

# Critics tour goes giddy over Da Vinci



**JOHN DOYLE**  
TELEVISION

BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF.

The publicist, a young man dressed in a very crisp, very blue shirt and tight grey pants, approached me in determined make-a-sale mode.

"Please take a DVD," he said, pushing a package at me. "It's got several great episodes and a press kit. It's a truly great show."

I looked at the package in his hand. "It's okay," I said. "I've seen all of it. I know how great it is. I'm Canadian."

The show he was pushing at me was *Da Vinci's Inquest*.

The publicist smiled. "Oh, right," he said. "Then you know. But you can't blame me for trying. Not every

reporter in the room is Canadian. I know most of you are, but there are a few Americans here too. We think we've got a hot show here."

It was one of the great and rare good-news events here at TV Hacks on Tour (TVHOT). One day, just after the mass of TV critics had their annual meeting and before the next session of being bamboozled by American network honchos, I moseyed over to one of the hotel's restaurants. There, splendid in a vintage suit and tie, was Nicholas Campbell, once *Da Vinci* the coroner, soon to be *Da Vinci*, Mayor of Vancouver.

Handshakes, smiles and jokes followed. Campbell said he was reading a column of mine on the plane and it was so funny he was reading out bits of it to other people. I told Campbell he was looking good and it's just great that *Da Vinci's Inquest* is finally being seen in the United States. It was so friendly, mutually supportive and cheerful that we all got a bit giddy.

*Da Vinci's Inquest* has been picked up for syndication in the United States. It will be available in

90 per cent of the American TV market. At last, one of the finest TV dramas ever made, in Canada or anywhere, will be seen by tens of millions of Americans. That's one reason we were all a bit giddy. Believe me, there wasn't another press session like this one at TVHOT.

Just how unusual was it? Well, first it was unusual to have a genuine Canadian star turn up down here. It was also unusual — but a great sign for *Da Vinci's Inquest* — that several American reporters turned up to meet Campbell. There is a small but significant buzz about the series.

It has already received advance praise. The New York Times caught on to it some time back, when *Da Vinci's* creator, Chris Haddock, had a series on CBS called *The Handler*. The Times described *Da Vinci's Inquest* as "unlike anything on television." That quote is being used in the press material. More recently, a guy from Media Week magazine, who tracks trends in TV, took a look at the show and pronounced, "Move over *CSI*." He also described it as "a surewinner."

More significantly, I thought, Campbell was the centre of attention while somebody else was being ignored. While the critics gathered around Campbell, in the same room stood somebody who would normally be getting the attention here.

Over by the window stood a very beautiful young woman. Her name is Jerilee Villanueva and, it turns out, she's from Newfoundland. Tall, blond and striking, she was wearing a low-cut dress and heels. She looked stunning. She works as a spokeswoman for some car racing series that is being syndicated by the same company. In certain circles, she's also famous as a participant in *The Lingerie Super Bowl*. That was a notorious pay-TV event that aired in 2003 as gimmicky alternative to (or addition to) the real Super Bowl. It featured a runway fashion show by a gaggle of buxom lingerie models, and then a football game between two teams of the models clad only in lingerie and football pads. Villanueva was one of the models.

Down here, she should have

been the one getting the attention. But she was virtually ignored as the press zoomed in on Campbell and wanted to hear him talk about *Da Vinci's Inquest*. Not even the Canadian reporters, learning Villanueva was from Newfoundland, could be persuaded to pay much attention.

Campbell told us that, naturally, he was hoping to make some money from *Da Vinci's Inquest* airing in the States. He's not getting rich in Canada on a CBC show. He also told us that a horse he partly owned was running in an afternoon race in Vancouver. He kept checking his watch. We all kind of wished we could place a bet on the horse, because things were looking up for Campbell, he seemed so anxious about the horse and, darn it, it was a Canadian guy's horse.

He told us a few things about the coming season of *Da Vinci's Inquest*, which will morph into *Da Vinci's City Hall*, because Dominic Da Vinci is now the mayor. It was off the record, because it isn't finished yet. Being good Canadians, we wouldn't dream of giving it away.

We invited Campbell to come to the Television Critics Awards that night — drinks by the pool, a good time to relax and gossip about the business in Canada. (He never did show up, but nobody felt aggrieved about that. The man's entitled to enjoy himself in L.A.) Meanwhile, the honcho from the syndication company told us, that, yeah, they're hot for *Da Vinci's Inquest* and they're taking a look at *Corner Gas* for the American market. Meanwhile, Villanueva lingered by the window, virtually ignored. I couldn't just leave her there, loitering, this lovely young woman from Newfoundland. I went over for a minute and asked her about her background and she told me she'd been in L.A. for about five years doing modelling. She said she understood that Campbell was famous and, maybe, she wasn't very famous at all. But she hoped that would change. I wished her well with the car-racing gig and as I left I knew that something strange, and way Canadian, had happened.

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*jdoyle@globeandmail.ca*