



NATIONAL STIGMA CLEARINGHOUSE

JEAN ARNOLD, CHAIR
(212) 242-7988

NORA WEINERTH, CO-CHAIR
(718) 997-8527

STIGMA ALERT

Dear Mental Health Activist:

"Wonderland," a television series set in a busy urban psychiatric hospital, is set to premiere on March 30 on ABC. An ABC release calls the show edgy and real -- "nothing less than gripping television."

A multiple shooting by a man with schizophrenia in the pilot episode leads us to believe that the show will exploit violence in typical TV style. If so, it may serve to unite the mental health community (60 million) against the outlandish amount of crime and violence that is scripted for "mentally ill" characters. (See enclosed bar graph from Cultural Indicators Project.)

*Isn't it time to tell the entertainment industry, **NO MORE CHEAP SHOTS!** Let us know your views and suggestions, e-mail or regular mail. As information develops, we will post it on our web site. Many Thanks!*

The National Stigma Clearinghouse
March 7, 2000

Enclosures:

*Bar graph showing dangerous people in prime time TV
TALK magazine article*

We urge all members of the mental health community to voice their objections to entertainment that exploits, misleads, or demeans.

Website

<http://community.webtv.net/stigmanet>

E-mail

stigmanet@webtv.net

245 EIGHTH AVENUE, #213 NEW YORK, NY 10011 (212) 255-4411

ADVISORS: D. Kyle Felt, past Chair, American Mental Health Fund • Patricia E. Deegan, Ph.D. and Daniel B. Fisher, M.D., Ph.D., National Empowerment Center • George Gerbner, Ph.D., Founder, Cultural Environment Movement, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania • Otto Wahl, Ph.D., George Mason University



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UPDATE ON "WONDERLAND"

1) *ABC has begun to promote "Wonderland" on prime time with a 15-second ad. We are attaching an approximate transcript. Understandably, the written version is a poor substitute for actually seeing and hearing the ad.*

2) *Attached is a letter from the National Stigma Clearinghouse to Michael Eisner, who runs the Walt Disney Company, which owns ABC, Inc.*

3) *Attached is a release from ABC about "Wonderland."*

4) *We've attached an address list for "Wonderland." You might write to express your concerns now, or wait until after you've seen the first episode on Thursday, March 30, at 10 p.m. Eastern Time. (Check local listings).*

If you belong to a group, now is the time to discuss group or individual action. Our next UPDATE will include suggestions.

The National Stigma Clearinghouse

March 11, 2000

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March 9, 2000

DESCRIPTION of the ABC "WONDERLAND" promo recorded March 8 at around 9:57 p.m.

The 15-second promo is complex, rapid-fire, and clearly meant to attract action-lovers. Transcribed below is most of the audio and visual content (much occurs simultaneously).

Voiceover: I know my ABC's

Visual on a black screen: This is not a commercial

Voiceover: A is for addiction

Visual: Closeup of a man randomly shooting a gun in an urban location

Voiceover: B is for beta blockers. [Closeup of men gesturing with prayer-like motions (?)]

Visual on a black screen: This is not a video game

Voiceover: C is for compulsion

Visual: This is not a movie

Visual and audio: Woman is being told: Your son just bit off your finger!

Voiceover: D is for delusions

Visual and audio: Woman is pleading "My son is a good boy!"

Voiceover: E is for electro-convulsive therapy

Visual: A frightened man strapped to a gurney is being wheeled by 4 to 6 uniformed men, including some in "NYPD" uniforms

Voiceover: F is for fear [visual is of a seated older woman]

Visual and audio scene: An African American hospital staffer says "you just saved a life" and an Asian staffer, smiling, says "it feels really good"

Closing: Wonderland premieres Thursday, March 30th, on ABC

Website

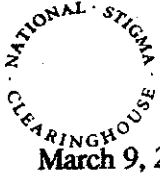
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March 9, 2000

Michael D. Eisner
The Walt Disney Company
500 South Buena Vista Street
Burbank, CA 91521

Dear Mr. Eisner:

We are writing to express our concern about "Wonderland," a new television series set in a psychiatric hospital and slated to begin on ABC on March 30.

Advance publicity about "Wonderland" (an article in TALK magazine, an ABC release, and a current TV ad) confirms our worst fears that the series will reinforce prejudice against people who have psychiatric disabilities. The creators of "Wonderland" picked a scenario with the highest potential for sensation and extremes, a psychiatric hospital emergency room.

To focus on the rare and extreme behavior of any group as a basis for entertainment is patently unfair and biased, and would not be tolerated by any stereotyped minority group. Putting a spotlight week after week on mentally ill people who are in crisis cannot possibly meet standards of balance and accuracy.

We are also deeply concerned about political messages which may be scripted into "Wonderland." You may be unaware that a real-world controversy presently exists over whether to forcibly medicate people who have mental illness. To illustrate the intensity of this battle: a forced-treatment law was recently enacted in New York based on a false claim that an assailant had refused treatment when in fact he had begged for treatment. To avoid manipulation on this and other highly controversial issues, it would be imperative that "Wonderland's" creators work closely with the members of the mental health community who experience psychiatric illness firsthand. There is no indication that this has been done.

For years, the mental health community has shown remarkable restraint in the face of predominantly violent or criminal television portrayals of "mentally ill" characters, and "mentally ill" characters portrayed as deserving violence. Television has been called "the wholesale distributor of the stigma of mental illness" by George Gerbner, a distinguished communications researcher for over thirty years. Gerbner's monitoring of television images, recently updated in a report for the Screen Actors Guild, shows outrageous disproportion in the violent and criminal roles assigned to "mentally ill" characters. Otto F. Wahl, of George Mason University, provides a full discussion of media exploitation of people with psychiatric disabilities in his book, *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*.

We suggest that ABC delay the introduction of "Wonderland" pending a preview of the episodes by representatives of the mental health community (not just NAMI and E. Fuller Torrey). The fact is, we have worked for years to bring balance and accuracy to television portrayals of mental illness with little success. For a program finally to happen only to trot out the same old stereotypes is bitterly disappointing.

Sincerely,
Jean Arnold

Enclosures: Talk article, ABC release, ad transcript

Copies to: Robert A. Iger, Patricia Fili-Krushel, Stuart Blumberg, Ron Howard, Brian Grazer, Peter Berg

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"WONDERLAND"

"Wonderland," a riveting, gritty, one-hour drama shooting on location in New York City, delves into the lives of the doctors manning Rivervue Hospital's psychiatric and emergency programs. Writer, director and former "Chicago Hope" star Peter Berg is the executive producer/writer/director.

Mr. Berg and the writers of the drama spent months at a New York hospital researching the project and working side by side with top psychiatrists and ER physicians. They were able to observe everything from electric shock therapy sessions, to interviews with serial killers, schizophrenics and suicidal housewives.

Edgy and real, the stories for "Wonderland" are inspired by the experiences of staff and patients. The cast of "Wonderland" is encouraged to improvise, and the show is shot documentary style, resulting in nothing less than gripping television. With personal lives as complex as their patients' minds, the doctors of Rivervue endure joys and sorrows that often mirror the triumphs and tragedies of the afflicted they strive to heal.

The cast stars Ted Levine ("Silence of the Lambs") as Dr. Robert Banger, Martin Donovan ("The Opposite of Sex") as Dr. Neil Harrison, Michelle Forbes ("Homicide: Life on the Streets," "Kalifornia") as Dr. Lyla Garrity, Billy Burke as Dr. Abe Matthews and Michael Jai White as Dr. Derrick Hatcher.

In the realm of psychiatric medicine, this public, city hospital is the Mecca, and its doctors are among the world's best, brightest and toughest. Professionally, Dr. Robert Banger (Mr. Levine) heads up the forensic psychiatry department (the psychiatric study of criminology); while personally, he struggles to cope with the break-up of his marriage. Still in love with his wife, Dr. Banger is forced to fight her tooth and nail for the custody of their two young sons. Dr. Neil Harrison (Mr. Donovan), who also specializes in forensics, grapples with the fears and joys of impending fatherhood. His wife, Dr. Lyla Garrity (Ms. Forbes), heads up the Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program, a.k.a. CPEP (a critical response facility for people suffering psychiatric emergencies).

Dr. Abe Matthews (Mr. Burke) is recognized as a talented psychiatrist who works in the CPEP, but has a well-earned reputation as a first-class, commitment-phobic womanizer, both inside the hospital and out. Dr. Derrick Hatcher (Mr. White) balances the struggles of single parenthood with working daily miracles in the emergency suite — all while simultaneously leading med students through the ropes of Rivervue's "boot camp."

In addition to Mr. Berg, executive producers for "Wonderland" are Ron Howard, Brian Grazer, Tony Krantz, along with co-executive producer/director John D. Coles. Peter McIntosh is the line producer. The program is produced by Hostage Productions, Inc. in association with Imagine Television.



NATIONAL STIGMA CLEARINGHOUSE

ADDRESSES for "WONDERLAND"

ABC, Inc.
77 West 66th Street
New York, NY 10023
Robert A. Iger, President
TEL: 212-456-7777
Web: www.abc.com

ABC-TV Television Network (News & Entertainment)
77 West 66th Street
New York, NY 10023
Patricia Fili-Krushel, President
TEL: 212-456-7777

ABC-TV Entertainment Division
2040 Avenue of the Stars
Los Angeles, CA 90027
Stuart Blumberg, Chairman
TEL: 310-557-7777

The Walt Disney Company (owns ABC, Inc.)
500 South Buena Vista Street
Burbank, CA 91521
Michael D. Eisner, Chairman & CEO
TEL: 818-560-1000

Imagine Entertainment (producers)
1925 Century Park East, Suite 2300
Los Angeles, CA 90067
Ron Howard, Brian Grazer, Chairmen
TEL: 310-858-2000

Peter Berg (creator of "Wonderland")
c/o Hostage Productions
609 Greenwich Street, Suite 9A
New York, NY 10014
TEL: 212-905-1701

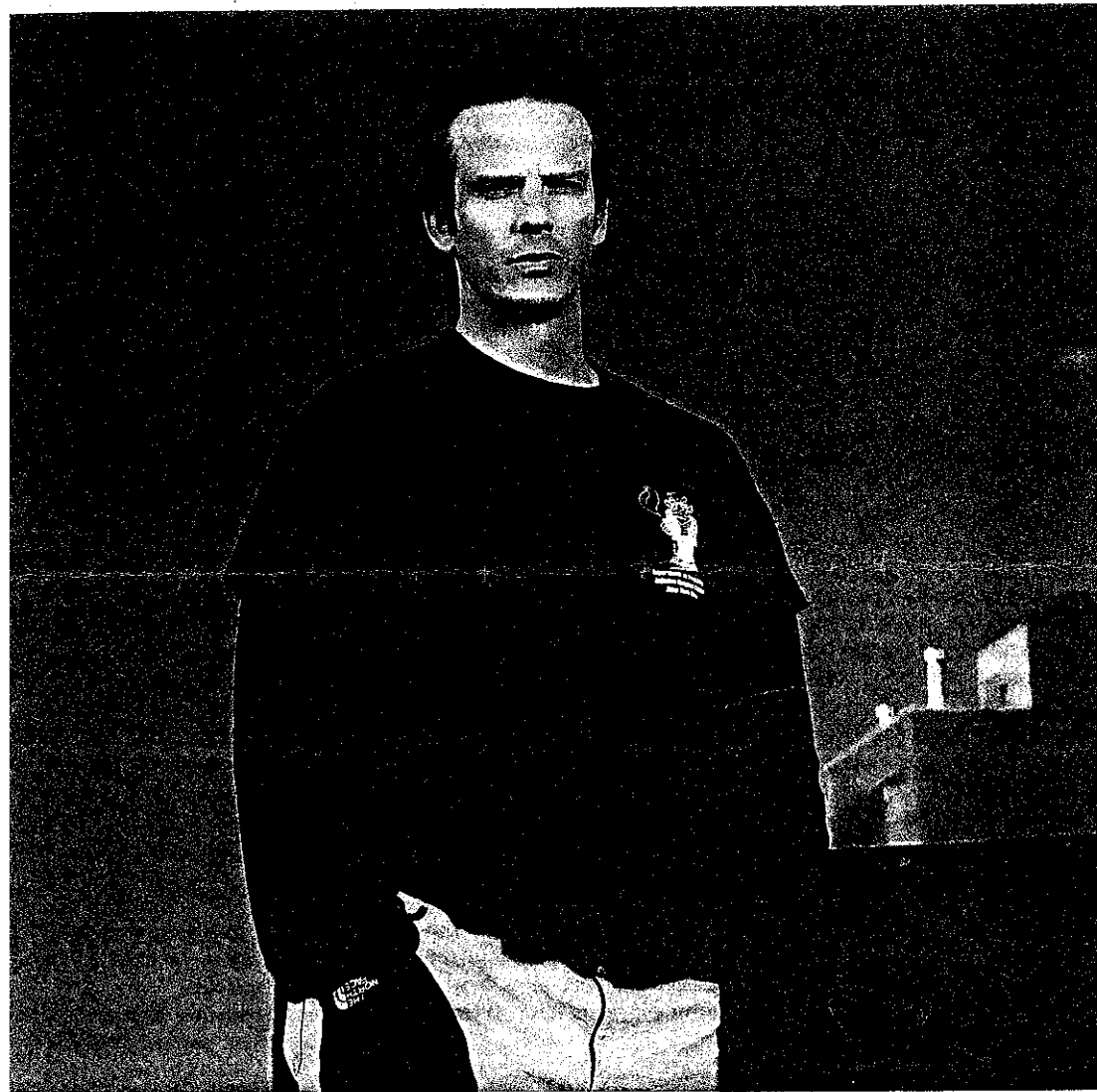
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THE CREATIVE LIFE

Fully Committed

Peter Berg's new series, *Wonderland*, is an unapologetic look at life inside a mental institution. It's certainly original. But will it make good television? By Jonathan Mahler



"These are the people that society would prefer just go away." Photo by Michael Birt

Peter Berg's unwashed hair is standing on end and he's rocking back and forth manically in his desk chair as he unspools his urban fantasy, which calls for an electroshock-therapy booth to be positioned next to every coffee cart: "People would get their coffee, they'd get buzzed real quick, and they'd go to work. And everybody would feel fine."

Until such neuron-jolting snack bars become a reality, we'll all have to find other ways to do

battle with our brains. Berg, for one, has found a convenient outlet for his madness in his work. On *Chicago Hope* he played a volatile—at times belligerent—hockey-loving surgeon, and his big-screen directorial debut, *Very Bad Things*, the story of a bachelor party that degenerates into a series of murders and bloody mishaps, was clearly the product of a febrile (if not downright deranged) mind. There was also his homage to rage in *Details* mag-

azine: "I really loved putting my fist through things."

Now comes Berg's latest creation, the TV series *Wonderland*, which debuts on ABC in March. Set in a mental hospital modeled closely on New York City's Bellevue, *Wonderland* is a variation on the medical drama, only it takes as its subject the frailty—and resilience—of the human mind rather than the human body. The world Berg depicts is one in which madness and san-

ity are never far apart—patients and doctors alike can crack. In the pilot episode, which Berg wrote, directed, and produced, one of the psychiatrists on the ward describes it this way: "These are the people that society would prefer just go away—the shadow people.... They remind us how easy it can be to slip."

Wonderland is the most ambitious attempt yet to enshrine the post-Prozac state of mental health in our popular culture, and it's a testament to how far we've come since the landscape was dotted with Victorian hospitals warehousing our social deviants. (Even the recent *Girl, Interrupted* was set back in the 1960s.)

This year is also the 25th anniversary of Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the iconic film that continues to inform, even dominate, our collective image of life in the bughouse. As it turns out, the Steppenwolf Theatre Co. in Chicago is producing *Cuckoo's Nest*, which will open in April. Some of the play's themes are timeless. "It's kind of a classic antihero story of a rebellion against a system that's oppressive," says Gary Sinise, who'll star as Randle Patrick McMurphy, played by Jack Nicholson in the original movie. "People can always identify with these types of underdogs fighting against things that they seem to have no control over."

But a lot has changed since *Cuckoo's Nest*, and electroconvulsive therapy is a perfect example. In *Cuckoo's Nest* it's used as a punishment, a form of psychiatric revenge meted out to uncooperative patients, most notably to McMurphy. These days, ECT, delivered via smaller currents, is an increasingly popular treatment for patients who don't respond to antidepressants. Hence Berg's vision of a brighter tomorrow.

Madness has always been a popular subject for filmmakers. It certainly offers rich metaphorical opportunities: the madman

as nonconformist, as seer, as creative genius. The madman (or woman) as individual, struggling against an oppressive patriarchal system, was the metaphor of choice in *Frances*, the 1982 biopic of 1930s actress Frances Farmer, whose unconventional activities—sexual and otherwise—landed her in an asylum, where she was psychologically and physically abused,

Before, madness was something society was unfit to judge. Now we're all a little crazy.

and eventually lobotomized.

Things didn't improve much from there. The postwar era was a dark one for America's psychiatric hospitals. The treatment of mental illness had atrophied; we did our best to lock lunacy away. Asylums became dumping grounds for misfits and rebels. The conditions were beyond grim, and movies like *Titicut Follies*, a 1967 documentary about life inside a Massachusetts hospital for mentally ill convicts, didn't leave much to the imagination. But these films aspired to do more than record inhumane treatment. They grew out of a mind-set that blossomed in the 1960s, thanks to the temper of the times and the work of the proto-pop psychologist and LSD guru R.D. Laing, who questioned the sanity of society itself. To Laing, being nuts was a perfectly sane reaction to an insane world.

In this context the dramatic possibilities are endless. In the 1966 film *King of Hearts*, a French village deserted during World War I is taken over by the inmates of the local asylum. As the war rages on around them, they co-exist peacefully in their wacked-out utopia. Are they crazy? Well,

they're not the ones killing people.

And then there was *Cuckoo's Nest*, the apotheosis of this trend and the quintessential film for the counterculture: the mental institution as a metaphor for the abuse of authority. Salvation arrives in the form of the magnificently defiant Randle McMurphy. "This is a guy who's done some hard living, but he enjoys life in his way," says Sinise. "It's not always legal, but through that free spirit he teaches people things about themselves." More to the point, McMurphy tries to restore his fellow patients' manhood—get them laid, teach them to play poker, watch ballgames, go fishing, all the healthy masculine urges their psychiatric care has tried to suppress.

Nowadays our scapegoat has all but disappeared. Since *Cuckoo's Nest*, the majority of these state mental hospitals have closed down. But deinstitutionalization has wreaked its share of havoc. Three decades ago, Andrew Goldstein, the infamous New York City subway pusher, would never have been deemed fit to walk the streets. "Those who 25 years ago would be seen as ill are now seen as defiant," says Patrick McGrath, whose novel *Asylum* is being turned into a movie starring Liam Neeson.

As the crazies joined the rest of us, their use as a metaphor changed as well. After all, what better way to capture the alienation of being creatively unappreciated? More recent depictions of the mentally ill on-screen have almost studiously avoided detailing the debilitating pain of being out of one's mind, opting instead for a more reassuring vision of the crazy person: He's not crazy, he's misunderstood—and usually a genius to boot.

In *The Madness of King George*, England's deranged king is inspired to act out scenes from *King Lear*.

The 1996 hit *Shine* traces the life of David Helfgott, an apparently schizophrenic pianist who suffers a psychotic break during an especially emotional performance. Helfgott is placed in an institution, where the doctors won't allow him to play. When he's released he rediscovers the piano, and music helps to cure him (well, not cure him, but patch him up enough so that he can live happily and give inspired performances). In *The Fisher King*, Robin Williams plays a homeless loon who's privy to insights to which the sound of mind aren't. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the madman is no longer the victim; he's the (brilliant) victimizer. True, in this tale the romantic vision of madness does verge on the gothic. But without the help of Hannibal Lecter, Agent Starling could never have caught Buffalo Bill, the movie's real villain. And at the end of the film we find ourselves cheering on Dr. Lecter, who's preparing to kill, and eat, another fellow who is... a psychiatrist.

To his credit, Berg doesn't buy into this myth of madness. There are no wise fools in *Wonderland*; it's a harsh and unapologetic look at mental illness. In the pilot a schizophrenic man comes to the ward after gunning down five people in Times Square. He'd stopped taking his medication a few days earlier, and his paranoid delusions had returned with a vengeance.

Not even the doctors are immune. In the same show, one of the shrinks leaps on top of a gurney and chokes a patient. Before, madness was something society was responsible for and was unfit to judge. Now we're all a little crazy.

Berg's mother worked at a psychiatric hospital when he was growing up, and he spent eight months hanging around Bellevue before writing the first episode. He insisted that all his writers log time there as well. One of them quit after three weeks. ("He said he couldn't handle it," says Berg. "He felt like he was losing his mind.") Berg, too, started questioning his own sanity. "Spending time at a psychiatric hospital, one is forced to take a long, hard look into the mirror and wonder why it is that my neurotransmitters are functioning in a way that allows me to button my shirt properly and put my napkin in my lap at dinner," he says. "There

were many times when I started feeling like I was cracking up after eight hours at Bellevue."

Berg sees *Wonderland* as a chance to set the record straight, to represent the world of the mental institution without vilifying it. It's a worthy cause and long overdue, but will it make good television? In courtroom dramas, the accused is either convicted or acquitted. In most hospital shows, patients either live or die. But try integrating multiple personalities in a one-hour episode. Berg's doctors can't exactly save lives. Often they can't even diagnose an illness.

When Berg first pitched the idea to ABC, they told him no one had ever made a viable TV show about a psychiatric hospital.



Nicholson in *Cuckoo's Nest*

After they screened the pilot, the network's executives asked Berg if he could "continue to do that." "I said, 'Do what?'" Berg recalls. "And they said, 'We don't know.' No one was able to articulate what they liked or why they liked it. It just felt very authentic to them."

Perhaps *Wonderland* works because Berg is so adept at capturing the terrifyingly opportunistic creep of madness. Consider the schizophrenic from the first episode. He shows up at the hospital shortly before his shooting spree but isn't admitted. When the doctor who turned him away is called before a disciplinary committee, she delivers a stirring defense that should please those psychiatrists who've suffered for so long at the hands of American moviemakers: "I catch ghosts. Mental illness is not visible.... There's no amount of blood work or DNA sampling that can help me to predict a human being's behavior from one minute to the next."

Not only does the madness now walk among us; it's almost perfectly camouflaged. ■

In the world Berg depicts, patients and doctors alike can crack.

