

watch me

You Can Check Out Any Time You Like,
But You Can Never Leave

The long, slow death-march of Awful Summer Reality Series Week continues, as Fox unleashes **Paradise Hotel** upon a population that has apparently wronged Rupert Murdoch somehow. The new show follows the adventures of eleven single men and women who live in an exclusive resort, only each week, one guest gets the boot to make way for a new contestant -- and Fox hints that the new contestants could be chosen from among the puffy, Fritos-added home viewers.

Wednesday, 9 p.m., Fox

--Philip Michaels

station breaks

The Cable Gods Have Failed Me - June 13

Foreign Television is Weird - June 13

[Weblog Archive...](#)

previously...

Tuesday

Wil Has a Way

Wil Wheaton, child actor and nice guy. Who knew?

Friday

Death Comes to TiVo

TiVo, no! Don't go! Don't leave me!

June 12

TeeVee C.V.

Our credentials.

June 10

Many Reasons to Watch The Wire

Paying for HBO? You owe it to your wallet to watch 'The Wire.'

June 2

Putting the 'X' in Fox

Thank god, it's the last of the upfronts.

May 30

24 Misogyny Watch: Day Two Wrap-Up

How the women of '24' fared in season two.

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A TeeVee rerun from www.teevee.org



Fall '01: D'Onofrio v. Columbo

by **Chris Rywalt** - October 3, 2002

Last fall I was assigned to review *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* for some lame Web site. I forget which one. And I watched the show, which I was going to do anyway, and I had opinions about it, which I was going to have anyway. And then I didn't write the review.

So here it is, a year late. After watching the whole of the 2001-2002 season, and also the season premiere for the new season, I find that my opinions haven't changed at all.

L&O: CI is a departure from the *L&O* road. It might be helpful to remember what the original *Law & Order* was all about; that way we can see how far *Intent* has come.

When *Law & Order* first debuted in 1990, it was to carry on the tradition probably started by *Hill Street Blues*, which had ended three years earlier. It was an antidote to the sitcom, an antidote to shows like *Miami Vice* (which had only ended its run the previous season). With its seriousness and its realism, *L&O* was intended, probably, to be an alternative to the goofy TV of the time, and other shows from the same era show the same trend: *Homicide* (1993) and *ER* (1994), for example. The sitcom was out of favor, the prime-time soaps were all doddering to their conclusions, and the fabricated action shows like *Wiseguy* and *Quantum Leap* were winding down.

Catch the first season in re-runs on TNT sometime. You might be surprised at how realistic the show was trying to be, how dirty and unpleasant. Almost every scene is underlit, except for the ones which are overlit with fluorescents. Everyone looks a little ill. The handheld camera has clearly had one scotch too many. Scenes are crowded, noisy. No one is a hero. There is no grandstanding. No one is happy. Even when the good guys win, they lose.

Law & Order has changed over the years and now it's pretty slick and almost every show and case ends with a stirring closing argument. But it's still pretty grim compared to, say, *CHiPs*.

Not so much *Criminal Intent*, and that's where the new show blazes its own path. Or, more properly, actually wanders off from its predecessor's path and blunders into a much more well-trodden path. A paved road, actually. A paved road with strip malls on either side populated with characters like Jessica Fletcher, Mark Sloan, Ben Matlock, Dr. _____ Quincy, C. Auguste Dupin, and -- most obviously -- Sherlock Holmes and Lieutenant Columbo.

Yes, it's a return to form for the mystery series. Back to showing the viewers at home the crime so we can spend the next hour waiting for the hero to catch up. Back to the entire crime being solved by one person with powers of observation so refined they should be put in orbit in place of the Hubble telescope. Back to odd little details giving the culprit away; back to forcing confessions using psychological tricks; back to the days of hunches, clues, and watching a guy turn his head sideways and say, "Just one more thing..."

And it's hilarious and worth watching entirely because of one actor: Vincent D'Onofrio.

D'Onofrio has had a pretty amazing film career. He's managed to play a ridiculous variety of roles and almost never even looks like the same actor twice in a row. After playing an insanely murderous Marine for Stanley Kubrick he went on to play Thor; Orson Welles; Robert E. Howard, creator of Conan the Barbarian; a space insect in human skin; Abbie Hoffman; a serial killer who hangs from hooks in his back over corpses to masturbate; and Pooh-Bear, a drug dealer whose nose has fallen off. Following all those portrayals, what D'Onofrio is doing on TV is anyone's guess. Perhaps after running a gauntlet of characters who make Christopher Walken look like Danny Kaye, Vincent thought bringing a creaky old television formula to life was his greatest challenge yet.

He manages it, too. Like all the great detective stories of old, the pleasure in watching *L&O: CI* comes, not from the crime itself or even the solution of the crime, but from seeing *how* the crime is solved. D'Onofrio's character, Detective Robert Goren, combines the brilliant mind of Sherlock Holmes with the cunning and elliptical interrogation style of Columbo. Somehow, through sheer force of talent perhaps, D'Onofrio makes this impossible role into a believable person -- someone you can imagine really does go home and study up on the Bible and art restoration techniques just in case he gets a perp who quotes Ezekiel or counterfeits Impressionist paintings.

The rest of the show doesn't even qualify as window dressing. Actually, there is one small bright spot: Kathryn Erbe, playing Goren's partner Detective Alexandra Eames, is quite possibly the first and only actress who actually looks like she could be a female cop and not an actress who spends a lot of cuddle time with her elliptical cross trainer. When she takes off her blazer to reveal a sleeveless shirt and those muscular arms of hers -- well, she's the one actress on TV who looks like she really could kick ass.

Alas, the writers never give her anything to do. Ditto Jamey Sheridan, whose main job is to look good in profile and provide someone to receive Goren's exegeses. A sad plight for an actor who has played Randall Flagg and Ozzie Nelson. Courtney B. Vance is on hand, too, to show that he can really, really

Fall 2001

New show reviews:

September 13, 2001: ["Lost" and "The Amazing Race"](#)

September 20, 2001: ["One on One"](#)

September 25, 2001: ["Undeclared"](#)

September 26, 2001: ["The Education of Max Bickford"](#)

September 27, 2001: ["Wolf Lake"](#)

October 1, 2001: ["Citizen Baines"](#)

October 4, 2001: ["UC: Undercover"](#)

October 8, 2001: ["Alias"](#)

October 10, 2001: ["Scrubs"](#)

October 22, 2001: ["Reba"](#)

October 24, 2001: ["Maybe It's Me"](#)

October 29, 2001: ["Elimidate Deluxe"](#)

October 30, 2001: ["The Agency"](#)

November 2, 2001: ["Smallville"](#)

November 5, 2001: ["Bob Patterson"](#)

November 9, 2001: ["Pasadena"](#)

November 26, 2001: ["Inside Schwartz"](#)

November 29, 2001: ["The Bernie Mac Show"](#)

December 26, 2001: ["The Tick"](#)

January 2, 2002: ["24"](#)

January 28, 2002: ["Emeril"](#)

February 18, 2002: ["Terrible WB Sitcoms"](#)

April 23, 2002: ["On a "Love Cruise" to Nowhere"](#)

October 3: ["D'Onofrio v. Columbo"](#)

whisper. If anyone ever needs to find someone with the silkiest whisper in the world, I hope they hear Courtney B. Vance.

Ditto all the supporting actors, locations, sets, grips, best boys, and everyone and everything else. No one really has anything to do except sit back and watch Vinnie D'Onofrio cock his head to the side, squint, bend over, imitate random accents, quote the Bible, yank bizarre factlets out of his ass, lie, fabricate evidence, and goad evildoers into confessing their awful crimes. Which he does every time. No one gets away with it.

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What relation this could possibly have to the rest of the L&O universe I cannot imagine. Over in that universe, the bad guys sometimes win, cases are sometimes won by accident, no one is ever really sure of what's going on, and everyone is pissed off all the time. If characters from the other shows didn't occasionally pop up in cameos there'd be no reason to suspect that the shows were related.

No reason that you or I could see, anyway. But I bet Goren would notice.



Chris Rywalt is TeeVee's copy editor and master of the Station Break. He has lived his entire life within sight of New York City. His [Web page](#) looks so 1995. But as a man of many talents -- he programs, he writes, he draws, he paints, he sings -- okay, he doesn't sing well -- he can't always be updating one paltry file. He has written 48 TeeVee pieces.

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