



'Criminal Intent': Cop Drama's Winning Formula

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Producer Dick Wolf, king of cut-and-dried crime shows, has cut and dried another one for your viewing pleasure. "Law & Order: Criminal Intent," the second spinoff from Wolf's "Law & Order" template, will be a viewing pleasure mainly for those who are already fans of Wolf's wares.

This means one gets lotsa plot, very little characterization, a slam-bang docudrama style and, of course, a solemn-toned announcer at the beginning to describe the premise. This one, it turns out, is about the exploits of New York's "Major Case Squad," whose detectives deal only with, well, major cases.

But haven't some of the cases on "Law & Order" been major? We'll just have to overlook that. And based on the quality-level of the "Criminal Intent" premiere (at 9 tomorrow on Channel 4), that's worth overlooking.

The best thing about the show is that its cast is so overqualified for it. Vincent D'Onofrio is one of the most inspired and versatile young actors of our time. He was unforgettable in an episode of "Homicide: Life on the Street" in which he barely moved; he spent most of it trapped under a subway car.

In "Criminal Intent" he plays a hyper-intuitive detective who scans every

crime scene like a dauntless superhero with X-ray vision. He's also something of a philosopher. When his partner, ably played by Kathryn Erbe, points out to him that he's just said something good about the "bad guys," D'Onofrio says, "Bad guys do what good guys dream."

Of course, just because he's a philosopher doesn't mean his philosophy holds water. That line, from writer-producer Rene Balcer, sounds snappy but does not stand up under analysis. The thing is, the show zips along so fast that D'Onofrio could be reciting the Russian alphabet and you might not notice until he was halfway through it.

Courtney B. Vance as an assistant district attorney absolutely owns the screen when he appears, but he doesn't appear until late in the show, and then too briefly. Dianne Wiest does a guest-star gig in the last quarter-hour that amounts to only a few lines of dialogue. Are acting jobs so scarce that fine actors like these (and Jamey Sheridan, as the captain of the squad) have to take such itchy bit parts?

Although "Criminal Intent" airs at 9 o'clock, it contains a good deal of 10 o'clock dialogue, including graphic sexual references and three horrible murders within the first six minutes. The show is part of NBC's new brutal and bloodthirsty Sunday-night lineup, a gambit that would be unwelcome at any time but perhaps especially now.

If we must have such shows as "Criminal Intent," however, Wolf is clearly the man to do them. The plot of the premiere could easily be expanded into a feature-length movie, but Wolf's thing is compression. Thus, what you get is Condensed Cream of Crime -- and an hour of cracklingly tense TV.

'Alias'

At first glance, "Alias" appears to be unadulterated garbage. But then you start noticing all the adulterations.

Yes, I am aware that ABC's new domestic espionage show has received glowing reviews from certain quarters. And I am also aware that tomorrow night's pilot (at 9 on Channel 7) is, in network press-prose, "brought to you without commercial interruption by the New Nokia 3300 Series Wireless Phone." Oh goody.

But what a loud load of nothing this dimwitted ripoff of "La Femme Nikita" turns out to be, with cheap sequences of horrific torture crammed in to

spice it up. Our nothing if not plucky (and unlucky) heroine, Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner), thinks she works for the CIA, or rather a "covert branch" of it called SD-6. Um, isn't the CIA supposed to be all-covert? Well maybe not.

Anyway, it turns out that Kid Syd may not be working for the CIA at all but only thinks she is. Why else would the CIA ransack her apartment and kill her boyfriend? Meanwhile up pops Victor Garber as her estranged papa (Good grief, it's Daddy!) who implies that they are both double agents who are pretending to have been planted by The Enemy within the CIA but actually may be working for the CIA after all!

Got that? Don't worry, it isn't worth getting.

The horrific tortures include a giant scary needle injected into victims' arms and the old "Marathon Man" bit of interrogating a captive, in this case our little Sydney, while performing painful dental work. As for the show's credibility -- when Sydney decides to go underground, what does she do but dye her hair bright flaming red, all the better to attract as much attention as possible?

"We could use another double agent in SD-6," some Big Shot at the agency tells Sydney near the conclusion. But he may be lying. And Sydney may in fact be a triple agent. Or even a quadruple one. Nothing is as it seems except for the fact that this seems like a lousy show and it is one.

'Citizen Baines'

To keep assuring us that "Citizen Baines" is set mostly in Seattle, the city's Space Needle pops up in as many vistas as possible. As it turns out, the Space Needle may just give the best performance in the show. Even the liveliest.

A resolute snoozer apparently meant to capitalize on the success of NBC's "West Wing" and its political stories, "Baines," a CBS drama premiering at 9 tonight on Channel 9, introduces us to its supposedly lovable hero as he wakes on Election Day wondering whether he'll win a fourth term as senator from Washington.

Well, he won't. And so darling old Elliot Baines (played by lanky James Cromwell) must face life as a private citizen. This will consist primarily, it appears, of listening to the whining grievances of his three grown daughters.

Since the senator has Lyndon Johnson's middle name as his surname, let us describe the senator's daughters the way legendary impressionist David Frye used to refer to LBJ's: as "semi-beautiful." There is nothing "semi" about their kvetching, however, which is kept up at withering heights all through the show.

One daughter, pregnant, sees her husband with his girlfriend in the park -- definitely no small matter. Another daughter, a rebel once caught with "a couple of joints," deeply and loudly resents it when her father helps get her a job as a newspaper photographer. This suggests she is not only an ingrate but an imbecile. Those jobs don't exactly grow on trees, honey.

And the third daughter -- let's see, what's her beef? If you really want to know, you'll have to tune in and find out. But take this friendly warning for what it's worth: You'll be sor-ree!

'UC: Undercover'

Zoom goes the whirlybird, bang goes the tommy gun, click go the keys of the lappy-top computer. Explosions, gunfire, swooping, diving, boom boom boom, bang bang bang! Is it New Year's Eve in Hell? No it's "UC: Undercover."

And if a certain network we could mention puts on many more shows like this one, it'll be "NBC Undercover" too. Talk about mega-migraine headaches. "UC: Undercover" is a tidal wave of white noise coming at you in a vicious blur. It's hard to imagine why sane viewers would want to just sit there and let it clobber them.

Basically a fancy-pants and domesticated update of "Mission: Impossible" outfitted with tons of high-tech gear, "UC: Undercover" (premiering at 10 tomorrow night on Channel 4) bombards the viewer with visual as well as audible cacophony. The camera, like the helicopter in the opening shots, zooms and swings and zigs and zags, all in an effort to sustain the illusion of Something Going On.

Nothing is going on. That's what's going on. And "UC: Undercover"? That's what's going off -- providing the ratings are as bad as the show is. Speaking of shows -- Grant Show, who plays the leader of the "elite" crime-fighting force in the first episode, won't be around for the second, having been replaced by another actor.

Grant, in other words, got lucky.

As the comic-book characters go about their anti-crime capers they shout out inane lines galore. Such stuff as "Let me give you a little 4-1-1" and "Don't talk to me like you know me" and "Try that again, you'll have a hole in your back the size of your crack habit." Grrr!

Female suspect: "I watch Court TV! You're violatin' my rights."

Female cop: "You have a right -- to shut up!"

Yes indeed. And we all have a right to stay as far as possible from TV shows as preposterous and foolish as "UC: Undercover." Think of not watching it as therapy for the soul and blessed rest for the senses. Never waste your senses on anything this senseless.

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