**MEDIA ETHICS**

**CASE 78 – “RESCUE US”** [[1]](#endnote-1)

Launched in 2004 as a vehicle for comedian Dennis Leary, *Rescue Me* capitalized on America’s post-September 11 deifying of New York firefighters, albeit with a twist. Billed as a “dramedy” by the FX Network, *Rescue Me* would act as worthy NYFD complement to the already successful LAPD Emmy-winning juggernaut, *The Shield* (2002), a gritty drama exposing the dark underbelly of America’s “heroes.”

At Engine House 62 in the Naked City, desires trump logic, and conflicts are resolved with playground justice: may the bigger asshole win. Arguably, the biggest at Engine 62 is Tommy Gavin played by Dennis Leary, a character you hate to love: a psychotic megalomaniac whose unfettered duty to self is at once both repulsive and surprisingly refreshing: an alcoholic, forty-something Irish firefighter whose phantom conversations with both Jesus Christ and Gavin’s dead cousin are the least of his problems.

High on “vitamin testosterone” and low on political correctness, *Rescue Me* is a virtual Plato’s Retreat \* for the male ego, Spike Cable TV, big fires, big attitudes, bigger breasts. In the June 20, 2006 episode titled “Sparks,” there is an exhibition for the male rape-fantasy – the fantasy of women turned on by their attackers.

The plotline from the previous episode, “Torture,” acts as a precursor to this culminating rape scene. Tommy Gavin’s soon-to-be ex-wife, Janet, is sleeping with Tommy’s brother, NYC police detective Johnny Gavin. Tommy sees it and avenges himself by beating his philandering brother. In the closing minutes of the “Sparks” episode, Tommy arrives at Janet’s apartment to discuss the pending divorce proceedings, including the division of material goods. What transgresses next shocked both dedicated fans of the show and television pundits.

As the discussion between characters escalates to rage, Tommy pushes Janet onto a nearby couch receiving several pleas of “no” in the process. Fighting through her resistance, Tommy forcibly has intercourse with her or, in the opinion of many viewers and critics, rapes her. In addition to this violent and forced sex, what shocked viewers most is the scene’s resolution, as Janet succumbs to the pleasurable, albeit brutal, nature of the act and seems to enjoy it. As Tommy exits the apartment with vindication on his face, viewers are stunned. Was this shock TV at its worst? Did the FX Network just condone its antihero as a violent rapist? Is this appropriate and responsible TV drama?

The promotional material for *Rescue Me* includes a tagline that hints at undercurrents of NYC firefighters’ needing saviors of their own with the slogan, “They save us. But who saves them?” Yet, in the aftermath of the “Sparks” episode, many viewers questioned, “Who saves us from them?”

1. *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning, Ninth Edition.* (2012). Christians, Fackler, et. al. New York: Allyn & Bacon.

   \* Plato’s Retreat was famous 1980s New York nightclub. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)