

COUCH POTATOES

"Wonderfalls"
Thursdays 8 p.m.
Fox Network

"Wonderfalls" is the story of a woman who, with the help of an outside supernatural force, performs acts of kindness and helps strangers to improve their lives. Does this new show from Fox sound like "Touched By an Angel"? How about "Joan of Arcadia"? The difference between Jaye Tyler, "Wonderfalls'" leading lady (Caroline Dhavernas) and angels with an affinity for physical contact or modern day martyrs is that Tyler doesn't want anything to do with the metaphysical or supernatural.

Tyler is an overeducated, underqualified woman stuck in a menial job as a cashier for a tourist shop at Niagara Falls. Not that she minds. In the pilot episode she remarks that her parents work hard and are still dissatisfied with their lives. Tyler figures she can be dissatisfied with her life by hardly working at all.

Her life changes when a wax lion suddenly advises her not to give a customer her change back. Shocked, Tyler attempts to ignore the lion and gives the customer her \$5. Minutes later, the customer's purse is stolen. Tyler discovers that she can hear voices. Whether the voices are from God, Satan or who knows where, they all come from objects and knickknacks that are shaped like animals.

The monkey statue in her psychiatrist's office tells Tyler it loves her. A trio of synthetic representatives from the animal kingdom serenades Tyler with a throaty rendition of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall." Tyler discovers that if she does not follow the commands of her hallucinations, they will not stop talking, chatting and/or singing.

The problem is the animals do not simply tell her to help people. They use her as a vessel to set things in motion that will eventually lead to happy endings.

In the pilot, what starts off as an attempt to return the stolen purse to the customer ends with her setting up the neighborhood UPS man with a nurse. The reason the UPS man was in the hospital? Tyler had set up a date between the delivery man and her own lesbian sister. Due to a mishap involving an allergy to peanuts, the delivery man is put in the hospital where he meets the new love of his life—his nurse. Meanwhile, Tyler's sister finds love of her own in the UPS man's ex-wife. Twisting plots that begin in one spot and end in a way few people would predict help drive the nature of the show. Each episode is a puzzle with audience members attempting to piece together the larger picture.

What saves the show from becoming preachy is the biting sense of humor in the script. Clever dialogue and bizarre situation pieces are reminiscent of early Tim Burton films. Each show hosts a cache of bizarre actors. Tyler's WASP-like family attempts to help their wayward member, but they are ultimately clueless.

"Wonderfalls'" production is highly original and creative. Each scene is edited so it appears to be emitted from a Viewmaster (a bright red goggle shaped toy in which slides are projected for viewers to behold). The acting is all highly watchable. Dhavernas' performance as Tyler is a joy to watch. Imagine an adult version of MTV's "Daria" and you will have Tyler, swimming through life on the back of a giant life preserver constructed of sarcasm and cynicism.

"Wonderfalls" is a clever show with great potential. Expect future shows to continue in the fashion as Tyler, righting wrongs—protesting all the way. Hopefully, the larger mystery of the voices that torment Tyler will slowly be revealed as the series progresses. As long as the writing stays as top notch as it currently is and the actors and funky editing style continue to evolve and grow, "Wonderfalls" may easily become Fox's best new show.



— Robert Saucedo

"Stephen King's Kingdom Hospital"
Wednesdays at 9 pm
ABC

Reading a Stephen King novel can be compared to being friends with a highly intelligent bipolar fifth-grader who watches too much TV. King has many great things to say and some very clever thoughts, but occasionally he'll get caught up in spouting off needless amounts of profanity and unoriginal ideas. Part of the reason so many people have grown to love King's literature is because of the higher ratio of cleverness in his books as opposed to trash.

Unfortunately, when translating a Stephen King story to a visual medium, perhaps the best part is left out, his voice, leaving only the trash behind for viewers to clean up. Whether it's his use of word play or his interior dialogue, King's narrative voice is the prime cut of his novels, not the ideas. Transferring his voice to screen has always given screenwriters a hard time. That's why the promise of a 15-hour mini-series, ABC's "Stephen King's Kingdom Hospital," has so much potential. Unfortunately, if "Kingdom Hospital" is going to live up to its potential, it's going to have to rise above the initial impressions left behind by the two-hour pilot.

The series is a remake of the Danish mini-series "Ringet." In the pilot, viewers are introduced to the doctors and patients of The Kingdom, Maine's premier hospital. In traditional ghost story fashion, the hospital is built upon the grounds of an ancient graveyard. Among the spirits haunting the hospital are the ghosts of a little girl and a seemingly vampire-like teenage boy.

While ghosts haunt the state-of-the-art building, the really strange people are the people who work at the hospital.

Ed Begley Jr., Andrew McCarthy and Bruce Davison play doctors and surgeons with various personality quirks. From Begley's Dr. Jesse James who's more interested in promoting the facilities with buttons and stickers and separating patients with their checking accounts than actually saving people, to Davison's Dr. Stegman, an overtly angry surgeon who has recently taken lead of his fellow doctors, the staff is full of eccentric characters all played by talented actors.

The real oddities though, are the fringe players such as Julian Richings who plays the nearly blind security guard who has a penchant for talking to his German shepherd. Along for the ride are also two mentally retarded yet apparently omnipotent dishwashers who are seemingly telepathic and serve as a Greek chorus for the

epic mini-series.

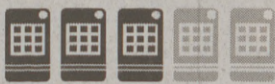
Among the hospital's patients, Jack Coleman plays a hit-and-run victim who is trapped in a coma throughout most of the pilot. In a scene that was obviously inspired by King's own misfortune, artist Peter Rickman is hit by a van while jogging along a country road. Left for dead, he is confronted by a creepy giant anteater that taunts the paralyzed victim throughout his ordeal. Diane Ladd also appears as Sally Druse, a psychic who begins to sense the brewing trouble the hospital has in store for it.

What exactly the trouble is has yet to be revealed. As of the pilot, it's apparent the tectonic plate activity is a bit shakier than most other hospitals and one elevator has a tendency to get stuck in transit. What this has to do with the ghosts and ghouls that haunt the hospital will be revealed throughout the remainder of the series.

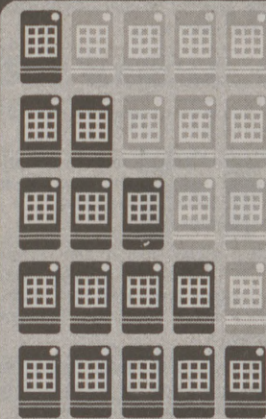
An aspect of the mini-series that really carries through from Stephen King's printed writing is the use of inner thoughts of animals and people to convey the general oddness of the hospital. Some examples are when Rickman lies bleeding at the edge of the road, a crow lands on his chest and the audience begins to hear the crow's plans for eating Rickman's eyes. Rickman meanwhile has been resounding thought after thought of why nobody has seen him and stopped.

With so much general weirdness going for it, "Kingdom Hospital" seems set to have an interesting run throughout the spring season.

If director Craig R. Baxley lays off the fancy special effects and camera techniques long enough to work with Stephen King to bring an actual sense of suspense and horror once the series gets into high gear. While sheer quirkiness may bring a fresh smell to a stale television landscape that's cluttered with an overload of reality, eccentricity can only last so long. From there, a story must need to take shape.



— Robert Saucedo



Better to watch paint dry

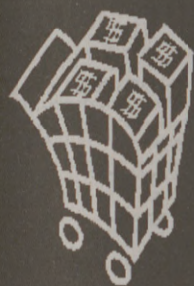
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