



A Bobby dazzler

June 16, 2005

What makes *Criminal Intent's* Bobby Goren tick? Gordon Farrer asks the questions.

Vincent D'Onofrio inhabits his TV character detective Bobby Goren so completely it's hard to accept that the two don't share more than physical characteristics.

He has the Goren stubble, the dark clothing and the half-smile that suggests he knows something you don't and knows you want to know it, too.

When you are introduced, he sizes you up. He doesn't look straight at you for long, but you know he just measured you. Not measured as for a suit or a coffin, or to work out whether he could take you down in a brawl - it's clear he could, he's a big man, and solid.

But it seems he was trying to gauge the challenge you might present to his intellect. Or is that to confuse him with the impossibly intelligent Goren, the modern-day Sherlock Holmes of *Law & Order Criminal Intent*, assuming traits that come with the face?

D'Onofrio is a loose-jointed man, despite his size. When he walks down the corridor at Channel Ten, he's all knees and elbows, but controlled, not awkward.

It seems that he's throwing his sharp bits wider than usual in an unconscious limbering-up exercise to prep for the interview.

Or it might be a fluidity he enjoys when he doesn't need to be wound up for a role - when he's not clutching Goren's leather satchel, or wrapped tight in Goren's duffle coat.

We're shown to a large room and led to a nest of comfy chairs beside a boardroom-sized table. On a side table a jug of water sits beside two glasses and a fruit platter.

The spirit of Goren enters D'Onofrio's body and he puts on a brief performance. He leaps from his chair and fires questions about a ceiling-mounted TV projector. How does it work? Do you watch movies on that wall over there? Is it LCD? Do you really watch movies with it? He probes and demands and doesn't settle for "I don't know".

Next it's the fruit: Is it good? It looks good. I'll try this watermelon . . . Nothing. No flavour at all. You try it. Nothing.

Then we are alone. Just the room with the table, television system, glasses of water and platter of beautiful but tasteless fruit. And this D'Onofrio - the D'Onofrio who talks for the next half-hour

about exhaustion, about directors, the future of *Criminal Intent* and the demons we all have inside us - this is a more gentle, genuine, less guarded D'Onofrio.

If the quirky, agitated, obsessively inquiring Bobby Goren had been in the room with us a few moments before, he isn't now.

Much was made of D'Onofrio's health after he was put into hospital a couple of times while filming last season, sparking speculation about the series' future.

Having decided he couldn't keep up the pace of 22 episodes a season of a show in which he has 60 per cent of the dialogue and appears in most scenes, he and executive producer Dick Wolf decided on a radical plan.

Criminal Intent would be reshaped to have alternating lead characters. Bobby Goren would appear every second episode, with detective Mike Logan (Chris Noth) returning from the original series every other week.

There were issues about your health . . .

"I'll tell you what happened so you don't have to ask. I'll tell you. I was directing a film, acting in a film, producing a film, doing my (TV) show. Simultaneously. And one day I collapsed. I lost my vision and I went down. And then I lost it twice more and I had to go to the hospital. They hooked me up to all these machines - my heart and my head - and I had wires coming out of me for days straight, and they couldn't find anything wrong. So the neurologist said 'You're f---ing tired. Sleep.'

"And they gave me something to sleep and I slept for a week. I came out and I talked to Dick (Wolf) on the phone, and I said 'Dick, I can't do 22 episodes a season. I just can't do it.' That's why Chris Noth" - he says it to rhyme with "both" - "has to come now. It's why he's shooting his episode right now while we're talking. Dick knew that was it for me unless he did something about it."

There will be competition and critical comparison between the two strands. Will that hurt the show?

"Yeah, there will be, but this is the only concern that I have: that Chris and Annabella (Sciorra, who will play Logan's partner, detective Carolyn Barak) do a good job . . . Annabella's a great actress. Chris has known that character for a long time, he can come in and he can do that character.

"My prediction is that they're going to love Chris and Annabella and our ratings are going to go up because of them."

Why?

"Because the women love Chris, he's Mr Big (from *Sex and the City*) . . . If he sticks to his character, and if (writer and executive producer) Rene (Balcer) writes it so that Annabella's the smart one and Chris is the street-wise one . . . If the audience gives it a chance, we've got a chance."

But so much of *Criminal Intent's* appeal is the quiriness of Goren. And you're subtracting that from every second episode.

"I'm hoping that the audience likes my character but likes the structure of *Criminal Intent* and will give it a shot with those other guys. I have to hope that it works out; I can't keep doing 22 episodes a season. The audience has to decide: do they want me every other week or do they not want me at all? Because I ain't gonna make it even though I wish I could."

Out of the blue, D'Onofrio offers a tantalising titbit. There is no obvious lull in the conversation, barely a moment's breath, but he chooses now to plant a seed.

"I'm going to come here and I'm going to do a show."

What sort of show?

"I'm not going to tell you. But I'm going to come here and I'm going to do something here with Channel Ten.

Do you have something in mind?

"I'm talking to Channel Ten already."

Why do you want to do something here?

"Because I love Australia. I would live in Sydney because that's where my friends are. That's where my daughter was born."

With some actors you're never certain you know who you're talking to. Is this publicity circuit D'Onofrio playing the PR game?

Would it be similar to what you do now? A TV series?

"Yep, a TV series. But I won't play a cop. Probably a miniseries. I don't know. It'll be mine and Channel Ten's."

There's no more to learn. For the moment.

Detective Bobby Goren is one of the quirkiest characters on television. Impossibly smart, a master of arcane subjects - from the odours of chemical compounds to cloisonne to oriental calligraphy and more. His agitated, stylised manner infuriates some viewers and electrifies others.

Where do Bobby Goren and Vincent D'Onofrio intersect?

"In the spontaneous stuff. That's the closest I come to the character. When we're on set, my choices from moment to moment are spontaneous choices. I go whichever direction I feel like going. I don't change any dialogue; it's improvisation without changing any of the words.

"I'm very close to the camera crew and the cinematographer and all the guys involved in lighting. I've been with these guys for four years and I've worked with all of them before in the 50 or so films I've done. They're very used to my energy; I keep my energy up high. We get into conversations that are bizarre and they know that when I come on set that things are gonna happen; that energy level's going to go from a work atmosphere to an elevated atmosphere so that the energy doesn't have to change when the camera starts rolling."

What sort of director do you work best with?

"A director who knows the story. I need to be informed because I know the story too, but I can make mistakes."

What about direction of your performance?

"The worst thing is a director who thinks they know anything about acting. If a director knows something about acting, you know immediately in your first conversation. If they don't, then you just have to let it go in one ear and out the other as much as you can."

From what you've about said working with Stanley Kubrick in *Full Metal Jacket* it sounds as though you craved more direction than you got.

"I wouldn't have dared ask him for more direction. I was shit scared of him. It was my first (big) film, he's Stanley Kubrick, it didn't even dawn on me that I should be wanting anything more from him. I was in this whole other head where I just wanted to do a good job then get the f--- out there and not get fired."

D'Onofrio has said that Kubrick gave him a valuable piece of advice about acting: real is one thing but interesting is another.

"Yeah, that's what he said. That's what he taught me."

It seems that you took that as a motto for your career.

"I think that's right. And that's important with the Goren character because when they gave me the first script I knew immediately that I was going to have to bring something to the guy to enable me as an actor to get away with him being so smart. I mean, he's ridiculously smart."

Ridiculously smart.

"Ridiculously smart. It's completely unbelievable that a guy like that could exist. So how do you get away with that? You make him weird.

"He's a weird f---in' guy. He's really arrogant, he's self-centred and he's as spontaneous as you can absolutely be."

Does he need more weakness? The episodes I've loved are the ones where . . .

"Where he f---s up?"

Not just where he f---s up, but where someone finds that place inside him and . . .

". . . and f---s with him. Yeah, those are the ones I love too.

"In this season coming up, the fifth season, we have a direction that we're going in that's different to what we've done before. I am no longer going to wink at the audience. I'm going to have fun. I'm going to lie, I'm going to tell the truth, and you're never going to know which is which . . . I think you're going to see Goren in a way you've never seen him before.

"The people that hate him will hate him more and the people that love him will love him more."

Does an actor have to have personal demons to play a character with demons?

"That's kind of an odd question because we all have demons, whether we're actors or not. I don't think actors have any more demons than anyone else."

But actors learn how to tap into them, to use those dark places in their craft. And some actors seem to use acting as a form of therapy . . .

"I wish that acting helped me out more than (it has). I have as many problems in my life as anybody else and I wish that acting could sort it out for me, but it doesn't. When you have problems in life you have to not act and to deal with it."

The publicist returns and reminds us that the photographer is waiting. Time for the last question.

Is there a particular role or type of character you yearn to play?

"I've never played a master thief. And I think I am one."

Perhaps we can look forward to seeing what you develop with Channel Ten, then . . .

Pause. Then there's a flicker of . . . Of what? Of surprise and then the hint of a smirk. "Um . . . ya."

Clearly, he knows something and knows you want to know it too.

He jumps up to be photographed, now looking unexpectedly dramatic and stern. But between clicks he's cheeky, full of banter, bouncing around to the photographer's side to look at the shots. "Very nice."

After half-an-hour of calm, casual, intimate chat, the energy levels are high again. Bobby Goren is back in the building