

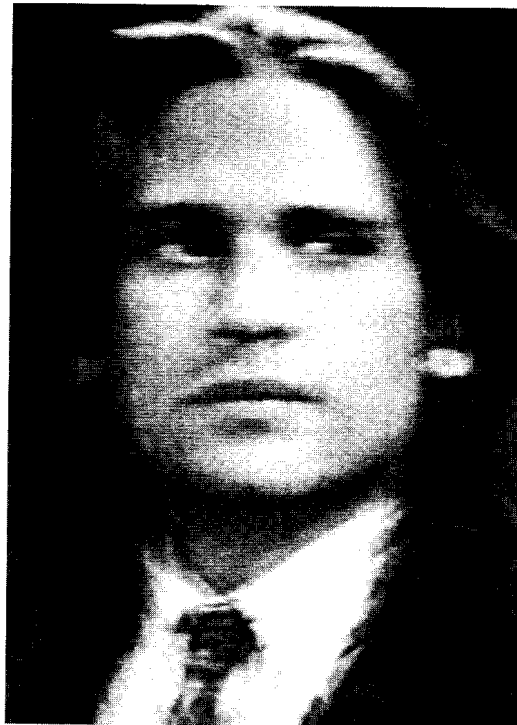
By Laurie Stone

Todd was bad. Todd was so bad he didn't even have a name at first, just the identity Frat Boy Number One. Todd was spawned on *One Life To Live* to rape Marty, a young woman who was drunk and depressed at the time. During a party, Todd hustled Marty into a bedroom, pinned her down, stuffed her mouth with a sweatband, entered her violently, and passed her off to two frat brothers.

The show treated date rape graphically, etching the woman's helplessness, the men's malice and brutality. In the ensuing trial, Marty was even accused of provoking the assault. Until the rape, she had been a nogoodnik herself—having falsely accused a studly reverend, who had spurned her advances, of sexually molesting a teenage boy. But in time the rape story lost its edge of surprise, with the characters devolving into illustrations. And it would have remained a case study, if it hadn't been for Todd.

Or rather Roger Howarth, who portrays him—Howarth, with his sensual mouth, flowing tresses, and emotional catch in his voice. Howarth seemed at once more intelligent than the material and yet immersed in it, steering Todd away from cartoon villainy and heightening the character's wildness as a dodge from sentimentality and high-mindedness. The show's creators—executive producer Susan Bedsov Horgan and head writer Michael Malone—rode the actor's talent, concocting an orgy of vileness for Todd's dark potential. After being jailed and then escaping, he kidnapped Rebecca, an evangelist who tried to reform him and fell in love instead. He punched out Marty's boyfriend, who hit his head and promptly died. And in a *Wait-Until-Dark* siege, Todd terrorized his ex-lawyer Nora, who was temporarily blind.

Characters as dangerous as Todd go up in flames on soaps. You can see little coffins on their eyelids, leaving only one question: how will the fiend get whacked? Todd was this close to being offed, but Howarth made that choice laughable. Rampaging through fictional Llanview, he injected ambiguity into the bluntest dialogue, his sneers averting cynicism to reveal depression and humor. He transformed Todd into a soul-wrenched Lucifer, his rage ripped from abuse and bathed in vengeful glee, his sexiness rising off his instinct for survival and his outlaw impulse to disrupt. Even the ragged scar he acquired on one cheek only heightened his animal appeal. No soap would jettison such gold



Hate me: Todd, the villain who won't be a cartoon, and Marty, the victim whose life he saves.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUDMILA KLUDNOVA

Coming Clean

A Soap Character Who Can't Be Laundered

and electricity—a figure simultaneously furious, ironic, melancholy, and horny.

But *OLTL* had backed itself into a corner. If Todd wasn't to die, how to integrate him into the ensemble? While most of Todd's crimes had been played out on a fantastical landscape, the rape had occurred in real time, and the show cleaned up at this year's Daytime Emmys for the seriousness and conviction of its approach. Awards were presented to the show's writing team, as well as a best actress Emmy to Hillary Smith, who plays Nora, and awards for best younger actor and best supporting actress to Howarth and Susan Haskell, who plays Marty. The rape made the laundering of Todd's deeds unfeasible.

Another tack would have been to dispatch Todd-as-we-know-him and reinstall the actor as a secret twin, with a clean slate. Or choreograph a fake-redemption dance, with the villain going straight for a while only to revert—thereby preserving the soap dichotomy of good-hearted versus selfish types. But there has been no such weaseling on *OLTL*. The show has elected to renovate the genre: maintaining Todd as a rapist, while enlarging his human dimension.

On the boards is a soap character of unprecedented psychological complexity, a being whose feelings are intrinsically mixed and mostly unresolvable. His angry side will never be erased. He will struggle with the impulses that made him a rapist, even after he

comes to understand them. He will shoulder the consequences of his past cruelties, even after he proves capable of love. Todd is a wolfman whose hairy soul won't be untangled and who yet walks among us. Is us.

It isn't surprising that the scripts are braided with literary conceits, for Malone is a well-known novelist—author of *Dingley Falls*, among other books—and an aficionado of multiple, Dickensian plots. During a period of expansion for Todd's personality, the character hid out in a garden shed and, befriended by two small children, became a Frankenstein figure, peeping into the windows of a family—at once discovering his humanity and his isolation. Arrested again and on his way to prison, he escaped when the police van carrying him struck a car. Inside, as fate would have it, were Marty and one of the children Todd had befriended.

Faced with the choice of fleeing or saving others, he begrudgingly risked his life. As preposterous as the situation was, Howarth and Haskell remained credible, their scenes taking on a hallucinatory air. Todd helped Marty from the wreck, at the same time raging against the impulse to compensate her for the damage he'd caused. Marty, her legs injured, shuddered with disbelief while her rapist carried her to safety. Most horrifying to the pair was their recognition of being doubles: set apart from others not only by the rape but by their deep-seated anger and willfulness.

When returned to prison, Todd underwent counseling, and the

scenes were played in a gritty, *vérité* style. "Everything's my parents' fault," mocked Todd, "that I didn't get enough warm fuzzies when I was a child. All of that and a quarter will buy me a gum ball. I did what I did. Everybody's got to deal with their junk. Why should I be different from anyone else?" The counselor, Ray, played with brashness and empathy by Scott Cohen, recognized Todd's despair and masochism—this son whose father degraded him and who now turns his aggression on himself, almost relishing being considered a lost cause.

"So you think you had a pretty normal childhood," Ray pressed. "I had a good mother and a jerk for a father."

"Even jerk fathers don't go so far as to visit their sons in prison, just to tell them they're disowned."

In another scene, Ray urged Todd to admit he was being abused by guards and inmates, and then connected Todd's powerlessness to Marty's feelings during the rape. Probing more deeply, Ray asked Marty to confront Todd—so he could face the consequences of his actions and so she could feel less a victim. The meeting quickly detonated. Marty shook with fury as Todd sneeringly asked if she wanted his blood. She fled but then stood outside the room, screaming into the window. "I hate you," Todd was frozen, until he bellowed the same thing, their howls combining into a song of damaged beasts, finding no comfort in each other but only painful reminders of their own abandonment.

In a phone conversation, producer Horgan says, "Roger fights against any attempt to sentimentalize his character. He's posed the most interesting challenge to this show. We're exploring whether Todd's rehabilitation is possible. Statistically, men who rape keep wanting to do it. We're being harder on Todd than the law allows. He could have been pardoned for saving lives, but we're keeping him in counseling."

"We're going to examine what underlies sexual-assault crimes and gender stereotypes. Todd's father degraded him verbally and abused his mother. Todd loved her, but she left, and every other woman has let him down. We're not painting him as a victim. He will never be rid of the wound. He will always be haunted by what he's done. The sexual element is the most complex piece of the story. Where is the part in Todd that feels tenderness? Can he come out of this and have nonviolent sex? Rebecca and Todd will go on. With Rebecca we can explore what women think is expected of them."

In another phone conversation, writer Malone describes a plot that was rejected: "Rebecca marries Todd, thinking, 'With me he will be good, I can tame the beast.' But he abuses her over and over, until eventually she kills him. It's much more fun keeping him alive. Rebecca has to face her sexual attraction to Todd, even though he is brutal, or because he is. Right now, she's gotten engaged to Powell, and it's as if she's saying, 'I'm going to marry Edgar Linton, because I'm afraid of Heathcliff.'"

"And what does Marty do with this man who raped her and then saved her life? Todd recently had a dream in which Marty placed a handcuff on herself and the other one on him and said, 'All you saved was the half of a life you left me.' He is feeling remorse, but there will never be anything romantic between them. We're thinking of a plot in which Todd is

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accused of a crime he didn't commit, and only Marty knows the truth. What will she do?"

Asserts Horgan, "People are ready for this depth. If they're not, we're going to make them ready for it." So far so good. The show is resisting pressure to turn Todd into a villain entirely, because a rapist cannot be redeemed, or to transform him into a romantic hero, because he is beautiful. His own abuse is being dissected at a time when, in the courts, the victim defense is detaching felons from their crimes and when such batterers as O. J. Simpson depict themselves as victims.

All the more reason, asserts OLT, to map the underpinnings of assault crime. And to do so in detail, unlike talk shows that present a dysfunction du jour, an expert, and a quick fix—a way to be reborn, cleansed, and straightened, with a wand that used to be religious faith and is now the damaged inner child. If emotional complexity were not still viewed with unease, would Jacqueline Kennedy have been so eulogized for bottling her feelings? Granted, she only swallowed her husband's egotism and infidelity, but against the backdrop of Nicole Brown Simpson's suffering, OLT is saying that silence and therapeutic band-aids aren't glamorous.

An even dicier tack is portraying a rapist as highly sexual, a rebel whose allure is allied with his unpredictability. In part this is the old genre fiction ploy of simultaneously exploiting and exploring titillation. But whatever else the show is up to, it is acknowledging that rape, though an act of vio-

lence, involves sex. The show is allowing that sex and rage aren't housed in separate rooms within the psyche but exist on a slippery continuum. And it's acknowledging that repeated acts of abuse may contain an eroticized component for both parties. A sexy rapist, however, also stokes fantasies that can blur the unerotic realities of sex crime. And the show is already confronting the uncontrollable reception of its images. Recently a castmate and Howarth were outside the studio, when several teenage girls looked at Howarth and said, "Rape me, rape me." Were they being irreverent? Turned on by rape? Confused about sex crimes?

Wanting to get "Marty" 's take on this, I spoke with Haskell at OLT's studio. She is slender, with long wavy hair and a face at once delicate and steely. Having received hundreds of letters from women who've been raped, she thinks that Todd's release from jail may become "a slap in the face to the rape story." "We presented an important issue. Women have gotten counseling, spoken to family members, admitted they were afraid to prosecute. Women in small towns run into their rapists on the street. People raped 40 years ago are still talking about it. The writers have a tough job. They've got this great actor in Roger, but they're walking a dangerous line."

She rolls her eyes at the mention of Powell, who also raped Marty on the fateful night but who has been spared counseling and has metamorphosed into a Dudley Do-right. "Marty is too comfortable in his presence," says Haskell, and she is dubious that a man like Todd can ever change. Speak-

ing from her character's perspective, she adds, "Marty almost has to laugh, thinking this whole year has been a waste, that the authorities have been fooled. She thinks that when push comes to shove Todd will always flip. She wants to strangle him."

Though Howarth feels similar concerns, sitting in makeup with his glued-on scar—new, less irritating versions are being fabricated—he's committed to fleshing out Todd's inner life. The PR line on Howarth is that he's sweet and mild mannered, nothing like his character. Fortunately for the sake of his complexity, he bristles and crackles during the interview, suggesting sources for his performance. He scoffs at fans who say, "I'm so glad you're good now, so I can like you." He maintains, "Todd isn't changing. We're just getting to see more parts of him, now that there is time for this psychological examination. It's always more interesting to see someone capable of anger than a person who explodes all the time. Todd will never lose his scar, because the mark is on his character."

The toughest challenge for the show is approaching, following Todd's recent release. Horgan and Malone say they have the moxie to honor rape victims without censoring the show's probe of sex and violence. While all soaps exploit the heat generated by forcefulness, none before has deliberately tracked the crossroads of anger, masochism, and arousal. The greatest potential awaits in Rebecca's story—in her erotic fix on Todd's aggression and woundedness. Malone and I tossed around some scenarios. In one, Rebecca and Todd switch roles. Admitting

STAR-SPANGLED BUMMER

I regret to report that infantilism has emerged as the CD-ROM medium's lowest common denominator. Never before has experience been so efficiently reduced to a kid's game. As the memorial repackaging of Woodstock continues (I harbor zero regrets about spending the sequel exactly where I spent the original: on the other side of the country), Time Warner Interactive's Woodstock: 25th Anniversary CD-ROM (\$39.95), based on Michael Wadleigh's movie, succeeds in reducing the festival's dimensions—both real and mythic—to its least threatening form.



A child's Woodstock

Apart from the medium's irritating delays and technological frustrations—I had to reset my poor PowerBook at least half a dozen times when the software froze or started consuming my desktop—I was most surprised at how little content the disk actually contains. Lacking the movie's split-screen non sequiturs, the CD-ROM feels aesthetically emaciated. Hunker after that classic rock sound? The pickings here are reduced to a few audiovisual snacks and eight full songs that, with the possible exception of Janis Joplin's gritty "Work Me, Lord," you've probably heard far too often. Where's Townshend punching Hofman?

Less interactive than my cable box, the Woodstock software offers photos, self-serving sound bites, a ridiculous where-are-they-now? game, and a psychedelic drawing palette so heavy it flashed me back to my first copy of Eye magazine. If, like one paranoid participant, you still wonder why "the fascist pigs are seeding the clouds," this little souvenir offers a belated hint. —RICHARD GEHR

desire pumps up Rebecca, becomes a way for her to master her passivity. At the same time, her appetite for the beast in Todd triggers his fear that sexual desire will spill over into ferocity. He's not sure he wants her to love that element in him. And, seeing he has no control over his feelings or hers, he slows down their love-making. In another scenario, they

go up in flames! It remains to be seen whether hot sex, so fugitive, problematic, and satisfying, will be permitted to fly. With pictures of violence against women still more palatable in public than images of women in ecstasy, rely on the porn police, of every stripe, to stay tuned. Will OLT tell them where to put their nightsticks?

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