

'Adopted by a rich family'



Robert Caplin / For The Los Angeles Times

"Law & Order: Criminal Intent" co-stars Kathryn Erbe and Vincent D'Onofrio on set during the filming of an episode in New York.

The "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" team is happy about its move from NBC to USA.

By Matea Gold, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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NEW YORK -- When the cast and crew of "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" found out last spring that their show was being moved from NBC over to its sister cable network USA, the initial reaction was relief that the drama hadn't been canceled -- followed quickly by wariness about the change.

But these days, the team behind the third installment in the "Law & Order" franchise talk about their new home with an optimism long missing from the set of the crime procedural, now entering its seventh season.

"Reinvigorated" is a good word," said Warren Leight, the executive producer and show-runner. "Last year was awkward because NBC was going through a lot of changes, and we were not a priority, it's fair to say."

The move to USA, he said, is "like getting adopted by a really rich family."

After experiencing what Leight called "benign neglect" at NBC, USA has showered the program with attention, including a large-scale promotional campaign advertising "Criminal Intent's" premiere Thursday.

"It was nice that they had a really fresh energy toward the show, that they were enthused and inspired, something that we really didn't feel that much over at the network, frankly," said Chris Noth, who plays Det. Mike Logan. "USA has really bent over backward to show us that they care."

Executives at NBC, which plans to air reruns of "Criminal Intent" after episodes premiere on USA, rejected the notion that they gave the series inadequate support.

"NBC has always considered 'Criminal Intent' an important part of our schedule for many years, and we hope that it's a big hit

on USA," said Marc Graboff, co-chairman of NBC Entertainment and Universal Media Studios. "By definition, you have to prioritize when you're a broadcast network in a way that cable networks don't."

The move to USA is the latest twist for the youngest of the surviving "Law & Order" shows, which explores the psychology of criminals, often letting the viewers in on their motives before the show's Major Case Squad detectives discover them.

The episodes revolve almost entirely around the investigators, who are in nearly every scene. The pace was so intense for Vincent D'Onofrio, who plays the eccentric Det. Robert Goren, and Kathryn Erbe, who portrays his stoic partner, Det. Alex Eames, that the producers brought Noth on in 2005 to reprise his role from the original "Law & Order" and split the workload.

The drama's unique approach made it a solid player for NBC and sought-after in syndication. But the show, up against "Desperate Housewives" and "The Sopranos" in its early years, often seemed overshadowed.

"The show has never gotten the credit it deserves," said Dick Wolf, creator and executive producer of the franchise. "It's very frustrating over the years for the people who have worked on it."

Producers now hope that the move to cable, rather than marginalizing the program, will help showcase it.

Being part of such a well-known franchise is a "slightly tricky thing," Leight said. "It's both a blessing and -- people don't necessarily distinguish our show from the other two. On USA, we're obviously a priority for them, and our show gets to have its own profile. It feels a little bit like the kid brother finally moving out."

For USA, picking up "Criminal Intent" is a substantial investment, especially at a full 22-episode order, one the top-rated basic cable network made to bolster its standing as a purveyor of original scripted programs. Although USA still relies heavily on World Wrestling Entertainment and repeats in prime time, the network has had success with original shows such as "Monk" and "Psych."

"We're really excited about it, because over the last few years, we've developed a very strong brand based around characters," said Bonnie Hammer, president of USA Network and Sci Fi Channel. "We felt it was an absolutely perfect fit. Even though it came off of NBC, we're looking at it as our baby."

Although USA has been careful not to tinker with the show's formula, executives have encouraged the writers to play up the personalities and back stories of the show's detectives to mesh with the network's "Characters Welcome" branding slogan.

As it happens, Leight had begun experimenting with a more personal tone last year when he took over the program from longtime executive producer Rene Balcer.

"We were acknowledging the existence of their emotional life, and that was a sea change for the show," he said.

This season's first episode deals with the murder of a police officer, a case that forces Eames to dredge up memories of the

death of her husband, an undercover officer who was killed during a drug buy. While Erbe had always known it was part of her character's back story, it had not been explored on the show.

"I relish it," the actress said. "I've got years with just the gumshoe story lines, and there's only so far you can go with that stuff."

"It's bringing the humanity to it that's the hard part," added Noth of acting on a procedural. "You can just really feel like any old person can come in and say the lines if they don't address who you are. But that's where I think there's been a change."

This season, Logan, the squad hothead, is forced to adjust his approach when he gets a new partner with her own impulsive tendencies (Alicia Witt, temporarily replacing Julianne Nicholson while she is on maternity leave).

And Goren delves further into his idiosyncratic ways, especially mid-season when he goes undercover in a mental ward. When asked if he still enjoyed playing the oddball detective, D'Onofrio replied, "This year I am."

"I just think we have to stay in the character-driven stuff," he added. "People like the crime stories, but we've got six years of back story behind us. It's so interesting to go a little deeper with it."

Still, it's a direction in which the writers are moving cautiously, aware of Wolf's distaste for story lines that get too personal.

"The worry is: Are you going to veer off into melodrama or soap?" Leight said. "We're not. You will still never see a romance between our lead detectives or anything like that."

Wolf said he's open to the approach.

"I am not the character assassin that people assume I am," he said. "All of the shows work best when there is great storytelling combined with incidents in them that elucidate character."

How many viewers will tune in to "Criminal Intent" in its new home is the big mystery. During its last season on NBC, the program averaged 8.7-million viewers -- which would be a monster audience for USA, whose top-rated show, "Monk," drew 5.5-million viewers this year.

Network executives said they don't know what to expect, but they're hopeful.

"The world is no longer distinguishing between cable and broadcast," Hammer said. "If there's a great show out there, the viewers are going to follow."