“These Are Not Your Children”: *The Wire*’s eighth graders and their fate at Edward Tillman Middle School

Georgia Christgau | 29 May 2009 | 4-The Wire Files [May 09]

*The Wire* holds fans in its weary grip, surveying the broken streets and systems of modern day East Baltimore. Its naturalistic tradition is full of heart — Theodore Dreiser’s lost Sister Carrie of 100 years ago comes to mind, or Nelson Algren’s lovable unloved children of Depression-era Chicago. It couldn’t be any other way for the show’s creators, David Simon and Ed Burns, an ex-reporter and an ex-cop, respectively. The American city be damned, they seem to be saying, but not before we listen in on the disenfranchised, regardless of what they’ve done or what’s been done to them.

Like the elite surveillance technique of its title, *The Wire* is about overheard conversations. It’s a teacup-to-the-wall sort of show: you might want to put on the subtitles, to make sure you get every word. The everyday talk is as banal as it is essential. Like when accomplice Renaldo, cooped up in a van for hours with Omar, a modern-day Robin Hood who steals from the dealers and kills more than his share, complains that he ‘needs to go.’ Thinking he’s chickening out — they’re about to score big at a dealers’ poker game — Omar fumes quietly, muttering about cowards, but this changes nothing for Renaldo, who insists, ‘No, man, I got to go.’ Now Omar gets it, and hands over the toilet paper.

In their newspaper accounts and case files of their previous jobs, Simon and Burns wrote drafts of what would become *The Wire*’s stories of the downtrodden and the fallen, those rising up and the ones just making do. It’s a small world but the cast is large, for television, even for HBO: more than 50 characters, predominantly African American, over the show’s five-year run. They are drug dealers, lieutenants, and soldiers; three generations of dock workers in a falling-down union; a white incumbent mayor who thinks his election may have been a fluke, and a seasoned black mayor whose his corrupt cronies refuse to capitulate; school children, teachers, administrators; cynical cops, drunk cops, and the few who still believe they can protect and serve.

Each year focuses on a different bureaucracy complicit in the lie that results when we try to make a bad situation look good: ‘Jukin’ the stats.’ Everyone does it — the mayor, the police chief, the union hall, and the school principal - though they try not to. Season Four, set at Edward Tillman Middle School, was Assistant Principal Marcia Donnelly’s year. She’s as guilty of capitulating to the numbers game as the next bureaucrat, but Donnelly plays along because to keep her school functioning, she has no other choice. Both sympathetic and no-nonsense, she’s determined to do the impossible: provide a semblance of order amidst chaos. But she’s only nominally in charge of the season’s four young protagonists, none of them much older than 14.

September brings a new year like any other, even for these boys, starting eighth grade. Each one brings his own mismatched blend of enthusiasm and dysfunction to the task. Operating out of his hallway locker, Randy’s
experiment in free enterprise — a mobile candy store for younger students that he operates out of his backpack - finds him too often in the lunch room, cutting class. Michael sees that his younger brother gets to and from school, fixes his supper, and helps him with his homework, but where his own education is concerned, he can only shrug and stare at the floor. Duquan learns the limitations of trust in a relationship with his math teacher. As the son of a convicted dealer, Naquan’s suspension in seventh grade earns him placement in an experimental class with a curriculum designed to make school relevant to kids ‘who won’t be around much longer.’ Sherrod, although grateful for a place to stay at Bubbles’, can’t live up to his terms: that he attend school for a whole day. No one expresses disbelief in the benefit of a diploma’s long term investment of years better than dropout Bodie, a corner kid who’s maybe 18 and who supervises Namond in his new job on the corner. This puts him in contact with Randy, Duquan and Michael, wistful for his youth. He’s already paid his dues on the corner. He’s been loyal, punctual, obedient, and he never steals. And he’s got nothing to show for it. Maybe he should reconsider education - whatever that means. Impressed by Michael’s intensity, he mistakes it for an interest in academic achievement, asking him seriously, ‘What you wanna go to school for? To be an astronaut?’ The man on the moon is the closest school comes to offering a role model in this town.

Although school responds to each boy in crisis, their fates are more tied to the neighborhood’s continuing decline. Randy Wagstaff seems almost happy, at first. Smaller and cuter than the others, his biggest fear initially is crossing his foster mother, which is a good thing: for all her strictness, she provides safety and privacy, which Randy experiences in her home for the first time. When Donnelly brings him to her office for cutting, Randy begs her not to call his foster mother. Ms. D. asks for a good reason. He offers to rat out the school’s graffiti artists, but she already knows who they are. Then he remembers a night recently when someone who didn’t give him a choice told him to pass along information about a murder. Donnelly withdraws the call home when she hears that word, and contacts the police instead. Randy knows nothing, but on the basis of his non-story, a not-too-bright cop makes an arrest that doesn’t stick. It’s enough to earn Randy the name ‘snitch,’ however, and turn him into someone it’s dangerous to be friends with. His foster mother’s house is torched. Feeling responsible for his partner’s mistake, Sargeant Ellis Carver tries unsuccessfully to intervene on Randy’s behalf with social services, which returns him to a penitentiary-like group home. After their goodbyes, Carver sits alone in his squad car, beating his fists against its steering wheel. So much for father figures, but even Randy gives him a positive sendoff: ‘You tried.’ What’s ahead for Randy is nothing less than shame and torture among his peers in the foster care system for what they think he’s done.

But what was Randy’s error, exactly? That when candy sales were good, he cut a few classes? That one night he stood outside when he should have been inside? That he feared being honest with his foster mother? Perhaps we could blame the legal system, which obligated Marcia Donnelly to call the police. Even in a world where options are slim to none, most African American want to survive anyway. This is the lesson of Randy struggling to remain optimistic. It’s repeated in the show’s overall theme of surveillance as the
saintly black detective Lester Farley parses scratchy sentences coming on wiretaps connected to drug dealers’ cell phones as the audience strains to understand the code of East Baltimore’s survivors, of whom Randy, Michael, Duquan and Namond are emblematic. When rising drug lord Marlo Stanfield tells his number one lieutenant, ‘I heard your pups did tall with snitchin’ boy,’ we learn more than just a few words of street dialect; we understand that news travels fast; that justice is swift; and that the lives of both Randy and Michael, the initiate referred to as ‘pups’ are already on the line.

Besides Carver, two characters who formerly were police step up for these boys. (As Carver’s frustration makes clear, anyone with feelings for these kids needs a more believable MO than being a cop.) Season four finds Presbylowski, or Presbo, filling a math teacher vacancy at Edward Tillman. It’s a stretch to take Presbylowski’s transformation seriously - last year he blew his own calm cover in a shootout, his fear taking over and causing an unnecessary death - but advertising aside (‘It’s not television. It’s HBO.’) this is still TV land. More genuine is the mentoring role assigned to formerly Lieutenant Colvin, suffering from a wounded ego after a bungled attempt to control the drug business forced him into early retirement. The university piloting the experimental class at Tillman hires Colvin as part security guard, part teacher. Despite his ambivalence about both tough kids and liberal good will, he’s glad to have the work. Another adult character, Dennis Wise, or Cutty, an ex-con, opens a boxing gym in the neighborhood for kids that he hopes will keep them and him out of trouble. And Bubbles reaches out to Sherrod. Each of these men provide some grounding for the boys because they give them respect. Support and even love follow - not that it always matters.

Take Michael, for instance. He’s no killer, but he figures his best route is to become one. His returning stepfather maintains a relatively low profile, but Michael hates him anyway. He stays around to protect his much younger brother, to whom he has become mother and father both. Although they argue over who cashes the welfare check, his stepdad isn’t violent or insistent. He’s just another junkie like his mother, it seems. As the situation stagnates, Michael becomes more and more withdrawn. Typically for the series, his preoccupation takes a while to resolve itself as options, considered and discarded, shape the boy into the person he becomes. Cutty can’t melt his stony silence, although Michael loves the gym, and although he relishes the opportunity to prove his potential, he can’t stand it when Cutty tries to get close to him. Mr. Presbylowski’s contact as his math teacher is peripheral, but even he notices Michael’s smoldering and urges him to speak with a school social worker, advice he also refuses. Finally we see but cannot hear Michael telling all to drug dealer Marlo Stanfield, the show’s villain. He’s taking over every one else’s territories in East Baltimore and is certain to become its next drug boss. His solution is ruthless, brutal, and fatal: his hit man Chris kills the stepfather.

Why did Michael turn away from Cutty and Mr. P.? Because his problem is private. In one of the more brutal scenes of this violent show, as Chris beats the stepfather to death, he asks repeatedly whether the stepdad ‘got any’ in
prison. And did he ‘like little boys.’ Chris, another ex-con, was such a victim; as such, he’s a stand-in for Mike, who trades his life for the survival of his little brother. We might even say that belonging to Marlo Stanfield gives purpose to a boy who feels so alone. Michael trades eighth grade for hit man school with Chris and his associate, a teenage girl not much older than Michael named Snoop. He’s a good student. No one - Namond, Randy, or Duqan - know his reasons, only the outcome: when Michael goes ballistic on a kid not much older who’s stolen from Marlo, Namond, who witnesses this left-for-dead beating, sums up his horrified reaction later with: ‘He ain’t Mike no more.’

Duqan’s friendship with the other boys shows their capacity for love and acceptance. Always broke and hungry, and unable to conceal his parents’ neglect, he shows up at school in yesterday’s clothes; his body odor provokes teasing and worse. They look out for Duqan, after a fashion. When they find him being beaten up in an alley, they chase the other boys away. Then it’s their turn. ‘They can’t whup on Dukie like that. Only we can whup on Dukie like that,’ they tease, punching him once again to the ground. The beatdown is a term of their endearment, and anyway, Duqan finds a way out of his extreme neediness by giving back something doesn’t cost money: knowledge. He can explain why pigeons wear bands on their legs because he cleans coops for a person ‘who schooled me.’ He also has a key piece of information about the mysterious disappearance of dead bodies in the neighborhood. Dukie, an unseen eyewitness to murder, knows where they are, but he only tells Randy, Michael, and Namond, and only to set them straight. In their fear, they’ve begun repeating a theory invented by younger kids that a ghost disappears people in the dark of night. Now Dukie stands tall, but remains their equal. One night he sneaks them inside a boarded up building to show them Lex, a homicide victim they knew. Watching their horrified reaction, he instructs flatly, ‘no special dead, just dead.’

Duqan shares a generous trait with Mr. P., but their friendship challenges a cardinal rule of survival for young men in East Baltimore: never admit you need each other. Duqan teaches himself how to use a computer he and Mr. P. have found unopened in a school storeroom; it’s not long before he’s passing along what he’s learned to Randy and others. When Presbo’s first act of kindness fails - the new school uniform he provides Duqan disappears before his family’s ruthless thieving - his second act is more foolproof: he gets Duqan early access to one of the school’s showers in the gym. If, by his third act - laundering Duqan’s clothes, you find this portrait of a teacher’s selflessness stretches credibility, note that Assistant Principal Donnelly provides the reality check. Always the bearer of bad news, she’s become quite thoughtful in her delivery of it. When she tells Mr. P. that Duqan, aged out of eighth grade, must be socially promoted to high school, he can barely conceal his tears. ‘Do you have any children of your own?’ she asks. ‘No, not yet,’ he returns softly. ‘Well, have some,’ she advises. ‘They’ll be yours forever. These are not your children.’ He’s already crossed the threshold when he realizes he cares about his students, exposing a vulnerable side. In an English test prep class he’s forced to teach along with every other faculty member in the school, a text calls for a definition of ‘intimacy.’ Most kids think it means sex, but Presbo explains that it’s more subtle than that, ‘like when
you tickle your partner,’ he says. His honesty has cut off the stream of crude jokes that had already started in the back row, not to mention commanded the attention of his students. Blushing, he quickly recovers with ‘That’s enough for now,’ but when pressured about returning to the subject of intimacy, replies, ‘If you want to, yes, and if I don’t get too embarrassed.’

The attitude of The Wire towards its children acknowledges that they’re vulnerable by design, even though some come up harder, and quicker, than others. Namond sits in Presbylewski’s class too, unimpressed. He’s preoccupied with his treatment by this man, who’s just another authority figure to him, calculating his first attack of the new year. It’s spot-on: ‘Why you got to dog me before I know the rules?’ he challenges, when Presbo interrupts his answer by telling him he’s already made a mistake. Reassignment to the experimental class engineers his introduction to Bunny Colvin. Their first meeting is a fluke - literally, they almost knock each other down in one of the school’s corridors as Colvin and Professor David Parenti are walking to their classroom. In Colvin’s view, Parenti’s abstractions about the predictability of school dropout rates repeat the familiar ‘jukin’ the stats’ talk that soured his retirement from the police force a season or two ago. Colvin, not knowing or caring how to make intellectual small talk with Parenti that reduces the kids he knows to mere numbers, is so busy not paying attention to him that he almost collides with Namond in the hallway. Colvin, looking for an apt response to all the brainy small talk, welcomes Namond’s sudden proximity. ‘They do step up when you need them to,’ he observes drily to the professor.

Namond Brice’s sharpness and maturity puts him on a par with his equally calculating mother Yolanda, nicknamed ‘the dragon lady’ by the corner boys, who expects him to become a street soldier like his father Weeby, who wouldn’t sell anyone out and who, in prison, stands tall as a hero to Namond’s young superiors. Namond, 14, wants a different life — if only he could figure out what it is. He’s smart enough for the corner, all right — before he changed programs, he cleverly got himself kicked out of class just in time to get there for his new part-time job. His new teachers don’t ask him to leave when he acts out. ‘They do everything ass-backwards,’ he complains. He starts paying attention to other things they do differently. Maybe he realizes that his own view of the corner is ass-backwards, too. Despite having been told to cut his hair by Yolanda and by Bodie too, he ties it into a bushy ponytail at the nape of his neck that identifies him too easily to the police. He’s also too nice to his customers. He lets an addict pay for a hit with just $6, short of the required amount, rationalizing his generosity to his annoyed coworker with, ‘That’s Michael’s mother.’

Colvin’s acute perceptions about borderline kids precipitate a breakthrough in cooperative learning, a trope of the young, university-trained teachers whose teenage charges have been less than cooperative. The incident itself is small: Namond’s reprimanded for reading a magazine and as he throws it aside he remarks tartly, ‘It wasn’t mine anyway.’ Colvin observes that Namond has just successfully ‘gotten over,’ i.e., reduced the teacher’s scolding to an indifferent, ‘who cares?’ in front of his peers. An animated discussion of ‘getting over’ on the corner and elsewhere follows. This wasn’t the planned
lesson, but it’s a breakthrough. As teachers establish ground rules for talking and listening, some progress is made; Namond does well enough to sit for standardized tests. But it doesn’t keep him out of trouble. Picked up by Carver on a routine bust, Namond lets on that he is terrified of juvie — or ‘baby booking,’ as his mother calls it; Carver calls Colvin, who agrees to take him home overnight. That’s when Namond learns that Colvin’s wife calls him Bunny. Violence is never far from the baseline of even the most benign subplots on The Wire. In a hilariously unexpected exchange, while his wife gets peach cobbler in the kitchen, Colvin threatens to ‘cut [Namond’s] nuts off’ if he ever tells anyone his nickname.

Soon after Colvin visits Weebay Brice in prison to ask him to allow Namond to live with Colvin and his wife in their safer neighborhood while he attends high school. ‘You and I, we couldn’t change our paths,’ he starts, reflecting on Weebay’s long prison term and his own straight path in law enforcement. Weebay’s first reaction to his proposition is, ‘You’re asking too much.’ Colvin redirects his question with characteristic dignity: ‘You know your son.’ Both men love the boy, but Weebay knows it’s Colvin’s turn to love him more. Together they overrule Yolanda, and Namond moves out. In the season’s final scene, it’s morning and Namond is scribbling his homework while hurriedly finishing his orange juice and running for the school bus on a new corner - the one where Mr. and Mrs. Colvin live. In other words, he’s a normal kid — for now.

Is Edward Tillman Middle School a real place? Of course not. But at least The Wire integrates its role in the education of the young men of East Baltimore, in two ways. The first is by recognizing that the street is where most learning occurs. It happens when Dukie schools the other boys trying to catch a homing pigeon by identifying the rings they wear, or Snoop explains to Chris everything she has just absorbed about the new technology of the nail gun she’s just purchased in a hardware store. Snoop’s a girl, not a boy, and as such doesn’t have a father figure. She’s lucky enough just to be a character on the snow - the only female under the age of 21, and just as mean and soft as the rest of the adolescents.) Adults are not immune to instruction, either, as when Presbo, who’s left his keys in his car, asks one of his students to do what he doesn’t know how to do: break the lock with slim jim. And it happens in Bodie’s pivotal scene about the purpose of school and the man in the moon.

The reverse is also true: violence is not just what happens on the street. This is a commonplace on TV shows about public schools. As a public high school teacher myself, I was disappointed that The Wire stooped to the same cliché as other TV shows depicting adolescents in classrooms: they fight a lot, tragically sometimes. In the fourth episode two girls eye each other menacingly in math class as Mr. Presbylewska, clueless, proceeds with an algebra problem. Before the period is over, one has cut the other across the face with a boxcutter. Now if this ever happens, it’s a rare occurrence. Not because kids don’t take boxcutters to school: they do. But TV knows how violence such as this plays into the living rooms of smug middle class (and predominantly white) viewers who accept black-on-black violence on the
screen, no questions asked. We want to see poor kids destroy each other; it validates a do-nothing attitude that the system is broken and that there’s nothing we can do to fix it.

*The Wire* gets points, most of the time, for choosing objectivity over judgement; connection over isolation; humanity over indifference. Duquan provides that last detail even in this scene; operating a cheap hand-held fan, he blows fresh air across the assailant’s face. His goofy gesture of kindness turns a monster into a child, sweaty, tear-stained, and scared, soon to be handcuffed, expelled, incarcerated, and disappeared from society.

My only other caveat is an objection to the excessive amount of abusive language spoken by actors posing as students to teachers and administrators. One reason real teenagers use less profanity than the actors on *The Wire* is that they’re not stupid enough to get into trouble over the ‘f’ word when there are so many other provocative options. Like kids through the ages, they find ways of challenging authority figures that are much more clever than simply breaking the rules, especially in a school setting. The other reason is that they’re raised better. A public high school teacher for 15 years, I’ve been called names and teased, written up kids on discipline charges, and thrown a few temper tantrums of my own. But even the foulest mouthed children who talk trash to each other defer to most adults. I’m frequently referred to as ‘Miss,’ despite the fact that at our school it’s policy for students to call teachers by their first names, and despite the fact that I’ve been a happily married lady for almost 30 years, a fact I occasionally share with them. That’s the sort of statistic that inspires at least a second or two of awed silence: like the rest of us, they want to fall in love, and they want it to last.

The peripheral story of Sherrod serves as antidote to the outcomes of Michael, Randy, Duquan, and Namond, all of whom come from families with drug addicted and/or incarcerated parents. The homeless Sherrod’s sole custodian adult is the squatter and dope fiend Bubbles; yet even Sherrod’s tragic end isn’t the bottom for his half-alive guardian. It takes another year and a half of *The Wire* for Bubbles’ story to reach its happy ending. And at that, he’s one of the few characters among the entire cast whose future might even be called optimistic. Therefore, if you are inclined to feel sorry for any of these young protagonists, straighten up: on *The Wire*, pity is in short supply. Because life is hard. And life goes on.

Article printed from darkmatter Journal: [http://www.darkmatter101.org/site](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site)