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DVD

## 'CSI: Vancouver'? Well, Not Exactly

By MIKE HALE

VIEWERS disappointed with this fall's crop of new crime shows — or worried that a lingering writers' strike will rob them of their favorite old crime shows — can take solace, we're told, in DVDs. But what if you've already watched all 10 seasons of "The Sopranos" and "The Wire," as well as the 14 Orbach-Noth-Florek-Moriarty episodes of "Law & Order"? What's left to discover?

At the moment the best answer may come from a country known for its low crime rate. The Canadian series "Da Vinci's Inquest," whose second season has just been released on DVD (Acorn Media), passed largely unnoticed in the United States but had an eerily "Sopranos"-like track record at home. The shows, which made their debuts just three months apart, were both nominated as their countries' best dramatic series in all seven years they were eligible. "The Sopranos" won the Emmy twice; "Da Vinci's Inquest" won the Gemini five times.

Because it's a police procedural centered on a coroner's office, "Da Vinci" has been called a cross between "Law & Order" and "CSI." (It's right there on the DVD box: "The realism of 'Law & Order.' The science of 'CSI.'") But it's not at all like either of those shows. While its crimes can be sensational — several multiple-episode story arcs in the first two seasons involve a serial killer preying on prostitutes near the Vancouver docks — its approach is resolutely low-key, avoiding both ripped-from-the-headlines formulas and glossy melodrama.

With its elliptical, literate storytelling and the believable relationships among its large ensemble cast of pathologists, police officers and bureaucrats, it resembles much more closely the good, early days of "N.Y.P.D. Blue" or "ER."

Chris Haddock, the show's creator, had a real-life model for his protagonist, Dominic Da Vinci: Larry Campbell, who had been the chief coroner of Vancouver and was elected mayor in 2002, midway through the show's run. (After "Inquest" went off the air in 2005, it was followed by a short-lived spinoff called "Da Vinci's City Hall.")

The irritable, idealistic Da Vinci, played by the Toronto-born actor Nicholas Campbell (no relation to Larry), is the show's moral center, in a way that can feel slightly clichéd. "Da Vinci's Inquest" isn't a show that surprises you with the depth of its characterizations, like, say, "The Sopranos."

But if it's not unreservedly great, it's still better, in any number of small ways, than anything you're likely to be watching now, and that's surprise enough. For all his rage against a system that turns away from the deaths of the poor and the outcast, Da Vinci doesn't make speeches; he complains, cracks bad jokes and gets on with his job, the way most of us would. (This being Canada, he and his colleagues also conduct intelligent conversations on topics like legalizing drugs or establishing protected red-light districts.)

That realism extends throughout the show, which does without unvarnished heroes (or infallible forensics) while giving authentic life to its victims — street people, prostitutes, drug addicts — rather than reducing them to window dressing or plot conveniences in the American manner.

It's probably no surprise that a superior drama like "Da Vinci's Inquest" has failed to dent the American consciousness, while a Canadian grossapalooza like "Kenny vs. Spenny" gets a slot on Comedy Central. "Da Vinci's Inquest" has never had a true network run in the United States; its American home is the superstation WGN, which is showing it at 3 a.m. on Mondays. It's also available in syndication, and can be seen in New York on WCBS, Channel 2, at the only slightly less inhospitable time of 1:35 a.m. on Sundays.

So the DVD sets are really the way to go. If you need more encouragement, how about this: You've already watched so many shows that were filmed in Vancouver; isn't it about time you watched one that's set there too? MIKE HALE

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