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Vincent D'Onofrio Explores Acting Monogamy

The life of a movie actor is all about fresh beginnings: showing up for each job with a completely different script and a whole new character to play.

For example, Vincent D'Onofrio plays an Irish priest in the recent **"The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys"** and a methamphetamine dealer in the new crime drama **"The Salton Sea."** He also portrayed a farmer whose skin was inhabited by an alien in the first **"Men in Black"** movie -- but that's not a role he misses.

"It was fun to do," he says. "Barry Sonnenfeld's great to work with, fun to work with, but it was a bit exhausting."

Last year, D'Onofrio took on the challenge of the TV actor, which is playing the same character week in and week out. He stars as Detective Robert Goren in NBC's Sunday drama **"Law & Order: Criminal Intent,"** the third series in the franchise created by executive producer Dick Wolf.

Set and filmed in New York -- as are all the **"Law & Order"** shows -- the drama, which begins its second season this fall, takes a more psychological slant on crime, as Goren pits his considerable intellect against the perpetrators of major crimes.

Talking in late spring, D'Onofrio is still at work, long after most series have shut down production. "These six episodes we're doing now will air next season," he says, "We finish the end of June, and I guess we have 2 1/2 months off."

It's certainly not the usual schedule for a film actor. "Film is like a vacation compared to this stuff," D'Onofrio says. "This is real work. It's hard work. As far as the acting thing, it's the same. Acting is acting. I haven't lowered the bar on performance, so it's the same. There's just a lot more of it."



'Law & Order: Criminal Intent'

"It's the first time I've ever had to return to a character, which is a little strange. I guess I've gotten used to it, but it's still a bit odd to play the same guy all the time."

Asked what advantages he's discovered in playing the same character over an extended period, D'Onofrio says, "The idea of putting the same character in different circumstances repeatedly is interesting, and that's a challenge in itself. I'm a character actor, and I've spent almost half my life playing extremely different parts from one film to the next."

He also doesn't worry too much about keeping Goren consistent from week to week. "The truth is, I just throw him into it; the less consistency, the better. Actually, it's more interesting if the character isn't always consistent."



"I try really hard to just think of it as the first time, each time, without doing anything silly, like changing his voice or his speech patterns or his posture. I keep that all the same, but I don't lock myself into any kind of reaction that he might have from one thing to the next."

Goren is unusual among TV characters in that he lives a lot inside his own head, which is both intriguing and a challenge. "He gets quirker in the second season," D'Onofrio says. "I can't say too much, but we're definitely exploring his schizophrenic history in his family."

"He's becoming a bit more -- just a bit, not so it goes into a strange area -- a bit more obsessed at times, a bit more odd at times. More of his history comes out, through circumstance, not because you see him with his family or anything. I just want to keep going further with this kind of interior guy that he is, see where that goes."

D'Onofrio believes that the show's predecessors -- "[Law & Order](#)," which focuses on police and prosecutors, and "[Law & Order: Special Victims Unit](#)," which looks at sexually based offenses -- stick closer to reality than his show.

"The way they behave, it's very real. They could be real cops, and their stories are much more along the lines of stuff ripped out of the headlines. Our stuff is ripped out of the headlines, but then we do something else with it. We make it fictional."

"My character is definitely a fictional character. There's no cop that exists like my guy. My guy would be slapped silly the first day on the street. The first time that I cocked my head weird or did too much interior stuff, people would just laugh at me."

Asked how the show evolved over the first season, D'Onofrio says, "One of the big things that happened, one of the most obvious, is that we know we can get away with it, because it was a big question. The first time that my character started to take pauses on television, and no words were being spoken, it scared everybody a little bit."

"So we know it works. We know that people don't mind watching the character think about things, which is good. It makes the show more clever, and it also helps me sell some of these Sherlock Holmesian deductions I make."

"[Law & Order: Criminal Intent](#)" had both critical and commercial success in its freshman season, and D'Onofrio is quick to point out that it's not all down to Dick Wolf. "Dick is our boss, and the concept of the '[Law & Order](#)' thing is to his credit, and the '[Criminal Intent](#)' is to his credit, but as the show goes on, you can't forget that the show runner, Rene Balcer, is also very responsible for what you see out there."



Vincent D'Onofrio

"He and I had to basically come up with the goods to sell this in a different way than the other shows and make this character, Goren, interesting. In my opinion, the writing is probably some of the best crime-story writing on television."

"We're all in sync, usually, and if we're not, we try to change the other one's mind. It's a very collaborative effort. I've heard that I'm lucky, and so I believe it."

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