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HEADLINE: Rewriting the Law;

LAW & ORDER's most troubled series, 'Criminal Intent,' finds creative stability by adding new partners in crime fighting. But will the Big experiment pay off?

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BODY:

IT'S A LAW & ORDER: CRIMINAL INTENT geek fantasy: Det. Alexandra Eames (Kathryn Erbe) is on the witness stand getting hammered about, of all things, her partner's personal life. "Isn't it true Detective Goren's own father abandoned his family when Detective Goren was a child?" It is?! "Isn't it fair to say Detective Goren has a special vendetta against imperfect fathers..." He does?! "...that he'll bend the truth to implicate them in crimes they're innocent of--?" Finally, the masterstroke: The defense lawyer whips out a letter Eames wrote years ago requesting a new partner. Total stillness. Until the crash, that is, when a crew member stumbles into a prop and ruins the take. A co-producer rips off his headphones: "If there was one scene not to have a crash in five seasons!"

To say the least, NBC's Criminal Intent is trying more than a few new things lately, besides breaking the cardinal Law & Order rule about delving into a cop's juicy backstory. Five seasons into its run, the show--billed as a howdunit, since the guilty party is usually revealed up front--is re-creating itself with the help of original L&O vet Chris Noth and Trial by Jury guest star Annabella Sciorra. They join Erbe and **Vincent D'Onofrio** (Det. Robert Goren) as series leads in a time-share arrangement where each pair gets 11 episodes. (This two-hour special--airing Nov. 6 at 9 p.m.--is the only time all season that everyone will appear together.) This new tag-team approach is garnering critical praise, but unfortunately for this beleaguered series, not ratings: Viewership is down 7 percent from last season.

The juxtaposition is nothing new for Criminal Intent, which, while part of TV's most storied franchise, has spent much of the last year being battered by tabloids and the vicissitudes of network TV. It debuted in 2001 and soon grew into a hit thanks to D'Onofrio's twitchy, fussy Detective Goren, a master of psychological disarticulation. But even a genius needs backup, so Erbe was cast because "she just looked like a real cop," says exec producer Rene Balcer. By the end of its second season, Criminal Intent was the No. 1 show on Sunday nights, averaging 14.3 million viewers. All was well until 2004, when ABC's group of mother hens moved to Wisteria Lane, and the cop drama lost more than 2 million viewers. More bad luck came a month later when D'Onofrio, dealing with a heavy shooting schedule and the recent death of his sister, was hospitalized after fainting on set.

"I had been telling them for years we have to change things," says the star. "I had been telling them, 'Take my money, make this easier for me.' And because nobody can believe that the money's not the most important thing to you, they just keep going on. And then one day you end up in the hospital." Production shut down for a week, while NBC execs sweated. The good news: D'Onofrio's hiatus got the show a lot of press. The bad news: None of it was positive. Gossip columnists suggested D'Onofrio was an on-set terror, which Erbe contests--for the most part. "Sometimes [working with him] is really annoying. And sometimes it's awesome. Almost always it's awesome." Then came the tabloid assertion that the Full Metal Jacket star was "losing it" because George Bush had been reelected. "It was awesome stuff!" says D'Onofrio. "That I fainted because Bush got elected? You can't make up s-- like that!... I'll tell you, I felt a little sick to my stomach, but I wasn't at work when I found out."

"It wasn't emotional," he continues. "It was just exhaustion." As Balcer explains it: "He and Katie are doing 30 scenes per episode. Most actors who are the leads in their shows do maybe 14." It may not have been all Balcer's fault, but it was his problem to fix--his and L&O czar Dick Wolf's. It was Wolf who tossed out the idea of having two lead pairs trade episodes--a seldom-used gimmick employed most notably by the 1957 Western Maverick. It was a radical notion: After all, didn't people love this show because of D'Onofrio? And who could sub for him? It just so happened that Noth was a guest star on Criminal Intent at the time, reprising his L&O character, Mike Logan. "Suddenly it was, 'Here's a guy who can attract an audience!'" recalls Balcer. And even though NBC axed Law & Order: Trial by Jury in May, Sciorra was still foremost in their minds. Then, says Balcer, "it was a question of talking everybody into it."

Convince four actors to work half-time? As Balcer puts it, "What's not to like?" Little things--like pay cuts. Though Balcer will say only that everyone is "treated very fairly," Erbe confirms that the studio, NBC Universal Television, now pays them for 11 episodes instead of 22. And if we're listing the not-to-likes, it can't be easy for Erbe, relegated to the background for much of her tenure on Criminal Intent, to see Sciorra's whip-smart Det. Carolyn Barek get as many lines as Noth. "I can't watch [their episodes]," she confesses. "This is probably not a conversation I can have. I would love to have it, but I can't [But] I'm happy, so happy that people are noticing."

Nevertheless, Erbe embraces the timeshare, as does Noth, who loves the flexibility. "I'm not gonna lie: Not having to do it every episode was the thing that brought me back." Okay, but given the critical excitement about the new pair, would he take the job full-time if the network offered? "I don't think Annabella and I would want to do that." (Sciorra concurs: "It's great to be a character that comes and goes. But when you're on it every day, it's too much.") NBC says the question is moot: "I can't imagine a situation where we would push that," says Vivi Zigler, exec VP of current programs. "Not unless [D'Onofrio and Erbe] wanted to leave. "

For D'Onofrio, the situation is ideal. "It's gonna be the first time, literally, that I've been able to sit with a script before I was shooting it," he says. "The show's gonna get better because of that. My acting will be better." And what if the audience decides that CI's new team is what's "better"? "If they have four years of success like we did, being No. 1 on Sundays, can you imagine?... If that happens, I would be an ass to not like it."