

THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS

By Michael Ventura

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"These are the people that society would prefer just go away. The shadow people that project upon us their shadow and remind us just how tenuous mental health is -- our worst fear. They remind us how easy it can be to slip." These words were spoken about the mentally ill by actor Ted Levine in the role of a psychiatrist during the first episode of ABC's *Wonderland*. The few seconds that it took to deliver that speech constitute the program's one shining moment. The show purported to be a realistic drama of life in a mental hospital, and it opened to much fanfare. Reviewers loved it. ABC bragged that *Wonderland's* creator, Peter Berg, spent seven months researching at the infamous Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan. *Wonderland's* fictive representatives of mental illness included, in the first episode, a cop-killer and a kid who bit off his mother's finger; in the hospital the unsedated psycho-killer, with no policeman nearby to guard him, stabs a syringe into the belly of a pregnant shrink. Controversy ensued. Mental health professionals, including the National Mental Health Association, protested the stigmatizing of the mentally ill, but reviewers, Berg, and ABC held firm, claiming their show was realistic. A psychiatrist named Sally L. Satel dissented from her profession and wrote an op-ed piece defending *Wonderland* in *The New York Times* (whose reviewer loved the program, calling it "gripping" and "dazzling"). Satel's piece was titled "Prime-Time Psychosis," and its emphasis-quote blared "A realistic TV show gets undue criticism" -- apparently the people laying out the *Times'* op-ed page were ready to, and were allowed to, put the authority of the paper behind the word "realistic," which was Satel's point: "Television is finally portraying mental illness realistically."

Nearly 15 million people tuned in to the first episode of *Wonderland*; about 3.3 million changed the channel by the second commercial. Roughly 9 million tuned in to the second episode; 2.6 million didn't last till the second commercial. (These are ABC's figures.) The network pulled the plug on the show. More controversy ensued. Was TV afraid of the dark subjects? Did the network chicken out? Was the show given a fair chance? Peter Berg assured anyone who would listen that his show, in its now-canceled episodes, was about to lighten up: "The majority of *Wonderland* was in no way depressing" -- though he failed to explain how a realistic depiction of a mental hospital could conceivably be "in no way depressing."

Notice that in all this bla-bla-bla everyone had their say: network execs, producers, actors, shrinks, the media -- everyone except the people that *Wonderland* claimed to be about, the mentally ill.

When I got advance word of *Wonderland*, I called my brother Aldo and asked him to watch it. Aldo will turn fifty this year, and for more than 30 of those years he has been in New York's "mental health system." (I must put quotes around that phrase, knowing what I know of the system.) He's lost count of his hospitalizations -- roughly 50. He figures he's spent 12 years in the locked wards, and roughly another 15 in various group homes, supportive apartments, and other mental health programs. For the last several years he's lived in a kind of halfway house for the mentally ill on Staten Island. We keep in close contact, Aldo and I, talking on the phone every weekend for an hour or so -- not only because we're brothers, but because we love and respect each other. Sometimes our

calls are difficult, especially during the periods when he's severely disturbed. Sometimes he's a pain in the ass, sometimes I am, but our friendship as well as our brotherhood weathers those times. I asked Aldo to watch *Wonderland* because I have reason to trust him as a witness (his insights have helped me many times), and because I thought it just that somewhere in America, on some printed page, one voice of the voiceless mentally ill should be given a chance to speak in this controversy. Here is Aldo's critique as he spoke it to me, edited only for space:

"The show is completely and totally and absolutely a misrepresentation of what I know and my experience as a psychiatric patient in institutions of any kind, from the best to the worst. An exaggeration. A caricature. *Nobody* [in authority] in the psychiatric setting would tolerate some of the behavior that was exhibited by the [show's] psychiatric clients. No patient would be allowed to scream and scream, 'I want a cigarette' over and over -- if he didn't shut up he would be taken down the hall and shot in the arm and sedated." He related an incident in which he caused a disturbance and said, "That guard took me into the seclusion room and beat my brains in." As for the caring shrinks on the show, in Al's case "the psychiatrist knew that had happened and didn't acknowledge it." According to my brother, this behavior is universal, though in *Wonderland* nothing of the kind was even suggested: "If someone is making even the smallest kind of nuisance of themselves, they would be put in their place in a second. Knock him off his feet, drag him into the seclusion room, give him an injection, and that's the end of it. And you don't see [in the show] the big hurly-burly guards who do all the dirty work, which are all over the place in reality. You don't see them."

I asked him why that psychiatrist had said nothing about his beating: "Because there's an indifference built into the system. You do not have passionate outcries. Ninety percent of the time there's just built-in indifference. There are no heroes or heroines in a psychiatric hospital. They're ordinary people. You want an example of indifference? Albert was here a year and a half. He disappeared two months ago. And no one misses him, no one talks about him, it's like he was never here at all, like he never existed."

"The cop-killer, that's what they pounce on [in *Wonderland*] -- not the complex problems that take good writing and good acting to deal with. When you're in a mental hospital, for the most part you suffer from boredom. There's no drama going on. Nobody's problems in a psychiatric hospital are *in view* as these [*Wonderland*] patients' are in view. Their problems are subdued, within them, not evident. Most mentally ill people look normal, and believe it or not, for the most part they act normal. The wasted look on peoples' faces -- that's all you see, wasted looks on peoples' faces day after day. The mentally ill symptoms are usually invisible, except in acute psychosis, and most people aren't in acute psychosis. It would be interesting if it was that way! [i.e., if it was the way *Wonderland* portrayed it.] It would be a real zoo. But it's not a zoo. They put people in chemical cages, and they put them there right away. The people around me are almost blank. It's not that they have nothing inside them, it's that there's nothing left to take and nothing left to give. I live with 15 mentally ill people here, and I go to [therapy] programs with over 100. We're given such a meaningless existence that it's like a slow death. The whole process is so mindless and one-dimensional and soulless. Slowly they [the mentally ill] become numb and quite despondent of spirit and slowly waste away."

"Nothing in that program gave anybody who had any problems any dignity whatsoever. The clients were portrayed as imbeciles, as goofy. And the staff -- they [in reality] are not as dynamic, not as glamorous, not as sexy. They're flat. Certainly not as

good-looking. The show glamorized the care-givers -- they had dignity. Everybody who had problems had no dignity at all.

"*David and Lisa* was a sincere portrayal of people who have problems, but *Wonderland* wasn't sincere. It was hokey. Even procedurally it didn't make sense." Here he went on to cite flagrant anomalies of procedural technique in both of *Wonderland's* episodes, for instance, "a shrink turning his back on an unmedicated psycho who's just committed murder! If he shot a cop he'd be out in the boondocks [isolation] with six, seven, eight officers around him, tranquilized -- no matter what his physical condition was, and no matter what the law says.

"If the general public gets its impression of the mentally ill from this program, God help us."

Not to worry, Al. For whatever reason, the public didn't buy it either. What's scary is that major reviewers, editors, and feature writers did -- educated people who thought themselves sufficiently well-informed to take ABC's word that *Wonderland* was "realistic." The insidious thing is that what convinced reviewers of the show's realism was precisely its unreality: extreme portrayals that allowed these literati to feel separate from, and superior to, the mentally ill. They saw sensationalism and believed it without question *because* it was sensational, *because* the mentally ill were depicted without dignity -- they were so relieved not to see any possible relation to themselves that they were happy to pronounce the depiction "real." What does it say about us when the sanest statements in this controversy come from a person whom society labels "insane"?

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