

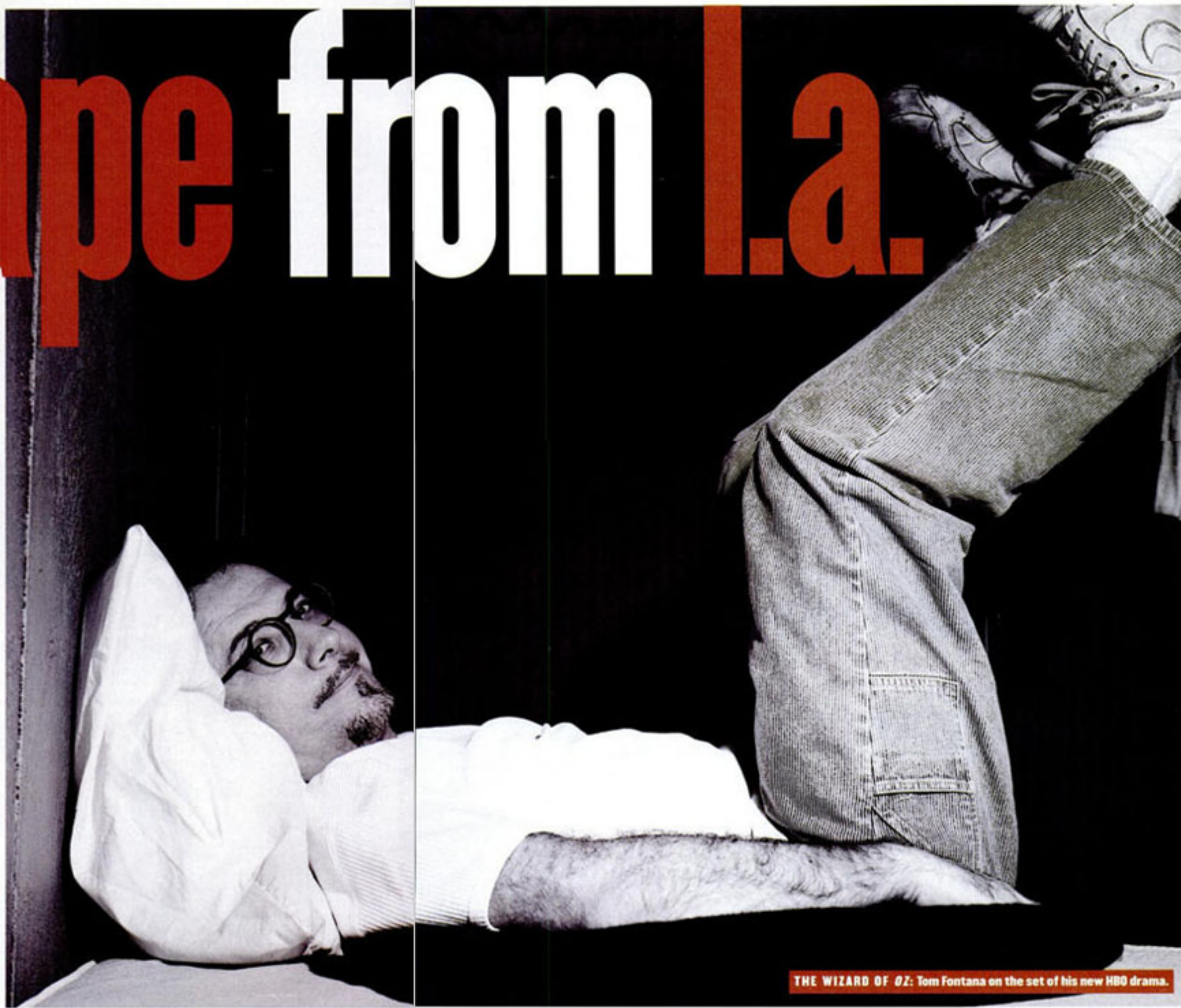
# escape from l.a.

**HOMICIDE PRODUCER TOM FONTANA GETS EVEN GRITTIER WITH HIS LATEST SHOW, *OZ*, ABOUT A MAXIMUM-SECURITY PRISON. SHOT IN NEW YORK, IT'S ABOUT AS FAR FROM *FRIENDS* AS TV CAN GET. EXPECT JAILBREAKS, NOT COFFEE BREAKS. BY TRISH ROHRER**

**t** HIS PAST APRIL, A RIOT ERUPTED IN A loft building on Ninth Avenue between 15th and 16th Streets in Manhattan. It started as a food fight among a menacing-looking crew of around 100 or so television extras, most in drab colors, a few with women's stockings tied

tight over their hair and cinched in the middle of their foreheads, all with arms like Christmas turkeys. They were hired for the day by 45-year-old Tom Fontana, the television writer and producer behind the show *Oz*, a new HBO series about a maximum-

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN CHAVKIN



THE WIZARD OF *OZ*: Tom Fontana on the set of his new HBO drama.

security prison (see "Television: Not in Kansas Anymore," by John Leonard, page 77). Their job: to sit quietly around the set of a large prison cafeteria until given the cue to throw the food put in front of them.

But things on the set of *Oz*—Fontana's first new show since the thinky six-year-old *Homicide*, and HBO's first hour-long drama series—didn't go as planned. When the cue was given, the air in the room suddenly ionized and darkened the

slipped on a slice of American cheese, flipped up into the air, and slammed down to the ground onto his back.

Fontana noticed. He suddenly tore from his director's chair behind a video monitor and ran in a crouch in the direction of the downed man, breaking protocol, risking a shot that would be impossible to replicate. But before he crossed the lens of the camera man—who was creeping around the room, surrounded by a

son tore him away from an impending journey to Tuscany (where, Fontana says somewhat implausibly, he planned to write epic poetry) and hired him on as executive producer of Levinson's then-upcoming show *Homicide*, that Fontana became one of the five most powerful television producers in the world.

"Tom commands serious respect at all of the networks," says Peter Benedek, co-owner of the United Talent Agency in Los Angeles. That may be, but *respect* and *serious* aren't by any means among the first words the jokers who work with Tom would summon to describe him—a man who genially calls his male colleagues on the set "shitheads" and who, on at least one instance, found himself in a bar holding a guy in the crook of his elbow and punching him repeatedly in the head. He's also a guy who hires his inexperienced assistants on as six-figure writers, who has young actors on his shows crashing in his guest rooms, who gave the part of a prison guard on *Oz* to a firefighter who was having a hard time after a divorce.

As for Fontana's respect for the networks, that fluctuates. One day, walking from his office to the set of *Oz*, he says, "Network executives don't give notes about structure or content. They give hair notes. 'What's with her hair?' they want to know. 'Can't you do something about her hair? And how about those baggy clothes? She's such a pretty girl—why doesn't she dress better? What is she supposed to be, a dyke?'"

When you ask Barry Levinson about Fontana's unpredictable side, he says, "Well," and a renegade laugh burbles out of him. "Well," he says again, into the phone, "I think that he's a big personality in his own right, but the important thing is that he knows how to deliver on the work."

AT THE END OF THE FIRST WEEK OF SHOOTING *Oz*, Fontana stops in at a tiny bar on 23rd Street to grant one of *Oz*'s lead actors, Lee Tergesen, injured in a stunt an hour before, his one, pressing wish: Jagermeister. While Tergesen soaks up attention by doing forward bends on the floor, Fontana sits against the wall, smiling a characteristic small smile, drinking Wild Turkeys, and waiting quietly for his credit card to return from behind the counter. He's a physical kind of guy in general (he's always bear-hugging the women he meets on the street and playfully punching the techies who jostle him when they walk by on the set), and when you start up a conversation with him about *Oz*, he leans in close to you, like you're out on a good date.

It would be understandable if Fontana were exhausted or testy or at least preoccupied after a week of waking at 5:30 to



TV CHARACTER: Fontana in front of Granville, a restaurant he partly owns.

way it does just before a storm. Then all at once, 100 men were out of control, standing on tables, screaming their guts out, hurling props at one another, hard, in a nasty, gleeful way. One man swan-dived from a table into a knot of bodies on the floor.

The director started screaming, "Cut! Cut!" but nobody cut, and so she started yelling, "No! No!" and ran down the edge of the room, an irate and helpless coach during a gruesome play. She may not have even noticed when a beefy tattooed man who'd been running down a long table

ring of bodyguards—someone managed to signal him that the guy with tattoos was a stuntman, the pratfall an improvisational flourish. Fontana crept back to his chair and stepped again into his role as unflappable leader. "My job is to make everyone feel like everything's going okay, even when it's not," Fontana said later.

Fontana made a name and the beginning of a sizable fortune in the eighties as one of the three top writer-producers of the much-loved sensitive-if-soapy hospital drama *St. Elsewhere*. But it wasn't until 1991, when film director Barry Levin-

# Network execs

**DON'T GIVE NOTES ABOUT STRUCTURE OR CONTENT," SAYS FONTANA. "THEY GIVE HAIR NOTES. 'CAN YOU DO SOMETHING WITH HER HAIR?'"**

write new episodes before showing up on set at 10:30 that same morning to oversee the shooting of ones he's already written, a workday that lasts until 8:30 at night. But instead, Fontana seems cheerful to the point of festive. He's got a Cuban cigar tucked into the corner of his mouth, a silver goatee, a small hoop earring, a black leather jacket, a bright-red long-underwear shirt, a pair of well-worn engineer boots, graying hair cropped short enough to sell insurance (he says), and that smile.

You'd never know from his demeanor that just hours later, he'd be at his desk writing dark, ambiguous stories about crime and punishment, control systems, prison rape—that from his pen would come branded swastikas, stabbings, naked cavity checks. Fontana doesn't want to write a family show, he says. Even though shows like *thirtysomething* have a built-in audience, which *Oz* does not (even Fontana's current assistant stands in the middle of his cubbyhole saying, "Who's going to want to see this show?"), that format's not Fontana.

"I like shows," he says, "where the stories have a real sense of life and death, and a size to them, with issues that we deal with on a day-to-day basis in our lives—drugs, God, death, love—but more intensified because of the environment, like prison. With a family show, you have to say, 'This week, how are we going to keep the family in some kind of emotional crisis? Okay, Mom's having menopause, and sister's getting her leg amputated.'" Fontana brushes these scenarios away with his drink, and his ice clinks in the glass. "But I think about the death penalty," he says, "and I just have to put my head in my hands." He puts his head in his hands and wobbles it from side to side like an old man fretting. "I don't know the answers," he says. "I don't have a political agenda with the show. I'm not advocating one thing or the other. I'm a storyteller. I want to tell stories that make people ask questions, like, How does one survive in an impossible environment? Which is, again, not all that different

from what all of us deal with day to day."

Fontana's own difficulties, for the most part, though, seem to be those of abundance. He has, at the moment, deals with three different television companies (NBC, ABC, and HBO) and is simultaneously, actively executive-producing two different hour-long dramas (*Homicide* and *Oz*) in two separate cities (Baltimore and New York). He's writing one of the shows entirely by himself, and taking responsibility for scores of people's lives, as well as more than \$35 million of other people's money. He has his own television company, Fatima Productions, and has just officially partnered up with Barry Levinson, starting a new, multi-million-dollar production company, Levinson/Fontana, based, unusually, in New York. Fontana owns shares in three restaurants in Manhattan (Granville and the two Matches, uptown and downtown), and in the past few months, he has bought a five-story townhouse on the corner of 13th and Greenwich Streets—the old Jackson Square Library, built by the Vanderbilts in 1887—the bottom two floors of which he is turning into offices for a diverse group of writers.

But Fontana denies being a producer, denies being a businessman, and denies being powerful. He refuses to buckle under the pressure to live in Los Angeles—a city he has lived in before and despises—and refuses to spend his spare time with the men and women of Hollywood who have similar résumés, similar bank accounts, and similar problems in managing other people's wishes and needs. And though he gives vast amounts of money away to arts organizations, theaters, young people in need, and family members, not many people outside of the television community know his name.

As far as Fontana is concerned, he is a writer, period. He produces so that he can have control over what happens to his words. He lives in New York, not in L.A., where all of the other top TV producers—Steven Bochco, David Kelley, Dick Wolf, Chris Carter—live, partly because he loves to walk.

"I walk down the same streets one day and then the next, and they're two totally different streets," he says. "The people on them are suddenly different, the attitudes, the colors, the lights, the way the sun is hitting a building. All of a sudden, you go, 'Oh, my God, I've never seen this building.' You look above the second floor, see gargoyles, and go, 'Where the hell did those come from?'"

Fontana eats out six nights a week, mostly at his own restaurants, mostly with young actor friends. He goes to parties at the homes of people like Peter Maas, where Gabriel García Márquez is the guest of honor, and then to dives where women dance naked on the bar. It's been said that he made a deal with HBO that if he was going to do *Oz*, it would have to be shot in Manhattan, and preferably within walking distance of his apartment, the new library, and his offices at the Chelsea Piers. "There's no place more exciting to make television than New York," he says. "And at the end of a long day of shooting, you go to a nice restaurant." He leans in and says conspiratorially, "You've got to count in the restaurant factor—very important."

LEVINSON ORIGINALLY HIRED FONTANA AS executive producer for *Homicide* to fight the fights with network executives over hiring film directors like Ted Demme instead of television directors, and to risk the risks that come with using writers like novelist Jane Smiley—recommended to Fontana by *New Yorker* fiction writer Henry Bromell, on Fontana's staff at the time—instead of, as Levinson describes them, "all the usual suspects." Fontana would be the one to explore, with a handheld camera, the more personal, unglamorous lives of Baltimore policemen and -women, instead



PRIME-TIMERS: Fontana and Levinson.

of creating melodrama through gunfights and car chases.

Gail Mutrux, once an executive at Levinson's Baltimore Pictures (and now a producer at Fox 2000), says, "With *Homicide*, even though it was Barry's name, everyone knew that it was Tom getting that show ready and on the air every week. Barry's name provided a certain protection for *Homicide*, and NBC sort of stepped back and gave Tom the space to try things. And even though Barry is the 800-pound gorilla, they still had to fight the fights with the studio. But the network really needed Tom, because Barry couldn't do a television show."

Though Fontana will start working on *Homicide* again this summer, right after he finishes writing and producing the first nine episodes of *Oz*, he has, in many re-

at HBO, says, "We had been talking for a long time about HBO trying to get into the hour-drama business. But it's a business that the networks actually do quite well. So we asked, 'What is it that we can do that would be different?'—because the networks certainly have got hospitals and policemen and lawyers locked up."

The relative permissiveness of cable allows Fontana a new, rule-breaking freedom. When asked why this is important, he says, "It'll keep me from getting fat and stupid." Then he pauses for a moment and adds, "Fatter and stupider."

ON LUNCH BREAK FROM *OZ*, FONTANA WAS giving a tour of his new library. When he passed the words WE LOVE FONTANA, scribbled, during a recent party, in big, black Magic Marker across one wall, he waved

where he was coming from: Tom believes people should be what they are. You shouldn't try to control people."

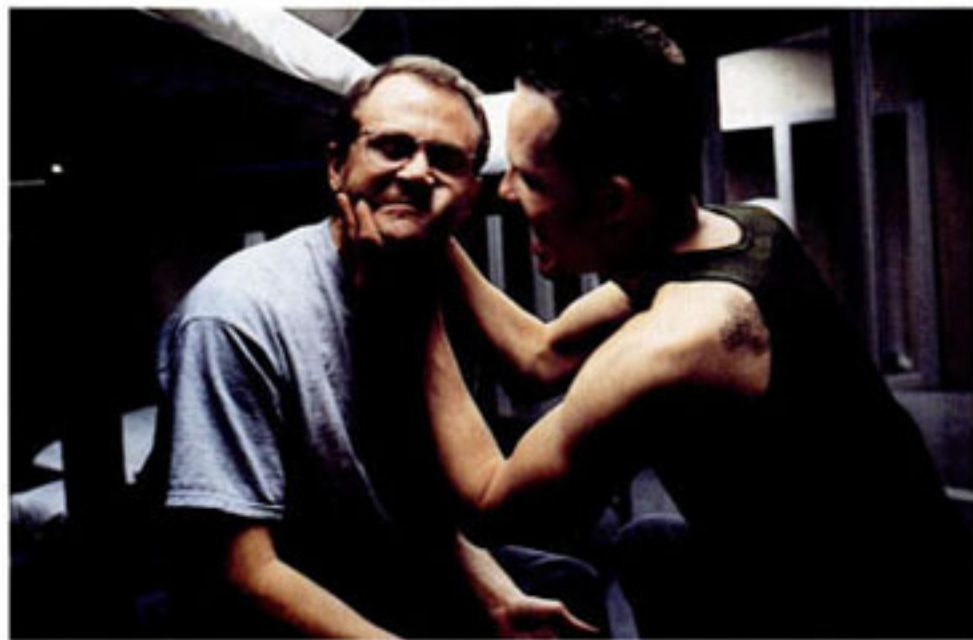
In the dark and empty warden's office on the set of *Oz*, Fontana, who spent the first five years of his life living over his Italian grandmother's bar, says, "I went to a Jesuit high school in Buffalo called Canisius. And that's where I learned my discipline. Then I went to a public college, Buffalo State, in the sixties, and that's where I learned to lose all my discipline. The combination of those two have been the things that have guided my life."

When he was a Catholic boy in Buffalo, Fontana wrote, but he hid it. His father was a wine salesman, his sister a nun, his brothers a gas man, a civil servant, and a schoolteacher, and if he ever showed his writing to anyone, he ended up feeling humiliated ("Either the person didn't get it," he says, "or I would suddenly realize that I had revealed something about myself that I hadn't intended to reveal: It was too personal, it was too painful, whatever"). Still, in 1975, when he was 24, he moved to Manhattan—to the only building on 4th Street between B and C that wasn't boarded or bricked up—with a plan to do only two things: Write plays and survive. Though he characterizes himself in those days as an "unsuccessful playwright," he managed to become, in the early eighties, playwright-in-residence at the Williamstown Theater, where he met Blythe Danner and her two young children, Jake and Gwyneth Paltrow. It was Jake and Gwyneth who saw one of Fontana's plays—*The Spectre Bridegroom*—in Williamstown and insisted that their father, the producer Bruce Paltrow, give Fontana a job on his new show, *St. Elsewhere*.

Though the young playwright's first television script "stunk," according to both him and Paltrow, Fontana, under Paltrow's tutelage, went from making \$5,000 as a playwright to \$90,000 in his first year on the show.

Paltrow describes a scene that Fontana wrote for *St. Elsewhere* years ago in which a young doctor the audience has grown to love loses his wife after she slips in the shower one morning. But there is a dying schoolteacher the audience has also been rooting for, and she is given the heart of the young doctor's wife. That night, the young doctor walks down the dark hallway of the ICU, stops at the schoolteacher's bed, sits down beside her, pulls his stethoscope out of his pocket, puts it to the schoolteacher's chest, and listens.

Paltrow whispers over his desk, "Thump, thump, thump, thump . . ." and you say, "His wife's heart?" And he says, ". . . beating in another woman's chest—thump, thump, thump. That's writing." Paltrow sits back in his chair. "He's



FACE-OFF: Lee Tergesen and Dean Cain in *Oz*.

spects, moved on to things more challenging for him. He says *Homicide* is more "Murder, She Wrote than Sam Peckinpah," and that he's tiring of the structure he essentially helped start with *St. Elsewhere*: several narrative threads woven together in one hour, a formula that successful shows like *ER* are still coasting on.

"I've done that for so long now," he says, "that I know how to do that. With *Oz*, I'm flying without a net. Instead of having stories that overlap, each story will last as long as that story needs to. So if we need to tell a story in fifteen minutes, we'll tell a fifteen-minute story. And then the next story may be a one-minute story, and the next a 35-minute story, within the hour. Each story lives on its own dramatic engine and is told from the perspective of a different character. I've never done it before, and as far as I know, nobody else has done it before."

Chris Albrecht, head of programming

his hand dismissively, saying, "It's easy to get love when you're giving someone a job and a place to live." Fontana is famous for his generosity with dinners out, jobs, apartment space, big breaks. His pop-psych theory: "I think I started out wanting to be loved. But I think over the years it's just kind of developed into a habit."

"SMOKE IT, DRINK IT, SHOOT IT, SNORT IT—come on!" Bruce Paltrow is doing an imitation of Tom Fontana talking to Paltrow's daughter, Gwyneth, when she was 16. Paltrow's fists are in the air, and his long, impish face is turned toward the ceiling of his L.A. office, in fake ecstasy. "Live!" He finally shouts, the way Fontana must have shouted less than ten years ago, when he was being what he calls the "wayward uncle" to a girl who would eventually become a movie star. "I didn't get mad," Paltrow says, his eyes gleaming behind big tortoiseshell designer frames. "I knew

# The permissiveness OF CABLE ALLOWS FONTANA A NEW, RULE-BREAKING FREEDOM: "IT'LL KEEP ME FROM GETTING FAT AND STUPID." THEN HE PAUSES FOR A MOMENT AND ADDS, "FATTER AND STUPIDER."

Faulkner. He's Williams. He's O'Neill. Under other circumstances, this is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright."

Although Fontana's recently formed partnership with Levinson compounded Fontana's clout, the mention of it leaves him uncharacteristically blasé. Ask him what his title will be at Levinson/Fontana Productions—a company funded by Rysler Entertainment, granting ABC a first-look agreement—and he says, "The Guy." Press him further and he says, "The Guy Who Isn't Levinson."

What excites Fontana about this partnership, he says, is that he'll be able to nurture young writers. He wants to do this, he says, partly because he doesn't think his commitment to television—a medium he has grown to love—begins and ends with himself. Also, he was instructed by Paltrow, after Paltrow saved him from a life of no money, no chances, no jobs, to "pass it on."

IN A BIG BOOTH AT GRANVILLE FINALLY, AFTER the Jagermeister-Wild Turkey stop, Fontana is making appetizers to order for his five guests out of caviar, capers, and crackers. One of the group—not Terjesen, who went home in pain, and who Fontana will later take to the emergency room, where they'll spend the night—says, "A little toast to Tommy," and everyone clinks glasses, more so after Fontana says that whoever doesn't clink thoroughly will die.

A few minutes later, tired of playing praise-the-boss, everyone switches to "What's Wrong With Tom?" These are the only answers his friends come up with: He's not good at pool, and he once lent money to his own assistants to keep them in a poker game, then proceeded to rob them blind.

Fontana readily offers a list of his own drawbacks. He lives in his head, he says. He's anal: If you touch his desk, if you interrupt him while he's editing, if you interrupt him while he's writing in the mornings, he'll kill you. Finally, he launches into a tirade about how he looked into

the mirror a couple of years ago—when he still had very long hair—and suddenly saw himself for what he really was: A bald-headed guy with a ponytail.

"I realized I'd been that way for a long time and no one had told me," he says. "All these people who are my quote-unquote friends didn't tell me that I was an asshole."

FONTANA SAYS HE'S READ EXTENSIVELY ON world religion and is always bringing up God, in one way or another. He thanks God, for example, after he tells you that he makes more money than he's worth. And he says that he's not so egotistical as to think that God would give him a second chance at a deep, lasting relationship with a woman, after he blew his marriage by neglecting it in favor of work.

Around the time Fontana was writing for *St. Elsewhere*, he went to Ethiopia, researching an episode, where he watched starving men, women, and children wait calmly on line for food they knew they might never get. Then he came back to L.A. and watched as people on line at the

movies shoved and swore at one another to get to the popcorn.

"That's why I can go to these parties, and clubs, and places—whatever they are—and not take it all very seriously: Because in the big continuum of life and death and God, it's all relatively silly."

So why write for television? Why not move to Tuscany, live off his fortune, eat focaccia, write epic poetry?

"How do I put this without sounding completely mad?" Fontana says, waiting for the light to change near his duplex apartment in Chelsea. It is a Sunday afternoon in springtime, and he has just finished writing for the day. "I believe that the whole evolutionary process is about mankind becoming God," he announces, and he steps into the street, headed for the cash machine across the way. "The whole planet's movement is toward becoming God, and this"—he looks around at the people and the buildings and the street and the cars of Manhattan—"becoming Heaven." Fontana walks up to the door of a bank, tries to put his card into the slot to open the lock and keeps trying, until a stranger points out that the machines inside are in ruins on the floor. As he walks away unfazed, Fontana says, "I think that eventually, down the line—and I'm talking how many millions and zillions of years from now—we will evolve into something that is God. Writing is my contribution to that."

You look at him skeptically, and he says, "For all the negative, dark things I write, I'm a fairly optimistic guy."

You get to a working cash machine then, and Fontana, having pushed all the right buttons, turns and says, "And there's this spaceship coming." And then he smiles that small, serene smile you've come to know.



GRIT AND TEARS: Scenes from *Homicide* and *St. Elsewhere*.