the same successful trail as predecessors Law & Order and Law & Order: Special Victims Unit?

Wolf's betting the show's premise will provide the necessary spark: "You get to see inside the criminal's head," he says. "It's the first time a Law & Order series has broken the locked point of view." In fact, Criminal Intent devotes almost as much screen time to the perp perspective--the planning, execution, and aftermath of the crime--as it does to the investigation by the Major Cases Squad, an elite unit of detectives assigned to the highest-profile crimes.

But will viewers really want to spend that much time inside the mind of the bad guy? "American audiences have always been fascinated by criminals...from pulp novels about Western outlaws to gangster films of the '30s and '40s to The Sopranos," says executive producer Rene Balcer, a member of the Wolf pack since Law & Order's first season 11 years ago. "In a way, they're a twisted mirror of our own wants, needs, and desires--there's a vicarious thrill in watching somebody

do something you would never dare do."

Actually, you'd think Wolf would never dare venture into this territory again after the quick demise of his 1993 non-L&O drama *Crime & Punishment*, in which cops and hoods shared their motives with an invisible voice known as the Interrogator. But he says *Criminal Intent* is different: "The thing that hurt *Crime & Punishment* was breaking the fourth wall. It doesn't seem to make audiences happy."

Neither, you'd think, would knowing whodunit before a show's opening credits, but *Criminal Intent*'s creative team isn't concerned about veering from that standard detective-show formula. "I have a lot of experience delivering thrills and twists and surprises, and I'm not going to disappoint with this series," says Balcer. "The audience may think they're one step ahead of the police, but I'm going to be one step ahead of the audience." Besides, adds new NBC Entertainment president Jeff Zucker, "just because you know what's going on, you don't know how the cops are going to figure it out."

Explains Wolf, "*Criminal Intent* is the triumph of psychology over criminality." In fact, he's fond of referring to D'Onofrio's Robert Goren as "an American Sherlock Holmes" who uses deductive reasoning rather than brute force to nab his prey.

It was this pitch that persuaded D'Onofrio to star in his first small-screen series. "I was not interested in playing some tough cop on a TV show--I've avoided it my whole career," says D'Onofrio. "There's a bunch of them, and we don't need any more." He was attracted to the idea of playing a more sensitive hero, however. "I've played some pretty nasty f---ers," says the actor, citing the serial killer in last year's *The Cell*. "I'm trying to even out my karma."

Don't expect D'Onofrio to go too soft. "I won't do soap," he says. "We want to stay a crime story, a detective story--you'll never see me with a lover, you'll never know too much about my family." Still, even as a good guy, the actor projects an almost unsettling intensity, raising the question of whether he may be too hot for TV. "TV is no longer just a cool medium," says Balcer, "especially with an audience that's used to cable." Adds Zucker, "Whether it's James Gandolfini or Dennis Franz or Martin Sheen...it's that intensity that is driving the one-hour dramas on television."

Like D'Onofrio, Erbe saw *Criminal Intent*'s Alexandra Eames as an antidote to a dark role: Shirley Bellinger, the mother who killed her kids (and was eventually put to death) on *Oz*. "The character kinda ate away at my conscience," Erbe admits. Yet her work so impressed Wolf that he hired her to play opposite D'Onofrio. "With Vincent, you need somebody that projects the same kind of intelligence and strength," Wolf says. "It's not that she's physically commanding--she's intellectually commanding."

Rounding out the cast are Chicago Hope vet Jamey Sheridan as D'Onofrio and Erbe's ambitious

boss, Capt. James Deakins ("a great cop who knows what could be done if the wheels of justice were properly greased," Sheridan says), and Courtney B. Vance (Space Cowboys) as flashy assistant DA Ron Carver. Trial scenes aren't as big a part of Criminal Intent as on Law & Order, which limits Vance's role but allows him plenty of time to travel home to L.A. to see wife Angela Bassett. "We're not quite prepared to move to New York," he says.

Cast members from the other Law & Order shows will also pop up occasionally. DA Nora Lewin (Dianne Wiest) chews out Carver in one episode, and the cops consult detectives Briscoe (Jerry Orbach) and Green (Jesse L. Martin) in another. Plus, a five-hour miniseries using actors from all three shows is planned for May sweeps (the plot involves a bioterrorist attack on Manhattan). "This sounds horribly pretentious, but the whole concept is that it's like Dickens' London," says Wolf of the Law & Order trilogy. "People can transit freely across all the platforms."

Using a slightly easier-to-swallow metaphor, Wolf compares his L&O brand to Coke, with the original as Coca-Cola Classic, SVU as Diet Coke, and CI as Cherry Coke, "which differs more [from the original] than Diet Coke." Yes, but it's also less popular. "It's on Sundays at 9 o'clock," Wolf counters. "How can it be as popular?"

Never a media wallflower, Wolf hasn't been shy about expressing his dislike for CI's time slot. "It's too early," he says. "You're dealing with adult subject matter--it should be at 10 o'clock." He's also worried that viewers won't be aware that NBC has returned to airing series rather than TV movies on Sundays for the first time in 22 years. So where would Wolf rather see his show? Mondays at 10 p.m., home of the Peacock's new coroner drama Crossing Jordan, starring--what do you know?--Law & Order evacuee Jill Hennessy. "It's just business, nothing personal," says Wolf. For now, NBC isn't budging. "I respect Dick and agree to disagree with him on this one," says Zucker. "I have every expectation it can work Sunday at 9." Should that prove true, there may be yet another Law & Order spin-off in NBC's future. "If this one works, the possibilities are endless," says Sheridan. Well, not exactly endless. As Wolf points out, "there are only seven nights in the week."

--Bruce Fretts

[BOX]

TIME

7:00

ABC The Wonderful World of Disney CBS 60 Minutes NBC Dateline FOX Futurama WB Ripley's Believe It or Not!

7:30

[FOX] King of the Hill

8:00

[CBS] The Education of Max Bickford [NBC] Weakest Link [FOX] The Simpsons [WB] The Steve Harvey Show

8:30

[FOX] Malcolm in the Middle [WB] Men, Women & Dogs

9:00

[ABC] Alias [CBS] CBS Sunday Movie [NBC] Law & Order: Criminal Intent [FOX] The X-Files [WB] Nikki

9:30

[UPN] Off Centre

10:00

[ABC] The Practice [NBC] UC: Undercover [FOX] Local programming [WB] Local programming

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