



George F. Walker

# chaotic justice

George F. Walker's

# This Is Wonderland

By Coral Andrews-Leslie

"We're just going on another ride," says George F. Walker. That's the way the cab-driver-turned-celebrated-playwright would describe the much-anticipated second season of *This Is Wonderland*. In September 2004, Muse Entertainment Enterprises announced that season one of this popular Canadian *Law & Disorder* will now be seen in over 100 countries worldwide. *This Is Wonderland*, co-created by Walker and screenwriter Dani Romain, follows neophyte lawyer Alice De Raey as she bops her way through the bizarre trials and tribulations of the Canadian justice system. Meeting a veritable United Nations of clients in the Gothic confines of Toronto's Old City Hall, Alice struggles against what Walker calls "the mess, complexity, sadness"—even the "stupidity"—that runs rampant in the lower court system.

Take soloists Walker and Romain, with the cadence of Dickens, Kafka and Chekhov, set to Lewis Carroll's whimsical accompaniment, and you've got the cross-cultural jazz of *This Is Wonderland*. Lead solo in this human mess is Cara Pifko as Alice. Named in tribute by Walker for New York director Daniel De Raey, the quick-witted legal novice is backed up by a talented ensemble cast including three "supporting Michaels": Michael Healey as the hypersensitive defense counsel James Ryder, Michael Riley as the excitable attorney Elliot Sacks and Michael Murphy as cynical judge Maxwell Fraser. Michaels Healey and Riley are theatre pals from Walker's old Factory Theatre days in the 1970s and 1980s.

Michael Murphy (*Year of Living Dangerously*, *Batman Returns*), a newly-landed immigrant and husband of actress Wendy Crewson, says Walker, was "a great surprise, and a huge amount of luck." Siu Ta completes the quirky quartet playing acid-tongued soon-to-be-lawyer Nancy Dao. Walker and Romain dub Cara Pifko the "smart, klutzy captain of the ship." Similar to Lewis Carroll's Alice (with nicer shoes), Ms. De Raey takes the viewer down into Toronto's Old City Hall rabbit hole to the lower criminal court system that handles up to 100,000 cases per year. It's an endless whirlwind of defense teams, crown attorneys, judges, translators, offenders and society's "displaced." Armed with a nonjudgmental attitude and sweet tenacity, Alice swims upstream battling an often overwhelming sea of human plankton. Nothing is predictable.



From the left: Cara Pifko, Michael Riley, Siu Ta and Michael Murphy.

# "We are in a unique and particularly terrifying negative situation

The same thing can be said for Canadian television production. "We are in a unique and particularly terrifying negative situation here in Canada," insists Walker. "We are overwhelmed by American culture. We have to go up against American television shows that have huge budgets. Every other Canadian network, besides the CBC, programs American shows. They surround Canadian shows with American shows that have expensive promotion." Despite those dire statistics, *Wonderland's* initial ratings and growing fan base in 2004 proved a potent shot in the arm of Canadian drama. Walker admits he would have been shocked had *Wonderland* not been renewed for a second season because of the commitment CBC had toward the show. "We won an award from the Canadian Schizophrenia Society" claims Walker, "and we got commendations from the Law Society and the Elizabeth Fry Society, so it meant a lot to some people. It's about the intensity of that response."

Not surprisingly, it was the countless "untold" stories in Mental Health Court that compelled Walker and Romain to write the series. Initially, Walker wasn't sure what the future held for *This Is Wonderland*, and he used the cancelled ABC drama series *My So Called Life* as his model for a show that attracted fanatical fans. He trusted that his and Romain's unique brand of "humanity on television" would attract the same dedicated fan base.

The concept for *Wonderland* emerged a few years ago. Walker was enjoying the usual "back and forth" brainstorming session with Romain during a lunch break when they sauntered into Toronto's College Park, the busy Provincial Courts a block away from their offices, during an exceptionally hectic day. Their chatter quickly dissolved. What the hell was this? The volume of the chaos hit Walker and Romain right between the eyes. Here was a gritty, kinetic world opening before them—a complex verbal jazz of messy humanity, boogying in a justice system bursting at the seams. As they took in the human frenzy of ordinary men and women in extraordinary circumstances, Walker and Romain knew its surrealism could never be produced in the theatre. Television was the only medium to fully capture this modern-day Bedlam.

They took the idea to the powerhouse team of Bernie Zukerman and Michael Prupas (the producers of *The Many Trials of One Jane Doe* and *The Death and Life of Nancy Eaton*), who gave them the go-ahead for the project. Then Walker and Romain spent 18 months "burrowing in," taking copious notes, using research assistants and eventually hiring a duty counselor as a consultant. They closely observed and spoke with defence counsels and the "never shy" offenders parading through the lower courts. Walker has heard that legal professionals gather at lunchtime to watch taped versions of *This Is*

*Wonderland* because of its uncanny ability to portray what really goes on in Old City Hall's chaotic courts. *Wonderland's* legal adviser confirms there is nothing too far over the edge that Walker and Romain could write that doesn't actually happen in the famous Gothic landmark.

"The point is, Dani and I knew what we wanted to do with this right away, and we both like television that uses words. These people are not too dissimilar from the people I have been writing about all my life," says Walker. "The whole world was simpatico as soon as I walked in. This is just like a playground that I have already been playing in, but writ large." Walker's creative playmates this year include directors Bruce McDonald (*Hard Core Logo*), Scott Smith (*Falling Angels*), Anne Wheeler (*Bye Bye Blues*, *Better than Chocolate*) and Chris Grismer (*Clutch*), who will carry on *Wonderland's* cost efficient system of having a director handle a three-episode block. Walker and Romain have penned nine more scripts for the second season, which features the usual ensemble cast. "We say to the [supporting] actors, 'you get to come in and bleed and fall apart and rant and do whatever you want for a brief period of time and then you go. We want it to be cathartic for you,'" laughs Walker. "So just enjoy the time that you are here. It's a time for actors to play and feel."

Walker, often dubbed Canada's most prolific playwright (*Nothing Sacred*, *Escape from Happiness*, *Suburban Motel*), has had his plays produced worldwide. Known for his searing insight into Everyman, Walker has also written for *Due South* and *The Newsroom*. Dani Romain, who "tuned Walker on" to film and television genres, is, affirms Walker, the "better half of his brain"—the person he incessantly argues with instead of himself. "Dani and I talk a lot about the interview we saw with Martin Sheen when he was talking about *The West Wing*. He was asked, 'Why do you all talk so fast on the show and so much?' He said because language is action. In *This Is Wonderland* we don't have car chases. We don't have explosions. We have language and ideas and energy. Our struggle has been to convince people that words are action. Words can be action, not just thought. That's part of our mission," says Walker. He reveals the second season of *Wonderland* is more "ensemble-oriented" as the four leads—Alice, Elliot, James and Nancy—now share an office "closer to the ground. They are in this common kind of office space. Elliot and James learn to live with each other in great ways," Walker enthuses. "I think the first episode will show you where the common ground is between Elliot and James, and they find it in Mental Health Court. Dani and I always talked about what would happen if we put Elliot in Mental Health Court and see how he responded." Walker catches himself, not wanting to give anymore away.

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The *Wonderland* scripts may appear improvisational but are, in fact, quite structured. “These characters are not really finished. There is no villainy, no redemption, no catharsis. There is always more the next day,” says Walker. *This Is Wonderland* has received increased funding for its second season and now, with a fourth production studio, there is room for the new office scenes. Walker says he might direct the last block and says he would like to shoot in more “interesting little locations.” One tiny programming peeve he has is the “lowering” of the show’s profanity, which he doesn’t think “helps CBC’s case.” Walker and Romain hope the network will beef up the language warnings and change its point of view. Despite this blip, Walker and Romain are encouraged by the CBC’s staunch support and are convinced *Wonderland*’s rollercoaster debut season would not have worked so well without the

eyes, and it’s like he has looked into the void or something. Walker is like all really talented guys. They’re all a little out there, and he’s that in the best sense of the word.” Murphy says his character’s “courtroom flip-outs” are priceless. He has told his California agent he’s not interested in coming back to do something unless it’s “sensational.” Residing in Canada after 40 years in Hollywood, Murphy loves the fact that the CBC leaves them alone and no one is “breathing down our neck. This is rare. I tell all the young people on the show that it doesn’t get any better than this.”

On the big screen, Walker and Romain have completed a Canada/UK co-production *Niagara Motel*, based on Walker’s popular *Suburban Motel*, a collection of six plays. Three of them, *Problem Child*, *Featuring Loretta* and *The End of*



Siu Ta



Cara Pifko and Michael Riley



generosity and smarts of Cara Pifko. “She’s all the things you want in a television lead. She’s intelligent and attractive, but she is also this great clown,” says Walker.

“Sometimes, I think about the idea on its own,” muses Pifko. “Someone else could have done the show at the Old City Hall, maybe even in Toronto, but it wouldn’t have been a quarter as good had it not been for George and Dani. It’s their scripts that make the show electric, interesting, entertaining, gritty, envelope pushing and fun.” Pifko’s third “supporting Michael” agrees. Judge Maxwell Fraser, an impatient, acerbic guy due to a “weakened cerebral artery,” has become Michael Murphy’s favourite role. “Fraser’s cynicism rap fits right into mine,” laughs the film veteran, who says he plays a “Murphy version of George Walker,” believing, as he does, that Fraser and Elliot Sacks are Walker’s alter egos. “You look into Walker’s

*Civilization*, will be showcased in a three-in-one premise. The film, directed by Gary Yates (*Seven Times Lucky*), was shot mostly in Winnipeg, with some Niagara footage, and stars Wendy Crewson and Peter Kelleghan. On the small screen, Walker and Romain plan to keep *This Is Wonderland* firmly rooted in Toronto making it “always about the work.” As for interaction between the *Wonderland* characters, its co-writers have “no map, only intuition,” and choose to let it happen when it happens.

“We will let things hang and let the audience do some of the work imagining what might happen. But you know what? We just might bite real fast on something,” laughs Walker. “Just out of the left field, we might just clamp our jaws down and something will get consummated.”

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