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Da Vinci's new quest: politics

ALEXANDRA GILL separates fact from fiction in Canada's top-rated dramatic TV series

VANCOUVER

Dominic Da Vinci is back. As usual, there's going to be hell to pay. But as Canada's top-rated and longest-running dramatic TV series enters its seventh season, our crusading coroner has pointed his gumshoes in a new direction and is now taking his gobsmacked fury out on City Hall. As *Da Vinci's Inquest* shifts from police procedural to political thriller, the mumbling hero is contemplating a run for mayor.

Big surprise? Not for anyone who has followed the sly intertwining of fact and fiction since the series debuted in 1998.

The idea for *Da Vinci's Inquest* was born when Larry Campbell, then-chief coroner of British Columbia, invited TV producer Chris Haddock to speak at an international forensics science convention about the role of a medical examiner he had created for a U.S. pilot series. As *Da Vinci* evolved, Campbell became the real-life prototype for the compassionate central character played by Nicholas Campbell. He was also hired as a regular consultant to help the CBC series achieve its high standards of technical accuracy and compelling, documentary-like realism.

Two years ago, when Larry Campbell (a former narcotics officer — like the *Da Vinci* character) ran for the mayor's office on a platform that called for the opening of Vancouver's first safe-injection site, it was no coincidence that safe-injection sites were concurrently discussed on the show's first episode that season.

When Campbell won his mayoral campaign in a landslide victory for the Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE), the idea to shift the show from the back alleys of the Downtown Eastside to the backroom corridors of power up the hill was a no-brainer for Haddock. "Right when Larry got elected, we started asking: 'Is this where the show's going?'" says Haddock, the series creator and co-writer.

The seventh season, which heads into its fifth episode this week, opened with a decidedly darker tone, and enough twists and turns to make the common couch potato sprout to attention: Just as *Da Vinci* discovers that his bid for chief of police is toast, a money launderer gets shot in the office of

a famous criminal lawyer, "who then has a suspicious meeting with the new chief of police and the mayor, who is desperately trying to cover up a hit-and-run case. The chief, meanwhile, appears to be having an affair with the chief of homicide detectives, "who, in turn, is trying to throw two constables off an messy murder case that involves a uniformed cop and a young native drug dealer.



The pulse certainly has quickened, but the writers, directors and actors 'defly pull all these complicated Strands together with the same shuffling rhythm and casual conversations about pet dogs or other domestic dribble that has always kept the show real.

"We're really just lifting the lens up from the street to the first floor," says Haddock, sounding justifiably proud as he leans over a cluttered desk in a gorgeous, sun-dappled office that looks overlooks the dingy streets of the Downtown Eastside.

To reflect this broadened perspective into politics, the photography has been tweaked to include sweeping new vistas across the mountains (as you would see from the mayor's office up the hill), shot from a helicopter with a long-lens camera.

And to signal the story's new webs of intrigue, the shooting style has become a bit more obscured.

"We started last year by shooting through windows," Haddock explains. "You have to get the audience to work a bit to get past that curtain. There's a sense of having to dig a little bit more."

The challenge is one shared by Haddock and the writers. "It's all new territory and we're kind of feeling our way around. There has never been a show about City Hall, well, except for that one with what's-his-name, Michael J. Fox. Right — *Spin City*." "Of course, it helps to have a series consultant in the mayor's office. Haddock says Mayor Campbell was slightly reluctant to embrace *Da Vinci's* new quest, especially given how often people confuse him with the character.

"We differ on a lot of issues," Haddock says. *Da Vinci*, for example, is still pushing for a red-light district. But since attaining office, Mayor Larry Campbell has changed his tune. Vancouver's mayor obviously has to be careful about not divulging too many details about what goes on at City Hall. "He'll slam the door on me, occasionally," Haddock says, laughing.

And, no, Haddock says he doesn't have any snitches in the police department, but the set is always crawling with off-duty officers who are eager to offer advice.

"They sometimes say 'You could be a little gentler.' But most of them just like the fact that we talk about the police. I think they see that we represent, generally, a fair perspective."

The current storyline about police brutality certainly resonates in Vancouver, where the department has come under attack on numerous charges of officers using excessive force. "They've got some problems," Haddock admits. "But there are cases like this popping up all across the country, especially in Saskatchewan." The most influential real-life touchstone for this season's conspiracy scandals, he adds, is the Toronto Police Service and the internal investigation that recently turned up allegations of extortion and corruption.

"There are some deep, deep problems there," Haddock sighs with a whistle under his breath.

And what about Vancouver? At the end of last week's episode, a cursing *Da Vinci* was racing after Mayor Russ Hathaway (played by Bill Dow) who appears to be at the centre of some wrong-doings. As the plot thickens, *Da Vinci's* real-life muse must not be very pleased.