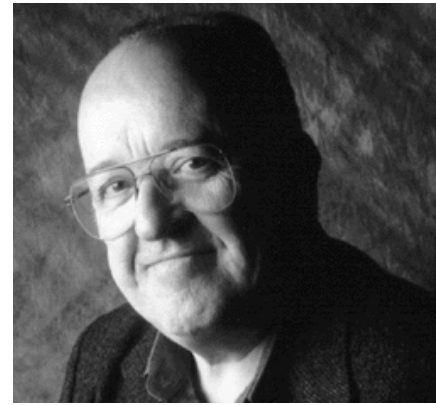


Unwinding the Da Vinci code: What has kept the CBC's drama so good for so long

by Robert Fulford

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The least prepossessing hero in the history of television, Dominic Da Vinci of Da Vinci's Inquest, hides his intelligence so convincingly that sometimes we're tempted to believe he's as dull as he pretends to be. He mumbles a lot, and he's no take-charge guy. When he's working a crime scene, a stranger wandering by would never guess that the beady-eyed little chap with the clipboard is a person of some official consequence.

A glance at his rumpled coat recalls another famous crime-fighter, Colombo, but Colombo was always shrewd (a fact the audience knew and the killers didn't) and always heading toward a clever solution to the crime, inevitably revealed just before the hour's end. Da Vinci, on the other hand, often appears less than shrewd and sometimes doesn't figure things out until weeks later, if at all. He's prickly when he doesn't need to be and inefficient around the office. He drinks too much, though not as much as he used to. He's so lacking in command skills that he can't even convince the Vancouver parking authority to let him leave his car in no-parking zones.

This awkward but loveable coroner stands at the core of the best and most successful drama on English-language CBC television and one of the best-written programs ever. In Canada he's been a hit since his first appearance in 1998; today the show runs in 45 countries. Nicholas Campbell, who plays Da Vinci, deserves much of the credit for that success. A graduate of both Upper Canada College and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, he's wiggled into the role of Da Vinci as if it were an extra skin.

The current season opened three weeks ago with a new tone, darker and more conspiratorial. This won't necessarily be applauded by those responsible for Vancouver's public relations. If we believe Da Vinci's Inquest, corruption has entered the very heart of the city. Last week the mayor was covering up a hit-and-run manslaughter that he or someone close to him committed, the police chief was conspiring with a famous criminal lawyer who apparently murdered his own client in his law office, the chief of homicide detectives was thwarting justice wherever she could, a narcotics detective appeared to be killing people, two uniformed cops were about to get caught for the beating death of a young drug dealer, and the head of the coroner's office, Da Vinci's boss, was showing himself willing to bend under pressure.

And that was all in one episode. On tonight's program we can watch the mayor and the police chief try to frustrate Da Vinci's investigations. They know he's after them.

Long-time Canadian TV viewers find that Da Vinci's Inquest stirs memories of a strikingly similar series, *Wojeck*, a great CBC success of the late 1960s. The parallels are numerous enough to suggest that Da Vinci's Inquest descends directly from *Wojeck*.

In Toronto 40 years ago, the late Dr. Morton Shulman was making headlines by expanding the range of the coroner's job to include criticism of the government's failures in safety regulations; rather than simply reporting the cause of a death, Shulman routinely condemned the official incompetence that made the accident possible.

Writer Philip Hersch and producer Ronald Weyman converted Shulman's legend into their own fictionalized coroner, Dr. Steve *Wojeck*, just as Chris Haddock, the inventor of Da Vinci's Inquest, built his hero on the reputation of a celebrated Vancouver coroner, Larry Campbell.

In both cases the star proved a brilliant choice. John Vernon played *Wojeck* as a brooding Slav, quick to anger and heavy with Catholic guilt. That made the show unique; he wasn't like anyone else on TV in that period. In the same way, Nicholas Campbell's deceptively casual manner (he hides serious purpose behind apparent indifference) sets Da Vinci apart from the intense and self-confident coroners on American forensics dramas.

The parallels continued in the lives of the men who served as models. Shulman went into politics as an NDP member of the Ontario legislature, just as Larry Campbell became mayor of Vancouver in 2002. But *Wojeck* died young. While 91 hour-long episodes of Da Vinci's Inquest have been made since 1998, there were only 20 versions of *Wojeck* over two seasons. It vanished because Vernon decided his future lay in Hollywood; he's since performed in about 100 movies.

Da Vinci's Inquest reaches for a documentary-like realism and focuses on Downtown Eastside, the original site of Vancouver in the 1880s but now a marginalized and drug-infested area that looms large in all discussions of Vancouver social policy. A certain whimsical realism carries over even to the program's Web site, www.davincisinquest.com, where fans find not only actor profiles and episode summaries but a tour of Da Vinci's office and personal effects. There they click on the screen of his laptop and discover the Internet sites he's bookmarked for easy access. Aside from public archives and the City Hall site, he favours *Down Beat* jazz magazine and sites that describe two favourite operas, *Carmen* and *Pagliacci*. If you click again you discover these are live links and suddenly the screen is full of the latest *Down Beat*. Someone had a lot of fun designing that site, giving it the detailed intimacy of the TV show.

That intimacy, which viewers may appreciate only after two or three episodes, depends on the large ambitions of Haddock and his writing partner, Alan DiFiore. These audacious storytellers continually make their own jobs harder by complicating the narrative, layering plot upon plot. They develop intricately cross-woven stories, some of them pursued over several weeks, and they match their multiple plots with an ever-expanding company of cops, snitches, criminals and coroners, some of whom disappear for weeks and then pop up again. The acting ensemble, clearly put together with great care, works so well that they leave us with the sense that their lives together continue even when we aren't watching.

Da Vinci's Inquest sets itself apart from most programs by allowing space for ambiguity. Without surrendering any of the tension an hour-long crime drama needs, the scripts delay the resolution of major issues while we ponder them, letting us make up our own minds about the characters. The writers honour the intelligence of the audience, something that doesn't happen every night of the week.