TELEVISION QUARTERLY

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TELEVISION QUARTERLY

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WHAT ED MURROW REALLY MEANS TO CBS NEWS AND TO ALL BROADCAST NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

A distinguished journalist and associate of Murrow looks at Murrow, the legend, the man and the book.

BY EDWARD BLISS, JR.

On December 28, 1986, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a cover story called "CBS News in Search of Itself." A subhead read: "The house that Murrow built strives for a new standard, one that could affect all of broadcast journalism."

CBS News was not built by one man. Ed Klauber, the CBS executive who conceived the organization, and Paul White, its first head, played vital roles in the building, as did early correspondents like William L. Shirer, Charles Collingwood and Eric Sevareid. But Edward R. Murrow, more than any other person, gave CBS News its prestige. Through unsurpassed reporting from London during World War II, his name became best known. For his principles and practices then, and later on, he became the legend. In *Edward R. Murrow: His Life and Times** by A. M. Sperber the legend not only lives but gains new life.

A. M. Sperber is Ann Sperber, onetime Fulbright Scholar and juvenile book editor who never met Murrow but was captured by him in 1954 when, an undergraduate at Barnard College, she watched the See *It Now* program in which Murrow dissected Joe McCarthy. "As a government major," she says, "you had to watch. We knew sooner or later he would do something on McCarthy, but I was unprepared for what I saw. I was fascinated and horrified. It didn't seem like Murrow to 'go after' people, and then I thought how incredibly brave this man is. No one had done anything so devastating.

"He became my idol, so in 1971, when I saw an item in *The New York Times*—a very small item, I could have missed it—that a full week of CBS documentaries was going to be shown at the Lincoln Center, of course I went. The *Times* didn't say which documentaries, but there they were, the Radulovich program, the McCarthy program, all the major programs with Murrow. Looking up at the screen, I realized there really was no one else like him. That's when I first thought of him as a person. I had to know all about him."

She began reading about Murrow—Alexander Kendrick's *Prime Time* and Fred Friendly's *Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control*. These only increased her appetite, and when she heard that Murrow's papers were available at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, she decided, with this new resource, to write a life of Murrow for teenagers. She interviewed James Seward, longtime intimate of Murrow and executor of his estate, who put her in touch with other people, including Janet Murrow. She interviewed me in the spring of 1973, and I remember her as a most enthusiastic person, hungry for every scrap of information.

*Published by Freundlich Books.

Sperber took her teenage manuscript to Pantheon Books, where an editor told her that she had aimed for the wrong readership. "This is not a juvenile book," the editor said. "Why not do it for the trade?" So she put the manuscript away in a drawer and started over, concentrating on research.

Comparing the Sperber and Kendrick biographies—the comparison is inevitable—it must be said that they were written under far different circumstances. Sperber's is the definitive work that was waiting to happen. Kendrick's earlier work was a quickie. Sperber could devote 12 years to the writing. Kendrick, one of CBS' most distinguished correspondents, a man whose reporting Murrow himself relied upon, wrote his book, published by Little, Brown in 1969, during a one-year leave of absence.

Nor did Kendrick seek the task; the task, in the form of Janet Murrow and James Seward, sought him. Janet herself had to be convinced of the desirability of a biography. Done properly, it would expose private matters, and she, like her husband, valued privacy. And it was more than a fear that human frailty would stand exposed.

It is the years of painstaking research, the hitherto unpublished detail, which makes Sperber's the definitive biography.

The telling might reopen wounds suffered in conflict with network executives for whom she and Murrow had respect and, in the case of William S. Paley, genuine affection. Years later, when David Halberstam portrayed Paley unflatteringly in *The Powers That Be*, suggesting he was a ruthless, profits-above-all-else mogul, unappreciative of Murrow, Janet telephoned friends in her distress. She just had to say it wasn't so.

In persuading Janet Murrow to cooperate in producing a biography, which publishers were pressing for, it was the argument of Seward and others—and I was one—that a biography would appear in any case, so why not have it done by someone like Kendrick, highly competent, who knew both Murrow and CBS, the man and the territory? Little thought was given to the possibility that another biography might be written one day, farther down the road. Kendrick, at work on his biography, could not call even the one year his own.

Nineteen sixty-eight was an election year, and, for a while, CBS pressed him into service to ease the reportorial load. I still marvel at his professionalism, that he could produce so well-written and informative a book in so short a time. At American University, I required my students to read what he wrote, a book that introduced them to Murrow much better than I ever could.

It is the years of painstaking research, the hitherto unpublished detail, which makes Sperber's the definitive biography. Murrow's papers at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy led to the archives of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars, which had been sealed since World War II. Murrow was assistant secretary of this committee, which included such names as Harlow Shapley of Harvard, Karl Compton of MIT and Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago. The committee rescued 91 academicians, some of them Nobel laureates, from Nazi Germany. The Kendrick biography devotes three pages to Murrow's work with the committee; the Sperber biography, benefiting from the newly opened archives, 12 pages. Both biographies quote Murrow as saying it was "the most personally satisfying undertaking in which I have ever engaged." Exploration of that area, at length, was warranted.

EYE TEST

Today, the Murrow biography has special meaning. Given what he believed in, what would Ed Murrow make of the mass firings at CBS News?

Murrow was the conscience, not only of CBS News, but of the network. At the same time, he recognized that broadcasting, like publishing, is a business. I doubt that, in terms of business management, he would quarrel with the argument that the news division was overstaffed. I recall when the evening news was staffed effectively—indeed, meritoriously—with half the producers that came later.

What Murrow would address today, as he did in his day, is the preoccupation with profit. I believe he would say, "Profit, yes, but don't make it the apple of CBS' eye." He would say this, I believe, out of conviction that the broadcast industry carries with it more responsibility than, say, the perfume industry.

Murrow also would mourn the loss of achievers like George Herman, Ike Pappas and Jane Bryant Quinn. He would mourn the departure of Fred Graham and Marlene Sanders, who were not dropped but made to feel unwanted.

Murrow might note what this has cost CBS in terms of the morale of those who are left. He might also point out that, in calculating costs, CBS must include the price it has paid in prestige. In the whole history of broadcasting, no network has received so bad a press. However, I believe he would agree with Laurence Tisch that how a news division operates is none of Congress' business. I think what would hurt him most, personally, is the question in people's minds whether CBS News ever again will be what it once was.

I am glad he cannot see what is happening. He was wounded the other time. Once is enough.

—Edward Bliss, Jr.

Sperber was on a mission, not an assignment. She would find out every last thing about Murrow and *his* mission if she could, reading memoranda no other writer about Murrow had read, interviewing people other writers had not interviewed.

"Having stepped through one door," she says, "I had to step through another and another." The "doors" she stepped through after mining what she could find in the Emergency Committee archives belonged to the FDR Library, where she found useful references to Murrow in the papers of Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins; the Mass Communications History Center of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, where the papers of early correspondents like Max Jordan, Cecil Brown and H. V. Kaltenborn are preserved; the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library; the Museum of Broadcasting in New York and the archives of the Institute of International Education, which was such a significant part of Murrow's early career. The BBC Written Archives helped document the London years.

The biographer's determination to get at records, and not take anything on faith, led her to use the Freedom of Information Act in order to see the FBI files on Murrow, the files Joe McCarthy used to hound Murrow, the files suggesting Murrow was a Red because of his friendship with Harold Laski and his sponsorship, when he was with the Institute of International Education, of a summer session for visiting Americans at Moscow University—a session, as it turned out, that never happened. And later files holding vague accusations—"This man should be watched."

J. Edgar Hoover did not like Murrow, and when John F. Kennedy in January 1961 nominated Murrow to head the United States Information Agency, the FBI held up his confirmation, Sperber says, with

a massive nationwide investigation reaching back to his childhood, going into every aspect of his personal and public life, from checks on his wife, parents, son and in-laws, to running down every allegation in every pamphlet, every leaflet cranked out in the post-McCarthy days. Citizens whose hand-scrawled letters to the bureau over the years . . . had never gotten more than a polite thank you were now themselves visited by agents asking if they had proof or personal knowledge of wrongdoing. College officials who had spent an evening at the most with Murrow . . . were pumped in the eventuality of "adverse information". . . . Suspect connections discounted by the bureau back in the fifties were reopened. . . .

Murrow's appointment was announced in late January; Senate confirmation did not come until late March. Footnotes covering this period are scattered with labels like "Confidential," "Unclassified/Official Informal" and "Eyes Only."

Sperber complemented this raw material with her extensive interviews. The footnotes show that she interviewed at least 97 people, 39 of them more than once. Among those interviewed a second time was Paley, whom broadcast writers feel fortunate to get in to interview once.

I remember Seward saying, "Ann Sperber was checking with me again yesterday." Seward was an excellent source, not only because he had been close to Murrow for more than 25 years, but because before retirement he had been an executive vice president of CBS. There was a hint in the way Seward spoke that he wondered if Sperber ever would get the job done—she had been at it more than 10 years—but then it was something she herself had wondered. Finding the pieces along what she calls "the paper trail," and putting them together, was taking so long. "At times," she says, "I almost gave up."

But the whole life is here, I believe,

as capably as one person can capture it, from North Carolina dirt farm to the Pacific Northwest, to New York, to London, back to New York, to Washington and finally to another farm in the foothills of the Berkshires near Pawling, New York, an estate really, with milch herd and pleasant woods in which, at the end, Murrow's ashes were scattered according to his wish.

Those interested in Murrow, what he stood for, and broadcasting, what it does and does not stand for, will be grateful.

To tell this story, Sperber has produced 705 printed pages, not counting 85 pages devoted to footnotes, index and acknowledgements. A bibliography runs five pages. Some readers will be discouraged by the detail in which Sperber writes—by the heft of the book—but those interested in Murrow, what he stood for, and broadcasting, what it does and does not stand for, will be grateful. The voluminous book proceeds from a voluminous life.

I have found no error of consequence, nor have others who knew Murrow spoken to me of any major error. At one point she refers to me as the son of a minister, a likely mistake since my father was a medical missionary. Murrow once made the same mistake. I found remarkably few typographical errors. The printing, like the writing, is clean.

I do, however, have a qualm. I suspect that Murrow, for many readers, emerges more given to rages than was the fact. My suspicion does not arise from any questioning of the accuracy of what Sperber reports. When she quotes Shirer as saying that Murrow, intoxicated, once gave him a pummeling, I accept the statement, aware that the picture presented is as Shirer, the aggrieved party, recalls it. (The falling out between Murrow and Shirer, two of early broadcasting's greatest reporters, is one of the tragedies.) It is the impression left by that and other related incidents that Murrow was a man given to frequent outbursts of temper that bothers me, and I suppose by "frequent" I mean very frequent.

I distrust the impression because in the more than 10 years I worked with Murrow—five years in close association, eating, drinking, traveling with him—I witnessed only one eruption of anger. It occurred the night he addressed the annual meeting of the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA). I have no question his indictment of the broadcast industry delivered that night was written out of anger as well as chagrin, but in the choosing of his words, and in his delivery of them, he was cool. "He went about it," Sperber writes, "with the painstaking deliberation of a man laying dynamite."

The eruption came minutes after the speech. As we waited for an elevator he exploded, "The dirty, rotten sonuvabitch!" I was startled. It was the first time I had heard him like that.

"What?" I said.

"He turned his back on me." He ground down on each word.

"Who?"

He didn't answer. I have talked to other people who heard Murrow that night, trying to find out who "turned his back." I never found out. Apparently it was someone who, after the speech, wanted no part of Murrow, dared have no association with what Murrow had said of the failure of the industry to live up to its responsibilities. Someone who feared for his career if he did.

I did see Murrow quietly angry more than once. I recall his deep emotion when the communist government of Czechoslovakia announced in March 1948 that his good friend Jan Masaryk had committed suicide. In his com-

mentary that night be paid tribute to Masaryk's faith and courage and found it difficult to imagine Masaryk "flinging himself from a third-floor window." The air in the studio was electric the way he spoke.

I was with him the day he learned

One finds no ogres here but a case history of corporate men seeking to balance principle in news broadcasting with profit.

that Laurence Duggan, director of the Institute of International Education, victim of a political witchhunt, had "jumped or fallen" to his death from a 16th floor window. You felt his cold anger. And hurt. Hurt because of the loss of a friend. Anger over injustice, over the capacity of McCarthyism, not only to maim, but to kill.

Because Sperber had access to hitherto unopened CBS files, the falling out between Murrow and the CBS brass in the later years is reported in a fullness of dimension that makes *Murrow*, the Home Box Office docudrama a caricature and shallow. One finds no ogres here but a case history of corporate men seeking to balance principle in news broadcasting with profit. Hence the book is timely, appearing at a time when the floors of network newsrooms are awash with the blood of persons fired or forced into early retirement. In his RTNDA speech, Murrow denounced, and today would denounce, such cuts.

The book appears when documentaries are not scheduled because audiences of a few million viewers are held to be too small and advertisers' interest in such programing too slight. But news, Murrow said, is more than a commodity "only acceptable when saleable." It was, to him, a vital organ in the body politic. If you do news, he said, only when it can be sold, "then I don't care what you call it—I say it isn't news." Words so radical in this day of ratings competition that you shake your head.

The title of that *New York Times Magazine* article was "CBS News in Search of Itself." I think of the anthology of Murrow broadcasts Janet Murrow asked me to prepare for publication. I had finished making the selections, and the question arose what to call them. I asked Janet what she thought the title should be, and her answer was immediate.

"I think," she said, "it would be good to call them *In Search of Light*. Ed always was trying to get at the truth." And it was under that title that they were published by Alfred A. Knopf.

If CBS News, or any other broadcast news organization, really is in search of itself today, striving for a new standard, it might be well for correspondents, editors, writers, photographers and anchors to read, if they have not already, what Ann Sperber has set down so faithfully about the achievements and the agonies of this man Murrow who set a standard back in the 1940s, to look long at that standard, consider how all that has been done in broadcast journalism was measured by it, then ask themselves if they need a new one. ■

Edward Bliss, Jr.'s association with Edward R. Murrow goes back to 1943 while night editor of CBS News. He joined Murrow's staff as writer, editor and producer in 1955 and remained with him until he went to the USIA in 1961. Later, he was news editor for *The CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, before leaving CBS to found the broadcast journalism program at American University. He is currently at work on a history of broadcast journalism for the Columbia University Press.

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IN DEFENSE OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST AND THE COMMUNICATIONS ACT

Broadcasting is more than just a business, says a leading TV executive, arguing the need for continued regulatory guidelines to ensure continued community service.

BY WILLIAM F. BAKER

Over the past decade, a vigorous and often successful attack has been mounted against what I consider to be one of the cornerstones of American broadcasting. What is under attack is nothing less than the requirement that those who produce and transmit programs over the air and into the homes of America must do so in a manner that, on the whole, *serves the public interest.*

We are told, by those leading this attack, that in place of any public interest standard, we may instead place our trust in the "invisible hand of the free marketplace."

I believe it would be difficult to exaggerate the significance of this attack. After all, broadcast television has long been the predominant source of information and entertainment for most Americans. It is, therefore, a potent force in shaping our national character.

How do the American people keep informed? How do they decide how to vote? How do they learn about their neighbors in this global village of ours? In all these areas so crucial to the future of our democracy, broadcasting plays a central role. Can we risk allowing it to be dominated by a totally unregulated marketplace? Can we permit the programming viewed by our nation's citizens and their children to be manipulated entirely by pressures for maximum short-term profit?

I don't think so. As a matter of enlightened national policy, I believe television broadcasters must continue to be required by law to present programs that are responsive to their communities. And, fortunately, I'm far from alone in this belief. In a statement adopted recently by the Television Operators Caucus on February 12, 1987, a group of major television broadcasters reaffirmed support of this essential concept:

"TOC believes that, as a matter of law and necessary national policy, television broadcasters must continue to have a public interest responsibility to present programs responsive to the needs and interests of their local viewers. The public interest standard of the Communications Act, as interpreted by the courts and as applied by the Commission in the context of license renewals, includes as an essential element a bedrock general obligation on the part of broadcasters to air programming addressed to local issues. . .

"The members of TOC recognize that the basic, generalized obligation of broadcasters to provide programming responsive to the needs and interests of their communities is ingrained in the public interest standard of the Communications Act as interpreted by the courts and the Commission."

This is a concept with deep roots. It

was first conceived in the 1920s by a commission chaired by a future President who was then Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover. (Hardly a notorious proponent of intrusive government!) The commission was faced by a chaos of broadcasters seeking to exploit a finite electromagnetic spectrum. As a means of deciding who was permitted to broadcast and who was not, the commission created a requirement that those receiving a valuable license must commit themselves to providing their communities with programming in the public interest.

Throughout the first half-century after the Communications Act, there was a mutual understanding the broadcasters must give something back to their communities in return for the right to use the public airwaves.

The concept—a *quid pro quo* bargain—was derived from the Interstate Commerce Commission Act (1887), which regulated interstate rail transportation and required carriers to act in the public interest; by logical extension, the Communications Act of 1927 (and later the 1934 Act) created guidelines for granting licenses to broadcasters, much like those issued to railroad carriers. In this way, a limited monopoly (broadcaster and railroad) was allowed to operate a limited resource. In exchange, the operator was expected to provide a service to the community.

Our government was forbidden, of course, by the Constitution and by specific legislation, to act as a "censor" of broadcasting programming. Nevertheless, throughout the first half-century after the Communications Act, there was a mutual understanding the broadcasters must give something back to their communities—public affairs programming and other public service efforts—in return for the right to use the public airwaves.

Over the years, the Federal Communications Commission spelled out the public responsibilities of broadcasters. These were always in the form of broad structural guidelines: the Fairness Doctrine, the personal attack rule, restrictions against excessive multiple ownership, requirements that programming be "balanced" and that it accord with the needs of the community.

Always the basic philosophy remained the same: let the marketplace work as much as possible; Government would enforce its part of the *quid pro quo* bargain only in those areas where the marketplace alone would not suffice.

When the license to enter a closed marketplace is a reward granted by the Government, it seems axiomatic that the Government has a responsibility, on behalf of the people it serves, to require the operator so rewarded to meet certain performance standards in the public interest. And we must admit our industry has thrived, while at the same time doing at least a moderate amount of mandated good, as policed by the FCC.

Yet now we have the argument that all such regulatory mechanisms are needless and even harmful—that the growth of cable television, VCRs, backyard dishes and other alternative technologies have all but demolished scarcity, and that the market can now provide adequate protection for the public interest.

But can it? The fact, the FCC continues to receive far more applications for broadcast licenses than it can approve. Many apply, but few are chosen. Does this sound like a truly open marketplace?

I could, if I wanted to, start a newspaper when I retire. I would probably go broke, but that's the way a mar-

ketplace works. But if I should solder together a transmitter and start a television station, I would be put in jail. So much for a free marketplace.

What's more, several recent events and trends suggest that the industry itself cannot ensure its own public service responsibilities, without at least some gentle regulatory guidance.

One such trend—due to the demise of the Station Holding Rule—is the tidal wave of mergers, acquisitions, buyouts and divestitures. When investment in long-term growth is overshadowed by the pressures of overnight speculation in broadcasting, one of the first victims is the kind of mature development that encompasses public service as a way of gaining viewer loyalty. There is simply no time in the broadcasting day for public service when (as Professor Warren Law recently wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*) "Now-Generation portfolio managers—under pressure to outperform their counterparts each quarter—look for near-instant results from their investments."

Just as ominously, some of the new breed of station owners have taken on significant debt—either to swallow fresh acquisitions or to avoid being swallowed themselves. This debt will, as noted in *Broadcasting* Magazine, require "exceedingly high profit margins. . . which means that experimental programming, community service, anything that doesn't generate a return on investment is going to go by the boards. . . ."

In short, the relaxation of regulations concerning station holdings has reinforced the necessity for a continuation of standards of public interest. And recent economic downturns in the industry also point to a need to retain a public service requirement. Let's face it: when the going gets tough, we are all the more tempted to neglect our responsibility to the public.

Finally any attempt to abolish the public interest standard throws the entire process of license renewal into an unexplored fog. For years, the courts have affirmed that station owners who have fulfilled their public obligations may consider their licenses secure. The likelihood of legal challenges has been minimal.

A return to the roots of American broadcasting is the right direction for all of us, broadcasters and citizens alike.

But what would be the rationale for renewal or denial, once the public interest standard has been removed?

On another front, legislation now before Congress would do away with the burdensome comparative renewal process, replacing it with a presumption of renewal for station operators who do not show a serious disregard for the rules and policies of the FCC. Here again, the public interest standard is the fulcrum.

Congress is unlikely to enact such legislation if broadcast licensees are not held to some sort of obligation to provide programming in the public interest. Without such a performance measure, there would be no meaningful way to justify a streamlined license renewal process and the long-awaited relief it would offer broadcasters.

It is clear to me that a return to the roots of American broadcasting is the right direction for all of us, broadcasters and citizens alike. Our system of broadcasting has always been, and should remain, a private enterprise within a carefully placed framework of responsibility.

As one who is professionally concerned with broadcast television, I know it to be a challenging, competitive industry—and yet, for me, it's more than a mere business. On that point, I could never agree with a recent FCC Chairman and advocate of total reli-

ance on laissez-faire market forces. According to him, television is merely a "toaster with pictures."

No. Herbert Hoover's commission had it right 60 years ago. Neither an appliance nor a commodity, broadcasting is a kind of interestate commerce. It is a highway of the air—bearing cargoes of imagination and information into the homes of all our citizens and our children.

Maintaining those highways successfully in the marketplace is our privilege. Doing so in the public interest is our unavoidable responsibility. ■

William F. Baker was President, Group W Television, and Chairman, Group W Satellite Communications. Other members of the Television Operators Caucus are Ward L. Huey, President Bello Broadcasting Corporation; William A. Schwartz, President Cox Enterprises; James T. Lynagh, President Multimedia Broadcasting Company; Joel Chaseman, President Post-Newsweek Stations; Dudley S. Taft, Vice Chairman Taft Broadcasting Company; James C. Dowdie, President Tribune Broadcasting Company; Cecil Walker, President Gannett Television; Derk Zimmerman, President Fox Television Stations; David Henderson, President Outlet Communications; Terry H. Lee, Chairman and President Storer Communications.

Mr. Baker recently became President of WNET, Channel 13, in New York City.

QUOTE UNQUOTE

That Bottom Line

"To be understood, American television must be viewed as the embodiement of contradiction—a miracle of spectacular technical achievement imprisioned by the demands of its mundane day-to-day operations. So-called 'high class' programming almost always competes with mass appeal presentations because, with 365 days a year to fill, programmers cannot possible stock each moment of each day with uplifting culture. In spite of all its limitations, this mundane miracle still produces great moments of brilliance that rekindle the awe felt by the first TV owners. Yet, in the game of American television, the bottom line has always been high ratings and, to this day, still is."

—Harry Castleman and Walter J. Podrazik, *Watching TV: Four Decades of American Television*

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FACTS AND FICTIONS: TV HISTORY THROUGH THE FILTER OF FICTION

BY MARY ANN WATSON

"I'm tired of pretending to write this dumb book about my maverick days in the great early years of television. Every goddamn executive fired from a network in the last 20 years has written a dumb book about the great early years of television. And nobody wants the dumb, damn, goddamn book about the early years of television."—William Holden frustrated as hell in Network. *Screenplay by Paddy Chayefsky.*

Not everyone who gets bounced from the executives suites of Hollywood or Madison Avenue rushes to his typewriter or word processor to write a novel exposing "the industry." Of the scores of novels about television, dumb or otherwise, only a few are the tattletales of insiders; most of the others are by fulltime writers, searching for a best-seller in the exploitation of such juicy ingredients as fame, power, wealth, and sex. The book jacket blurb of a recent TV novel is typical: "A contemporary study of sexual and professional passion, of talent rewarded and betrayed, set against our number one industry."

As literature, the television novels are dubious candidates for a place in the curriculum of a course in the modern novel; as a publishing commodity, few have earned even modest success. None of them have achieved the status of two novels about the motion picture industry which have earned a substantial place in contemporary American fiction: F. Scott Fitzgerald's sensitive *The Last Tycoon* and Nathanael West's mythic *Day of the Locust.*

The scores of TV novels produced during the forty-plus years of the medium have been dumb, most of them, because they have been badly written, and badly conceived. They are soapy, hokey pot-boilers. And the motivation of many of the authors has been highly opportunistic; in many cases, getting even; or to make a buck fast and easy by concocting the sort of sensational fiction which is a thinly-disguised yarn about some easily-recognized star, producer or executive. Or more often in recent years, an anchor man or woman.

However, the fiction about television cannot be dismissed, even if it lacks its Fitzgeralds or Wests; although its literary quality is slight, its historical value is altogether different. For that reason, it is worthy of serious attention.

The history of American broadcasting is steadily gaining recognition as an important component in a liberal arts education. Novels that a literary critic might justifiably dismiss as without merit, are often rich with relevance for the television historian in the universities; one professor's trash is another's treasure.

It might seem paradoxical to make

a case for the place of fiction in the study of history, but the novel should not be overlooked as a valuable supplement to an understanding of the evolution of American mass media.

Through novels, it's fairly easy, for instance, to trace technological changes in the broadcasting industry, and in programming formats and content, of the varying types of performers out of whom the viewing public fashions its stars, as well as the folkways of the men and women who make and market the product—and how they look at themselves, their audience and the medium itself. Popular literature provides cultural commentary, because embedded in works of fiction are versions of the truth.

Writers distort actual events for dramatic purpose; that's the nature of fiction. Regardless of how skillfully they may or may not have applied their craft, however, novelists who have written about television have documented major changes in attitudes and ways of thinking, for the public and the industry alike.

It should be pointed out that not only historians of and students of communications are becoming more interested in television's past, but also viewers of all ages. The success of the Broadcasting Museum in New York, which has to expand to a new, larger building to accommodate its audiences and exhibits, is only one example; so are recent TV programs like the *Today* show's 35th Anniversary special in prime time, or the tribute to Ernie Kovacs on various news programs during the 25th anniversary of his death. And at the recent NATPE convention in New Orleans, crowds flocked to meet "Buffalo Bob" Smith in person and his freckled sidekick, who will both be seen nationally this year in a syndicated *Howdy Doody* special. And certainly the boom in old, old reruns, going back even to the black and white shows, is testimony to the public's fascination with the past.

In any case, an exhaustive survey and definitive analysis of the fiction about television, starting with the Milton Berle and *Howdy Doody* era, is a doctorate disseration waiting to be written. This essay is intended as a modest beginning to the study and discussion of the subject, and to offer ways of integrating the imaginative with the factual in the pursuit of understanding the way it was; as an approach of getting a handle on the fiction of the medium, this literary replay has been built around several categories.

THE ADVENT OF TELEVISION

"Poor Daddy," a young girl laments to her baby brother in a recent comic strip, "When he was little they didn't have cable TV."

It's a cute gag that hits home in most American households. The velocity of change in the electronic media in just one generation is staggering.

College students born in the late 1960s have no personal range of reference about the emergence of television on the social landscape. Several works of fiction, though, can add dimension to the portrait of the era known sentimentally as the infancy of television.

Written and set in the mid-1950s, *The Great Man*, one of the better broadcast novels is the story of an Arthur Godfrey-type radio super star who, unbeknownst to his fans, also happens to be a congenital nogoodnik. This beloved personality and money maker for the Amalgamated Broadcasting System dies in a car crash, and the plot revolves around the production of an hour-long special memorial program.

As a writer, producer and director for both radio and television at NBC, author Al Morgan knows the network territory well. Although, clearly, the spicy novel was not meant to have even

a modicum of instructive value in 1955, all these years later it does by default. What we glean between the lines of the "sinful, sexy inside story of radio and TV" is a sense of how radio adapted to the coming of television, a medium that was competitor yet progeny.

In the course of the intrigue, we're acquainted with the way in which creative as well as technical personnel transferred their talents from radio to the new medium. The decline of radio's dominance is not presented as an obituary, but as a natural business progression.

The lexicon of broadcasting found here is as authentic as it is archaic. Radio shows transcribed on 16-inch platters and the eclipse of wire recording by magnetic tape turn up as conversational asides. But a new fangled device called a "minitape" propels the plot because it expedites the production of the memorial show.

"It's very compact," says an amazed small station owner to a network man as he inspects the marvel.

"We find it a very helpful little gadget," the big shot replies, "It only weighs thirty pounds, carries its own battery supply and records up to a half hour on a small reel of tape. . ."

When these lines were written, the full impact of the Japanese electronics industry on life in the USA was still a few years away. But transistorization and miniaturization were already beginning to revolutionize the business of broadcasting.

In order to milk every drop of publicity from the tragedy, the network top brass decide the funeral of the Great Man will be televised from Studio 41, home of the TV version of his radio talk show. It's an exaggerated caricature of executive suite crassness, but intertwined in the satire is a realistic description of the renovation of an old movie palace into a modern TV facility deisgned for live studio audiences. The introduction of television not only transformed radio, but it metamorphized the American social ritual of movie-going as well.

In 1957, the novel of another industry veteran takes a jaundiced view of broadcasting this time by a star TV comic. And again, the by-product of the study is an authoritative account of the nature of program production in a fleeting era. Ernie Kovacs, legendary for his innovations in TV technique, is reported to have written *Zoomar* in just two weeks.

Billed as a "sophisticated novel about love and television," the book treats traditional narrative structure the way Kovacs' treated conventional wisdom—with varying degrees of neglect, irreverence, and amused contempt. Nonetheless, the dizzying rise of Tom Moore, young executive at the United Broadcasting Company, sustains interest because of dialogue laced with Kovacs' gags.

"If my boss calls," a secretary is instructed, "get his name." Men at the top of UBC's corporate ladder come and go quickly, but there is security in the fact that each and every one of them will be a chowderhead.

A program called the "Miss Wipe-Ola Beauty Hunt" is the vehicle of Tom Moore's success. A tawdry, weekly pageant produced for Wipe-Ola Shoe Polish hits the top of the ratings charts and our protagonist suddenly finds himself in the driver's seat. He learns the business of TV production circa 1957 on the job. And so, too, does the reader in the course of heavily detailed descriptions of workaday life in the studio. Sophisticated it's not, but it's often amusing, even witty.

Thirty years later, the tools of the trade as Kovacs describes them seem awfully primitive. In rehearsal the director double checks the program credits printed on title cards resting on the easel since the character generator is still in the realm of science fiction. Turret lenses were the norm, and cameramen had to understand the principles of focal length.

When, in the story, someone attempts to "dolly with a 6-inch lens," he is justifiably referred to as a "dumb bastard." But one of the cameras is equipped with a new toy, a lens called a zoomar. With ease and speed it gives us a closer look, as the title suggests, of the subject at hand. With retrospective insight it's plain to see, ease and speed are the very qualities that will redefine the nature of the medium within a decade.

In 1958 Edwin Fadiman Jr, a novelist and radio-TV writer, chose the television industry as a backdrop for his character-based novel about a "cheating husband, indifferent father, and ruthless lover." The network Rex Lundy works for in *The 21" Screen* is keeping up with the state of the art. And, in an unintentionally symbolic way, this TV star with an underdeveloped soul now has the ability to see himself as others do.

"You've heard of TV tape?" a Master's Broadcasting executive asks him, "I've got an experimental setup in the office. It's amazing stuff. Would you be surprised to hear that we took down your show on it this afternoon?" The flawed protagonist declines the invitation to look at his videotaped show and "sort of kick it around."

The unwelcome new power of his bosses in Daytime Programming to scrutinize his performances is a harbinger of big changes on the way. Ultimately, Rex Lundy knows, he must confront himself, and when he does his life will be different. The emergence of videotape is, of course, also a turning point in the history of television. On it is recorded the end of an era.

CHANGING BUSINESS STRUCTURES

Whether there's any validity to the cliché that the American public gets the TV programming it deserves has been the subject of debate over the last forty years. In any case, the way in which the programming gets packaged, bought, and sold has gone through major changes.

The period in which the sponsor and advertising agencies enjoyed the lion's share of control over TV content is the time frame of Robin Moore's 1956 *Pitchman* which chronicles the struggles of an aspiring television mogul as he achieves his first taste of success beginning in 1952.

Benton March sells program ideas to advertisers. His dream is to create and produce a distinguished dramatic series that will have a profound impact on the medium. He hopes it will be generously supported by a sponsor like National Alloys, an organization of enormous wealth tinged with public responsibility.

Needless to say, it is a dream deferred. First comes the mundane business of pitching commercial properties like the low budget kids' show "Space Blazers" to the board of directors of the Hot Cereal Association.

Benton March tells himself and his friends that after he makes a bundle of money and a name for himself, he'll use his clout to do good work in television. Along the way though, there are too many tests of his mettle for his noble ambitions to survive the trek to the top.

The education of the pitchman to the harsh realities of commercial television is a story rich with the distinctive business features of the first decade of television, and the conflicts between advertisers and networks. It was the era of live TV, and kinescopes.

In those days, shortly after the lifting of the FCC licensing Freeze, there was still such a thing as a "non-television market." And, for a brief time, the film industry didn't yet fully comprehend the magnitude or the potential of television.

Following the ambitions of Benton March, the reader is schooled in the re-tooling of Hollywood. The produc-

tion of a series shot on film in a West Coast sound stage instead of a New York studio is his biggest break. *Pitchman* closes with the lead character quite accurately contemplating the enormous amount of money to be made in the syndication of rerun programming.

Time passes and power shifts. By the mid-1960's, program pitches are usually not made to advertisers, and the fully-sponsored program series, usually flaunting the name of the sponsor (*Philco Playhouse, Kraft Theater, The Firestone Hour, The Camel News Caravan*, etc.) had disappeared. The networks control their own program schedule, and shows have become carriers of spots for many different advertisers. It is also the age of the packager, some independents, others offshoots of movie majors like Columbia Pictures' Screen Gems, and a few are substantial new studios and companies like Four Star and Desilu.

A curious artifact of this transition period, which saw the shift of big-league production from East Coast to West, from live to film, was a sleazy called *The CanniBalS*. Yes, the letters CBS are capitalized within the book's title.

This pulpy ego trip is the work of a mediocre singer and actor, whose main claim to show business fame was playing the role of Eddie Cantor in a 1953 movie called *The Eddie Cantor Story*. Probably the most self-serving of all the many self-serving novels about network television, it's an I'll-get-even, rather vengeful version of the Brasselle Story, as *he* claims it happened.

What happened was that Brasselle with no major TV production experience behind him, had actually sold three TV series to CBS for the 1964–1965 season. Three in one season would have been an impressive score for even a top producer.

Richelieu Productions was the name of Brasselle's company, and the reigning monarch of the CBS Television Network at this time was Jim Aubrey, President of the network and a close friend of Brasselle's. It was widely speculated at the time that this palship had made Brasselle's feat of showmanship possible.

All three Richelieu series—*The Reporters, The Baileys of Balboa* and *The Cara Williams Show*—were flops of epic proportions. This episode probably was one of the factors leading to Aubrey's downfall in 1965 when he was relieved of his post at CBS. Three years later, Brasselle, after his fashion, gets even by telling his side of the Keefe Brasselle Story in fiction form. When Joey Bertell (close enough to Brasselle?) a performer turned producer makes the mistake of trusting one J.J. Bingham, the President of the Broadcasting Corporation of America's television network, he is plunged into a shameless world without decency.

The top echelon of BCA is comprised of men with bizarre sexual proclivities and boundless greed. But what makes these executives most offensive to Brasselle/Bertell is not their morals, but their lack of any genuine showbusiness savvy. Poor Joey Bertell, with his instinctive knowledge of what TV audience wants, has to put up with the stupid interference of programming dummies who have come up from the ranks of sales.

It is a galling situation for our hero. When "network thinking" dictates script changes in a series for which he had high hopes, Joey yells angrily "You can screw up Wheaties if you put kerosene and salt on it!"

As a novelist Brasselle is no better than as a producer. But as a curiosity, born of a certain era, *The CanniBalS* does offer an unwashed window onto the intrigues and pressures of packaging and production, corporate intrigues, and the seamy side of showbusiness, even though it's all reflected through the distorted vision of the author, as if in a funhouse mirror.

TV AND THE ELECTIVE PROCESS

Political science pundits are apt to believe that American voters like TV viewers, get just the kind of elected officials they deserve. In 1952, television forever changed the way in which we get the information we need to make decisions about our national leaders, when Dwight Eisenhower became the first presidential candidate to appear on TV commercials. That same year his opponent Adlai Stevenson preempted a prime-time entertainment show for a longer, more substantive political broadcast and received the following telegram: "I like Ike and I love Lucy. Drop dead."

Many works of popular fiction in the next decade reflected the anxiety felt by thoughtful voters and communications scholars over the harm television could inflict on the democratic process if left unchecked in the hands of advertising experts.

The Golden Kazoo by John G. Schneider, published in 1956, is a satirical but serious warning to the American electorate against being duped by the men in the gray flannel suits when choosing the next occupant of the Oval Office. The author, an advertising insider, writes with a fatalism, however, as if he's already read the handwriting on the wall and is just translating the unfortunate message for us.

The story is set four years "in the future" during the presidential campaign of 1960. The GOP candidate, Henry Clay Adams, is a handsome middle-aged man with a magnificent mane of gray hair. The Madison Avenue agency of Reade and Bratton takes on the job of selling this politician without distinction as a statesman.

The schemes devised by the assigned team are outrageous farce—a fake pregnancy for the candidate's wife and a massive grocery give-away. But, in planning for the grand deceptions the ad execs must contemplate past elections, and here is where we get some analysis about what played well then, what didn't, and why.

"Soap opera was 1952's, greatest and, I should judge, most lasting contribution to political TV," ruminates one of the team thinking about Nixon's "Checkers" speech, but not referring to it or the candidate by name.

"Who can forget that offstage cocker spaniel which starred in the first soaper? Millions of voters wept billions of tears. I have yet to meet anyone who knew whether the tears were shed for the dog, for his master, or for the master's fine little children, but that's the way it goes with soap opera. Misery needs no reason why."

By 1956, the adman remembers, "Our great television industry came into its own." He recalls the effectiveness of "those wonderous five-minute bits which hitch-hiked onto the tail end of high rating shows like *Lucy*, *Gobel*, *Dragnet*, *Sullivan*, and *Gleason* . . . singing commercials, animated cartoons, lovable animals, political morality plays . . . the candidates swapping corny jokes with big name stars."

"In '56," the consumer specialist reminisces, "we gave the television audience the kitchen sink, the kitchen sink complete with automatic dishwasher."

In *The Golden Kazoo* Schneider correctly anticipated the presidential election of 1960 would be the barometer of a new political era. The medium's ability to convey the human dimensions of political figures—whether reliably or not—was going to become an issue of dramatic importance.

Edward A. Rogers worked closely with Richard Nixon, as a consultant. He was the producer of the "Checkers" speech that saved Nixon's political life, and he was the candidate's media advisor during the 1960 campaign, when

television was less of a friend.

The "Great Debates" between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon are a landmark in television history, ushering in, if not in actual practice, surely in public thinking, a new way to gauge the worthiness of the men vying to be the Chief Executive. Numerous volumes have been written about the "Great Debates" based on an abundance of research studies. Evaluation of these historic confrontations, however, cannot be complete until *Face to Face*, the 1962 novel by the knowledgable Edward Rogers, is added to the bibliography of resources.

The story of presidential candidate Andrew Conger and his television advisor Charles Dale is not a bitter alibi by the author for a job poorly done. Rather, it is, one senses, a form of therapy for a man who has lived for many years in a combination pressure cooker and fishbowl. Through fiction Rogers can raise his voice to a level inappropriate for the gentlemanly discussion of election post-mortems.

At the outset, the author bluntly states he is not telling what *did* happen in the 1960 campaign, but what *might* have happened; what *could* have happened. By divorcing the personalities and politics of Kennedy and Nixon from the issue, Rogers forces the reader to begin from a neutral stance.

Campaigning for the presidency in the electronic age is rife with the temptation to violate the public trust. In *Face to Face* Rogers depicts outlandish "worst case" scenarios. He endows his characters from the broadcast industry with the most base human instincts. Yet, Rogers is a skillful writer, and always there is a kernel of true possibility supported by the public facts.

In *Face to Face* the North American Broadcasting Company cooks up the presidential debate idea to take the heat off the Quiz Show scandals, and also divert the increasing pressure for reform of violent programming. Rogers does not allow even a jot of genuine public service sentiment to taint his villains.

The most sinister turn the plot takes involves an agreement between the president of the network and the lesser known candidate who would benefit from the tremendous exposure of the highly publicized debates. The broadcaster would assume a newly created Cabinet post as Secretary of Communication in exchange for favorable coverage throughout the campaign leading to November victory.

In the wake of Roger's tale told with melodramatic strokes, there are interesting background details based on his own experience. His fictional nominating conventions, for instance, as in real life, were showcases for the rapidly advancing capabilities of video equipment. In 1960, the political machine was learning quickly how to accommodate the new machinery of television.

Candidates had to adapt their styles to meet the demands of the medium. Brevity and simplicity, the central character in this novel must convince the old fashioned politico, will work in his favor.

The negotiations between representatives of the candidates to hammer out the logistics of the debate format, we can assume, were written from Roger's actual involvement. And so we are privy to the high level discussions that were a form of psychological armwrestling for control of the crucial telecasts. Even the pros and cons of the freedom of the director to employ reaction shots at his discretion get presented in an emotional argument—the implication being that had the argument been resolved differently, Richard Nixon would likely have been the 35th President of the United States.

The problems Edward Rogers creates for Charles Dale were those the author knew well. As the campaign wears on in *Face to Face*, media advisor Dale grows more and more frus-

trated with the inaccessibility of his boss. One day he finds he must wait twelve hours "hoping for five minutes with the candidate." Andrew Conger did not make good use of the savvy men on his staff. Nixon, too, dismissed the advice of men with impressive credentials in the broadcast media. Nixon and Conger both misjudged what mattered most.

Face to Face is much more than a curio piece from a distant political epoch. It is a clue that adds to our understanding of the enigmatic career of Richard Nixon and the relationship of the American public with its president. His political resurrection and his final descent have, perhaps, more to do with the force of television than most could have imagined in 1960.

TV VS. GOVERNMENT

Right from the start, television was recognized as a critical new factor in the way we govern ourselves. It was the way television was to be governed in this democratic society, however, that would become an emotional issue dividing the industry and the federal government.

The tensions inevitably generated in the struggle to balance freedom of expression with the obligation of a regulated industry to perform in the public interest has been a dramatic vein mined by several novelists.

The increasing governmental pressures on broadcasting in the late 1950s inspired Lissa Charrell's *Happy Medium*. The book, published in 1960 set in 1958, deals with a Congressional investigation of the Affiliated Broadcasting System. As a writer for the NBC *Today* show and a former CBS editor and director, the author writes without sympathy for official intrusions into the programming of a network.

Though the broadcasters in *Happy Medium* are not without flaws, the government men are menacing characters with ulterior motives. In the exposition of Congressman Warren Feast, Chairman of the Congressional Committee for Clean Broadcasting, for instance, the reader is informed that he "cost Affiliated a cool million in legal, management, and public relations fees" with his clean-up TV campaign in which he wished to "censor everything from the amount of cleavage it was permissible to reveal in a décolleté gown to how much levity to include in an MC's dialogue."

The exasperation and cynicism felt by the broadcast industry toward government as a programming partner during this era is laced throughout this romantic novel. The protagonist, a beautiful woman who is the Associate Director of Public Relations for the network being investigated, understands the concept of mutual need in matters professional as well as personal. A regularly scheduled Congressional Report on network TV starring the self-righteous legislator is planned. As she explains to her boss, "He can't hurt the network that feeds him, can he?"

In the summer of 1958 rumors started circulating about the possibility of fraud in some of the most popular quiz shows on television. Denials were issued by all involved, but a grand jury probe kept the matter open. When, in 1959, Charles Van Doren confessed that his winnings on the game show *Twenty-One* were the result of his being given the answers in advance, television was embroiled in its first full-fledged scandal. Fictional accounts soon appeared.

The authors of 1961's *Isolation Booth*, Bob Kaufman and Lou Morheim, offer a charitable, though not flattering, view of those who produced the rigged contests. The message of their story is that showbusiness blunts one's sense of honesty. The narrator of the novel, an employee of a producer under fire, finds more malevolence in the contestants than in the men who supposedly just wanted to infuse their programs with solid entertainment values.

As the book closes, the lead character ponders the winners turned witnesses, "There they sit, under oath, in their mink coats and expensive jewelry, bought from the money they had won on any one of Dan's six shows, and condemn Dan Douglas and his associate producers for corrupting them."

"Give back the coats and the diamonds, you phonies," he thinks to himself, "if you feel so guilty. . ."

In *Coast to Coast*, author Walter Ross spreads the blame for the Quiz Show scandals more evenly among the participants. Although the shows were not produced directly by the networks, their responsibility for airing the deceptions could not be brushed aside. Ross weaves an intricate plot in which the president of the fictional TV network knows the scoop while the chairman of the board is in the dark. When the revelation comes, a series of lies and blackmail on the part of the network leads up to the Senate subcommittee hearings.

It's not too surprising the industry took umbrage at such a portrayal. When *Coast to Coast* was published in 1962, *Television Age* panned it as a "condemnation of the American system of commercial TV." Ross, of course, was just spinning a good yarn.

A parish priest who is a fraudulent contestant is, like university instructor Charles Van Doren, ashamed not only for disgracing himself, but also the integrity of a noble calling. In *Coast to Coast* the medium is guilty of leading him into temptation.

An added complication involves lavish entertainment and trips to the Virgin Islands supplied by the network to an FCC investigator when a new channel becomes available for application. The real-life resignation of FCC Chairman John Doerfer in 1960 came about because of the alleged improprieties of his accepting favors from Storer Broadcasting, including a vacation trip on the company yacht.

David Levy didn't need to visit the library to research *The Chameleons*, one of the better books about TV. His 1964 novel is based on a personal and painful episode. In 1961, when the public mood seemed to approve an elevation of program standards with the help of government, Levy was called to testify before the Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee investigating sex and violence on television.

As a vice-president for network TV at NBC he was accused by an independent producer of demanding more sex and violence in a program being produced for the network. He lost his job at NBC as a result. The next year Mr. Levy appeared before yet another subcommittee, this one headed by the late Senator Thomas E. Dodd. A highly regarded executive who later became an independent producer, Levy hoped to clear his damaged reputation as a television executive by pointing out that documents existed at NBC which demonstrated he had always opposed the use of gratuitous sex and violence in network fare. He called on the industry to take the initiative in the improvement of TV programming before "others will be obliged to do it for them."

Two years later Levy's novel about a conscientious television executive describes a Senate investigation of program practices which forces the protagonist to "choose between becoming a sacrificial lamb and a chameleon." Having apparently taken the fall for the network, Levy writes of the adversarial relationship between the industry and the government with a clear perspective.

The good guy in the book doesn't feel comfortable with the changing environment at the network and in the industry to which he devoted his professional life. "Pandering to the taste of the lowest denominator," the character knows, "led to scandals and the kind of intensive government surveillance the industry deplored."

With *The Chameleons*, Levy sends a lofty message to the industry.

Through its own greed it is inviting an assault on the freedom of broadcasting. When the message is bound in the context of well rendered characters, as it is here, the reader, allowed a privileged vantage point by a serious insider, feels a palpable connection with the temper of the times.

ANCHORS AWEIGH IN TV NEWS

The quiz show scandals had only a short run on the front pages and in the columns. But as television news boomed in the 70's, and as anchormen like Cronkite, and Huntley and Brinkley became national celebrities—media stars—so did news about news itself flourish; not only in the TV columns and *TV Guide*, but in the new personality magazines like *People*, and on magazine covers. Newspapers which had always skimped on TV coverage, now realized it was to their advantage to give more space to the competitive medium, and expanded their staffs and space. Even in special publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Business Week* and on the daily business pages, news about TV news proliferated. The business of TV news was good copy, especially in the age of the Cult of Personality, now under way.

On the local scene, during the seventies news expanded more than the network programs, as stations which had only scheduled news periods at eleven for a half hour, and a half hour in early evening, built hour, even two and three hour news "shows." So the local TV critics and columnists also became intrigued with chronicling the changing events and personalities of the local station news departments, their anchor persons, reporters, and even station news directors.

A new national sporting event was born—the weekly score-keeping in the press of the ratings of the network news programs, and quarterly on how the local newscasters were making out in the stations' sweeps months.

At the same time, on the crest of the women's movement, women for the first time began to be cast as reporters and anchors locally, and if not as anchors on the networks, at least as reporters; before, they had usually been confined to presiding over cooking shows and what were once known as "women's programs."

All of this expansion of news was accompanied by hype and lots of on-the-air and print advertising and promotion. The focus was as much on the news stars as on content, and on techniques of presentation, as many stations were influenced by news consultants, and jazzy formats like "action news" became common. Media critics observed that in some quarters the line between news and entertainment was becoming blurred.

So in the 70's, TV news also became appealing subject matter for the novelists. Much of the fiction of the period focused on the new electronic journalism and its personalities.

Anchorwoman, written in 1974 by seasoned storyteller Al Morgan, captures the mixed feelings experienced by those in television journalism during this period of cultural transition. The resentment of many newsmen having to share power and responsibility with women, coupled with the desire to beat the competition in the ratings race, gets crystallized in a discussion between the female broadcaster in *Anchorwoman*, clearly modelled after Barbara Walters, and a male producer from the old school.

"Thanks for letting me do it," she says when given a major assignment to cover a presidential trip out of the country.

"Wasn't my idea," he responds, "But I'll tell you something, you may be a pain-in-the-ass broad, but from now on you're our pain-in-the-ass broad."

In 1978 another fictional version of Barbara Walters appears in hardback.

The protagonist of *Nielsen's Children* by James Brady is a woman who not only reports the news, but makes it. At her on-air suggestion, the President of Egypt and the Prime Minister of Israel agree to meet for peace talks. Her professionalism and competence, however, cannot withstand the constant drive for ratings success demanded by the network.

In the end, she realizes she compromised her own high standards in exchange for a five million dollar contract to co-anchor the evening news and a public relations department that gets her picture on the cover of *Time*. Assigning blame for her unhappy condition is futile, however.

"We don't have villains in this business," Kate Sinclair decides, "No heroes either . . . there are only the ratings."

Local TV news in the 1970s became a target of satire personified by the character of Ted Baxter, the inept sitcom anchorman with a hairspray-addled brain. Pulitzer Prize-winning media critic Ron Powers made his fiction debut in 1979 with the publication of *Face Value*. He creates an affiliate station newsroom in which Mary Tyler Moore's Baxter would have been welcomed.

When the format for the evening news of UHF station WRAP gets changed to celebrity-oriented coverage, the two lead characters are also forced to change their journalistic ways. The pop culture reporter is appalled and he resists the bastardization of the news as much as he can without losing his job. He becomes a pariah for questioning the legitimacy of decisions made on the basis of market research. His lover, a tough cookie reporter with a master's degree in journalism, plays ball like a good scout and is rewarded with a network program of her own.

Face Value is an exaggerated portrait of local news abuses. But, again, it is in the residue of the story the historical value is found. Trenchant criticism of news judgment guided by ratings is tucked neatly into plot so as not to slow the action down.

The first TV novel of 1987 deals with news and newspeople, *Going Live* by Muriel Dobbin, currently West Coast correspondent for U.S. News and World Report, and before that White House correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun*. Although she was a print journalist, the author knows the Washington TV journalistic scene, around which much of the novel revolves.

It's a steamy novel, with the action taking place in various bedrooms as much as in the halls of Congress, the White House and the New York and Washington news bureaus. The principal character is Caroline Mitchell, "stunning Jackie O. look-alike, scarred by the sexual secrets of her childhood."

The sensationalism is blended with a dash of realism and trade details of the operations of local newsrooms and network bureaus and studios and the men and women who report, produce and anchor the news, nationally and locally. And there is validity in the portions of the novel dealing with the fierce competitiveness that often invades the newsrooms and studios, and the various forces that challenge the integrity and professionalism of the electronic journalists.

A lot of this has been done before. What is up-to-date is that this is the first fiction of the 80's to deal with a television industry shaking with the effects of the take-over arbitrage, levered-buyout era of the medium, as financiers and speculators, often without any broadcast background, become active in television.

Appropriately, one of Dobbin's principal characters is Joel Eliass, the new chairman and major stockholder of The World News Network, and one of the books several villains.

His "passion in life," according to the author, is "collecting corporations, which he did with cold-blooded relish, using a fortune accumulated from sev-

eral shrewd and unscrupulous land deals combined with a deadly eye for stocks and bonds."

THE IMPERFECT PICTURE

In American universities, television history has graduated from an interesting cultural footnote to a mature field of inquiry. Restructuring and analyzing television's past is being undertaken with academic rigor by a growing number of researchers. Along with traditional resources, novels also deserve the attention of media historians. While fiction can't contribute to building a body of facts, it can bring texture and a sense of human context to the study.

Industry outsiders, those who are professional writers of popular fiction, rely on their intuitive feelings of what interests and concerns the public when they turn to television for dramatic inspiration. Industry insiders, often key players in major events in the history of the medium, resort to fiction as a means of explaining how it was for them. And so the image we get from fiction is not one of perfect resolution. It is, however, a point of view shot integral to understanding the nuances of the whole story.

In the 1980s the television industry is a rougher, more complicated, more pressured environment than ever before. The stakes keep getting higher. Corporate takeovers, mass firings, the bottom line climate, the competition of cable and home video, and controversial new ratings systems are bound to provide novelists with a bounty of fascinating storylines and characters. The lucky ones will sell their manuscripts and enjoy the royalties or the revenge, whichever matters most. ■

Mary Ann Watson teaches broadcast history in the Department of Communication at the University of Michigan. Now having read her way through a long bookshelf of fiction, she is writing a book herself, strictly *nonfiction*; it's called *"Television in the Kennedy Years."*

TV NOVELS: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

1950s:

The Great Man

by Al Morgan, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1955.

When Herb Fuller, star of network radio and television, dies in a car crash, his heir apparent is assigned to produce the memorial program. Eventually, he finds out the shocking truth about the beloved personality.

Pitchman

by Robin Moore, Coward-McCann, Inc., 1956.

"It is a story about war," the dust jacket says, "the war between Benton March and television's overlords in their steel and glass bastions along Madison Avenue." Selling programs to advertisers conditions a man not to trust

anyone—not even his partner. Killer instincts are required to survive in the "television jungle."

The Golden Kazoo

by John G. Schneider, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1956.

A satire about "the unholy marriage of advertising and politics." A Madison Avenue boy wonder transforms a colorless and mediocre candidate into a presidential contender through TV gimmickry.

Zoomar

by Ernie Kovacs, Doubleday, 1957.

Tom Moore's fortunes in the TV industry skyrocket when the "Miss Wipe-Ola Beauty Hunt" program captures the imagination of the viewing public.

The 21" Screen

by Edwin Fadiman, Jr., Doubleday, 1958.

Rex Lundy was going to be a writer until he got a lucky break in television. Now he had too much to lose. . . "This is the revealing novel of a man corrupted by his own image," the back cover reads, ". . .what happens when a big-time television star decides the price may not be right."

But Will They Get It In Des Moines?

by Stanley Flink, Simon and Schuster, 1959.

A young TV writer presents the case study of *Twilight*, a live show set in New York. The experimental production built around remote interviews with real people going about their lives proves to be ahead of its time. Idealism, he learns, is not a valued commodity in television and it doesn't interest the audience in Des Moines.

1960s:

The Happy Medium

by Lissa Charell, Coward-McCann, Inc., 1960.

When this book was written the author was a women's feature writer on the *Today* show. She dedicates her story, which she says is "not true, merely typical," to Dave Garroway, Jack Lescoulie, and Frank Blair. A young publicist is involved in the crisis of a Congressional investigation which threatens the network. Her career and her private life collide.

Isolation Booth

by Bob Kaufman and Lou Morheim, Gold Medal Books, 1961.

In his introduction Steve Allen writes, "*Isolation Booth* provides a vivid behind-the-scenes look at rigged TV quiz shows. But an exposé or moral preachment on greed and dishonesty was not the intent. . ." In a larger sense, the book deals with all of show business. It gives, says Allen, "an uncompromising view of today's man-ambitious, torn by indecision, guilt-ridden, self-pitied, self-destructive, but still somehow indestructible."

Face to Face

by Edward A. Rogers, William Morrow and Company, 1962.

The author, Richard Nixon's media advisor during the 1960 campaign, writes about the secret agenda behind network television's push for a debate between presidential candidates. He is careful not accusatory, but merely provocative.

Coast-to-Coast

by Walter Ross, Simon and Schuster, 1962.

The executives and policies of the International Broadcasting Corporation are the subject of a Senate subcommittee investigation. The tyrannical network chairman finds he has as many enemies in his own ranks as he does in Washington. The truth about the quiz shows and the bribery of an FCC investigator comes out on the floor of the Senate.

The Chameleons
by David Levy, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1964.
A novel about a Senate investigation of a TV network with powerful bad guys on both sides. The author, writes from personal experience having been through the 1961 Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee Hearings and the Dodd Committee Hearings on TV violence.

So This Is What Happened to Charlie Moe
by Douglass Wallop, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965.
Charlie Moe is a sensational blond quarterback. The novel is about the pro football hero, and "the all-too-colorful world of big-time TV.

The Day Television Died
by Don McGuire, Doubleday, 1966.
Marvin Lazerus, a wacky writer at an advertising agency "jolts the entire TV industry with his obscene commercials." "Finally," the book's promotion reads, "his 'better idea' saves mankind from the boob tube."

The CanniBalS
by Keefe Brasselle, Avon Books, 1968.
A fictional account of one of the more curious chapters of CBS history—the placement on the prime-time schedule for the 1964–65 season of three series without a pilot and produced by a company and a man without a notable track record.

The Inheritors
by Harold Robbins, Trident Press, 1969.
"The story of Sinclair Television's transformation from the cellar of broadcasting into a fabulous corporate structure." The epic of the "new breed of conquerors" begins in 1955.

1970s:

The Anchorman
by Ned Calmer, Doubleday, 1970.
A local Boston newscaster is suddenly thrust into the position of network anchorman when his predecessor can no longer abide the demands of the "media game." The young newcomer struggles with personal conviction versus corporate anonymity during the year of the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and the Democratic convention in Chicago. The author was a veteran CBS newscaster.

Being There
by Jerzy Kosinski, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.
When his rich old boss dies, an illiterate and mentally disabled man is no longer sheltered from the world by working in the garden of the comfortable estate. He adapts to his sudden expulsion by taking on a repetoire of identities borrowed from television. Calling himself Chauncey Gardiner, he becomes the toast of New York society when his hollow personality and cryptic utterances are mistaken for charm and laconic wisdom. *Being There* is an iconoclastic parable about the projection of substance and the willingness of American society to remove itself from reality and accept instead the vicarious experiences of television.

Talk Show
by Noel B. Green, William Morrow, 1971.
The publisher's synopsis says, "Lester Corbett is an American entertainment institution. And not just on television. #1 late night TV host. #1 sex superman. But Lester begins to slip. Right in front of millions of startled viewers. Why?"

Snake in the Glass
by Hal Kanter, Delacorte, 1971.
The story of a network comedy show set in the 1950s. A conniving young writer is the "Number One Rat" in a enterprise which gives haven to several, including the star's penny-pinch-

ing manager and the network exec with gold cufflinks.

Anchorwoman

by Al Morgan, Ballantine Books, 1974.
The illustration on the cover looks very much like Barbara Walters. A morning talk show hostess battles to the top of the "cut-throat world" of network television toward an evening anchor spot. A Presidential assassination attempt is the crux of the story.

Stryker

by Chuck Scarborough, Macmillan, 1978.
A White House correspondent gets a demotion to the police beat after he loses his temper with President Nixon and uses some inappropriate language. The spirited young newsman gets tangled in an assassination web in which executives of his own network conspire to kill the President. Author Scarborough is a news anchor at WNBC-TV in New York City.

Nielsen's Children

by James Brady, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978.
Another story that borrows heavily from the career of Barbara Walters. Kate Sinclair, a morning talk show hostess, accepts a five million dollar contract to co-anchor a network evening newscast. Her success and competence breed resentment. In a system dominated by the ratings she is, despite her professional talents, a network pawn.

Killed in the Ratings

by William L. DeAndrea, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978.
A murder mystery involving a scheme to rig the ratings. Network men conspire with the Mafia to distort the system in their favor. An innocent young executive inadvertantly becomes the key figure in exposing the fraud.

Face Value

by Ron Powers, Delacorte press, 1979.
A New York affilliate changes the format of its local newscast. The concept of celebrity is to be glorified relentlessly. A young comedian is a beneficiary of the new approach after being "discovered" by the station's pop culture critic. Allowing himself to be controlled and packaged, the comic becomes a mega-celebrity and a candidate for the U.S. Senate.

1980s:

Station Identification: Confessions of a Video Kid

by Donald Bowie, M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1980.
A poignant memoir of a childhood and adolescence dominated by television. Personal milestones in life are marked by media events and true friendships are cemented by mutual video addictions. The attraction of the protagonist to a young woman whose family didn't even own a television set forces his first bout with reflective thought on the medium.

Gospel Fever

by Frank G. Slaughter, Doubleday, 1980.
In the competitive world of TV evangalism, one of America's most beloved preachers is going to get knocked off his video pulpit. "Gospel Fever," the advertisement reads, "separates the crusaders from the charlatans, the healers of the faith from the hoarders of the fortune."

Sweeps

by Bill Granger, Fawcett Fold Medal Books, 1980.
A victim of the blacklist in the 1950s is found dead three decades later in a rundown Manhattan hotel. Found in his typewriter is a blackmail note to the leading network anchorman in the country—a man who did not speak out against McCarthyism when he had the

chance. Dramatic confrontation is fueled over how the network will cover the story. The author is a former TV critic.

The Televising of Heller

by John Bartlow Martin, Doubleday, 1980.

Senator James T. Heller, the principled Democratic incumbent from Illinois, gets dragged into the "new politics" of public opinion surveys, media events, and symbolism over substance. A television poll get fixed in Heller's favor and he participates in the cover-up. He struggles with his ethics and finally resigns his seat in the Senate. The distinguished author, was a biographer of Adlai Stevenson.

Going Live

by Muriel Dobbin, E.P. Dutton, 1987. ■

—Compiled by Mary Ann Watson

P R O and C O N

"The Federal Communications Commission's drive to deregulate broadcasting is well on its way to backfiring in a big way.

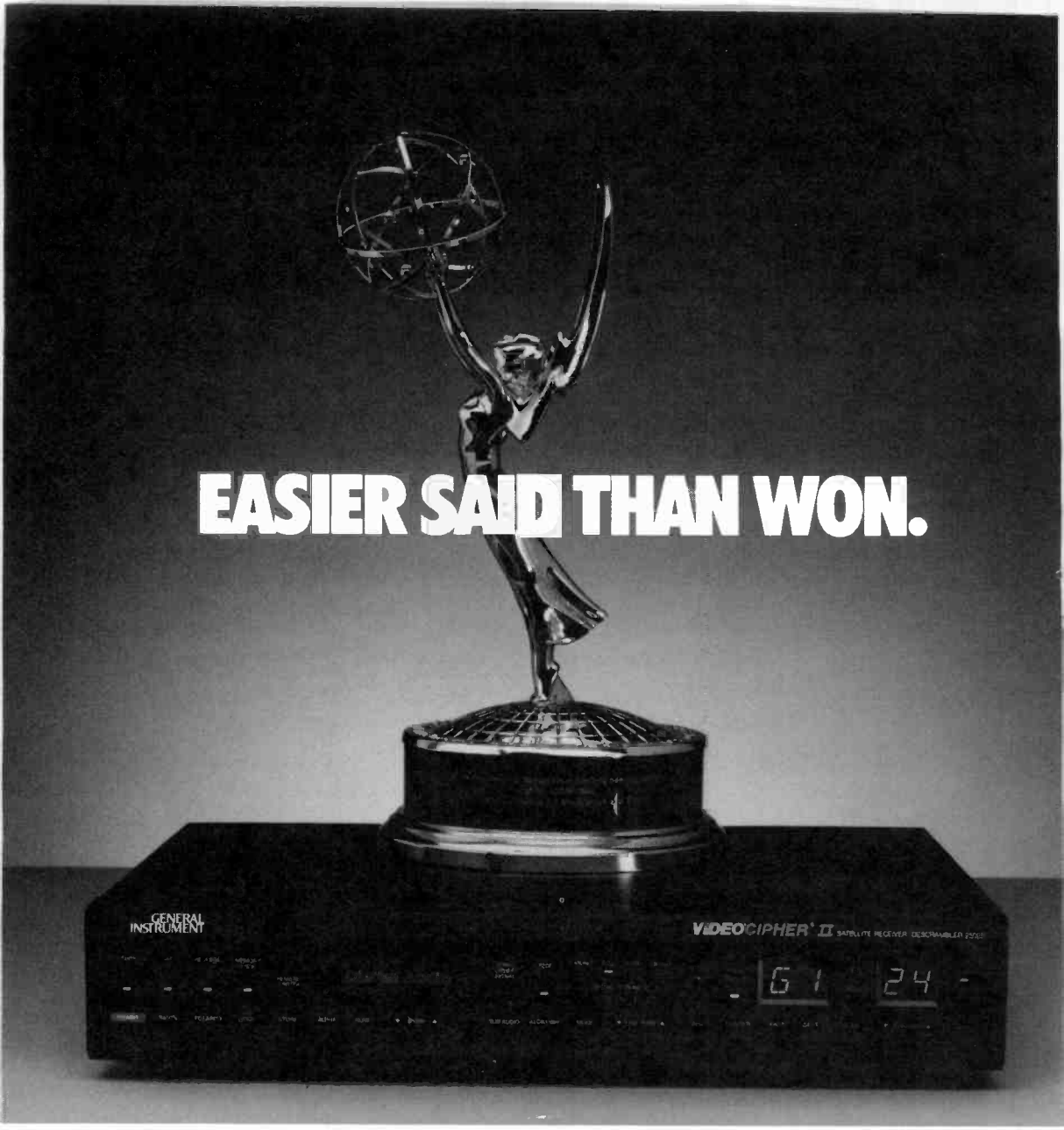
". . . Congress is ablaze with efforts to re-regulate the industry. One proposal would reinstate the three-year holding rule previously abolished by the FCC. A more ominous legislative effort would make the fairness doctrine a federal statute. . . . The lesson here is painfully obvious: if the FCC won't regulate, Congress will. Another lesson is less obvious, and is, in fact, lost on any number of deregulation zealots, including outgoing FCC Chairman Mark Fowler: It is dangerous to go too far too fast in politics.

"During his tenure as commission chairman, Mr. Fowler has passionately espoused an ideological opposition to all but the most elementary broadcast regulations. He has naively pushed the 'print model' to broadcasting, and never mind the historical differences between the two media."

—Electronic Media

". . . FCC Chairman Mark Fowler . . . pulled out all the stops in his farewell address to the industry he has so revolutionized with deregulation. . . . His steadfastness in trying to win or award First Amendment right for broadcasters is perhaps the brightest legacy of his chairmanship, although he will likely be remembered first for his preemptive strike on regulation."

—Broadcasting



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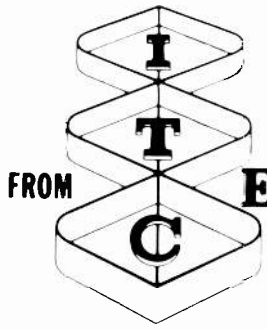

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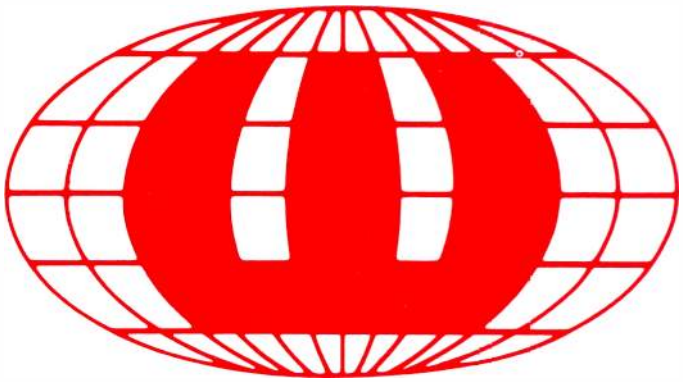

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TOPSY-TURVY IN THE EVERYDAY WORLD: THE UNSURPASSED CAREER OF ERNIE KOVACS

BY WILLIAM A. HENRY III

The night promised to be a landmark in television history. Jerry Lewis, the most popular comedian in the country, had just split up with his partner Dean Martin and would be making his solo broadcast debut. The NBC network thought, not surprisingly, that the event should qualify as a "spectacular," that era's term for what later would be devalued in TV parlance as a mere "special." There was just one hitch. The industry applied the term "spectacular" only to events at least ninety minutes long, and Lewis insisted on doing no more than an hour. Thus the network felt it had to cast about for a personality who could fill out the time—and who would willingly risk comparison with the beloved Lewis.

For a while it seemed no one would want to take on the thankless task. But then a candidate emerged. He had a nutty notion. To counterbalance Lewis, who rivaled Bert Lahr as a master of funny noises, the half-hour fill-in program would have no dialogue at all. It would be a pastiche of pantomime sketches and sight gags, accompanied by music or sound effects or serene silence but no talk. NBC officials were understandably dubious. But when they saw the finished program they went ahead. Its wit and ingenuity left them, like the performers, speechless.

The air date was January 19, 1957. The half-hour program was called *Eugene*. Its creator—producer, director, writer and star—was a mustachioed eccentric called Ernie Kovacs. And the morning after *Eugene* aired, it was Kovacs, not Jerry Lewis, whose name was on everyone's lips. It would be wrong to say that a star had been born; Kovacs had been displaying wacky ingenuity on television virtually from the medium's beginning. Between local and national shows, on networks including CBS, NBC, and DuMont (and in years to come, ABC), Kovacs had been a virtually nonstop presence. He appeared in every part of the day and night, in formats ranging from chit-chat to cooking instruction. But until *Eugene*, Kovacs's shows had never caught on the way those of more conventional, sentimental comics had. Lucille Ball would hang on playing essentially the same character for twenty-one seasons, Red Skelton for twenty; the longest of Kovacs's prime time comedy series lasted only seven months. *Eugene* and the acclaim it generated let a skeptical American public know that Kovacs was more than another wide-eyed, self-ingratiating clown. He was television's first significant video artist. He was its first great surrealist. He was its most daring and imaginative writer. He was, although few people (Kovacs least of all) would have used such a pretentious word back then, television's first and perhaps only *auteur*. And he was

a genius.

That term is freely used in the entertainment world to praise almost anyone who catches the public fancy for more than a moment. In commercial terms, a genius is any entertainer or impresario who finds a new way to make money. Kovacs never fit that description: He gambled compulsively, ignored the very concept of a budget, absorbed huge losses as an independent producer to pursue his whims, and died deeply in debt, not least to the federal government, which chose not to share his disregard for income tax laws. Kovacs's genius lay in the realm of art. There, a genius is someone who causes audiences to look at the world in a new way. Almost everything Kovacs did was original. If imitation is flattery, he has been flattered by the best: Every major comedy show since his time, from *Laugh-In* to *Saturday Night Live*, has acknowledged his legacy.

The quick black-out sketch (adapted from vaudeville to be sometimes just one word long), the closeup sight gag, the endlessly varied self-parody, all were created by Kovacs. Some were devised on the spot: A crew member tossed him a pair of glasses adorned with bulging, exophthalmic eyeballs and in that instant Kovacs impulsively gave birth to one of his most enduring characters, the lisping, campy poet Percy Dovetonsils. Some took time and money: Kovacs spent thousands upon thousands of dollars constructing a break-away floor so that he could tap an auto with his hand and, by that gesture alone, cause it to crash through the ground at his feet. Kovacs invented images of exquisite, frequently terrifying beauty: A hand protruded through the drain of a full bath-tub, fluttering its fingers in the water in a slow, ghostly gesture seeking help for a body trapped somewhere beneath. He also adored coarse, disruptive noises and reveled in violence. In an archetypal sequence, a man shot at a moving row of decoy ducks in an arcade until one of the ducks turned, aimed a miniature cannon at the camera, and fired. Kovacs loved music and used it more often and more effectively than almost anyone else in the medium. A snatch of baroque chamber music, a tinny recording of ragtime jazz, a Bartok concerto, any and all might be threaded through his show. He had an equal passion for utterly unmelodic sounds: the gurgle of a drainpipe, the clink of a glass, the crash of an explosion. He delighted in technology and recorded the introductions to his final series of programs while sitting in a control room. Yet he also gloried in the slapdash, low-rent early days of television, when he could create the wavy air of a dream sequence by putting a lit Sterno can just beneath the camera lens, or rig up a psychedelic effect for the camera with the help of a cheap toy kaleidoscope and an orange juice can.

Everyone who has ever seen a Kovacs show remembers it. However widely he was imitated, no one ever managed to put together a show that looked like his.

The essence of Kovacs's humor was unpredictability. He redefined the humdrum, everyday world as an unreliable place in which normal order and causality might vanish at any moment. About his vision and about himself there was always at least a faint aura of menace; at his loopiest he seemed to threaten to leap through the screen and grab the viewer by the lapels, if not the throat. This mad-dog comic sensibility proved as influential as his technical innovations. It later became the central shtick of performers including Steve Martin, John Belushi, and Bill Murray. Yet Kovacs's interests extended far beyond getting

laughs. In nearly every one of his shows, especially in the later part of his career, he incorporated some image or sequence that struck viewers for its abstraction and originality. Among the most arresting was a wordless montage to orchestral music of women getting ready for a date. The camera closed in on the processes of make-up and hair-arranging with almost predatory fascination. When the men arrived, the emotional focus shifted from lechery to empathy; one of the women was left behind, and she retreated to an inner room. Then, just at the moment when a lesser image-maker would have lingered on a close-up of her face, the camera angle shifted to a shot from high overhead as the light dimmed and the surrounding walls fell away to the floor. The moment's oddity was interesting in itself. As a metaphor for emotional collapse, it was perfect; as a self-conscious comment on the fact that the audience's sympathies were being manipulated by theatrics, by mere show, it managed to give a tired theme the glow of something new.

Everyone who has ever seen a Kovacs show remembers it: However widely he was imitated, no one quite managed to put together a show that looked like his. For a long time, however, nearly a generation, no one was seeing Kovacs's shows. They remained locked up in vaults, like most of the products of the Golden Age of early television. After his death in an automobile accident at the beginning of 1962 he was quickly forgotten. He left a legacy of debts, huge debts, hundreds of thousands of dollars, most of all to the IRS. His widow, Edie Adams, struggled for years to pay everything off and clear his record. He left, too, a legacy of great television, of manic, madcap art. But Kovacs's dime-store guerrilla theater was deemed insufficiently slick (and, for audiences increasingly unsettled by the true anarchy abroad in the land, insufficiently safe); moreover, his work was in black-and-white, a sign of antiquity and inadequacy to audiences newly infatuated with loving color. For fifteen years the Kovacs shows went largely unseen, until some of the best were packaged and re-released on public television in 1977. Critics heaped praise on Kovacs and viewers soon shared the delight; he found a whole new following, and that package of shows is still being aired today. A related tape, including reminiscences from family, friends, crew members, and fellow comics, is available in the home videocassette market.

Despite this high profile, the Kovacs story sadly demonstrates the need for a Museum of Broadcasting, and exemplifies the cavalier manner in which priceless early television was treated by the very companies that aired it. Until Edie Adams opened her vaults in 1985, network and other sources had provided less than twenty hours of Kovacs programs. At his peak, Kovacs appeared on television for almost that much air time in a single week. Many of his early, live programs were not recorded; others exist only in almost unwatchable kinescope form. Of the shows made late enough in TV history to have been recorded, many were discarded or reused as the tape equivalent of scrap paper. Not all of what was lost was priceless. Kovacs's gags misfired from time to time. Still, to judge from the exceptional quality of what remains, the lost shows must have included some beauts.

Raised in Trenton, New Jersey, in the modest circumstances of an immigrant household, Kovacs was no self-disciplinarian and no scholar. Given to drinking, smoking cigars, compulsive gambling, and needless clashes with authority, he knocked around for several years before landing securely in broadcasting. He became a local phenomenon in Philadelphia, where at one stage he had three regularly scheduled local TV shows: the two-hour

morning entertainment, *3 to Get Ready*; a goofy cooking show, *Deadline for Dinner*; and—in the oddest of casting for a scruffy, ogling, macho type—a weekly fashion parade, *Pick Your Ideal*. From the beginning, Kovacs seemed a natural for the cool medium. No matter how wacky he was behaving, he always acted utterly relaxed. He wasn't sleepy, like Perry Como; he radiated too much danger for that. But while frightening his audiences a little, he apparently never ruffled himself at all.

His work in Philadelphia persuaded NBC to give him a fifteen-minute slot on the network in the spring of 1951. Like most of his shows, it didn't last long. But it provided perhaps the first Kovacs footage to survive, and seeing episodes today makes clear that the essence of his style and persona had already been established. This vehicle was called *It's Time for Ernie*, although it never really mattered what the title was, or the format, or the network: Kovacs was Kovacs. The flavor was free-associative, rather like conversation with a schizophrenic. In one sequence, he opened with a shot of himself shooting an arrow; he cut to a shot of an arrow splitting an apple atop his own head. In another, the image on the screen went upside-down, then wobbled erratically to right itself again. At the outset of one installment, Kovacs got up, walked through a door out of the studio, ambled down the corridor to a drinking fountain, slaked his thirst, then wandered back in. The whole wordless business looked spontaneous and weirdly unprofessional. Apologists said it showed Kovacs as a wholly natural TV personality, doing whatever came into his head. Yet his little voyage also had a rich subtext of power-tripping: It constituted one of TV's first overt concessions that it is a medium for audience domination. People who might walk out on live performers found that they kept watching when a performer walked out on them. They gave rapt attention to a random happening rather than a carefully rehearsed, respectfully submitted show. They were thrilled by the possibility of finding a peephole into life, any life, no matter how mundane. This walkout was directed strictly at the home viewing audience. Kovacs did not have a studio audience—he almost never did, because he was creating something as yet undefined called television while almost everyone else in the business was still doing vaudeville. He understood that the real audience, the big audience, was sitting far away and experiencing him as little dots of light on a screen, not as flesh and blood in three dimensions. On this same short-lived series he first demonstrated what became one of his classic gags, one fraught with the awareness that television at once projected and dehumanized a personality. Wearing a panel around his neck to represent the control knobs on early TV sets, Kovacs demonstrated the various potential adjustments of the image by elongating or squashing his face, then twisting it into spasm-inducing distortions left or right. The rubbery mobility of his features was part of what made him a good clown. But the joke depended, deep down, on the viewer's mental tension between acknowledging the performer as a human being and seeing him as merely a picture to be rearranged until correct. This routine counterbalanced the walkout skit: Now the viewer rather than Kovacs was almost sadistically in charge. On other occasions, too, Kovacs belittled his cast and crew and truckled to the audience, as when he said of colleagues, "They've all chipped in to get on the program—as I have." Money is power in a capitalist society, and a huge percentage of Kovacs's asides to audiences over the years dealt with money. Late in his career, on an ABC special, he would remark to viewers, "The money means nothing. The money *is* nothing, consequently it means nothing. It is very, very little."

Not all of the humor had this kind of larger resonance. Much of it was fine, freeform slapstick. Kovacs mimed ripping ears off people. He imitated Jose Ferrer's Oscar-winning personification of Cyrano, suffering humilitating prop problems, buckling more than he swashed but, as was so often true with Kovacs, making things funnier when going wrong than they could ever have been if all went right. Perhaps most important to the hearts of Kovacs devotees, this network debut also introduced to a national audience the musicians dressed in ape suits and derbies who were known as The Nairobi Trio, Kovacs's most enduring characters, his most idiosyncratic, and his funniest. They pretty much always played the same song, a tiny little plink-plonk number that gradually grew heavier on the percussion. What they did with it varied widely. One ape might conduct the others with a banana for a baton, and in the course of the song peel and eat it. One might bop another on the head with a meticulously beaten pair of drumsticks. They might smoke cigars or rub elbows or smash dishes. Whatever they did, they kept right on playing in their lumbering, methodical way. People who loved them, and there were many, generally could not explain why. The trio was funny because it was, well, so preposterous, and yet so earnest, so intent on pursuing its silly song in the midst of all these antics. They moved neither like apes nor like people but like mechanized toys, a form of entertainment that Kovacs and many of his generation loved with the residual enthusiasm of childhood. On show after show he used such toys, the more lumbering and awkward their movements the better, and he set them against such pompous and fluid background music as the "1812 Overture." The Nairobi Trio's name, derived from the grand Kenyan city, led some sloppy thinkers to believe that Kovacs was making a racist crack, that he was saying blacks were apes. In fact, however, when The Nairobi Trio talked they used no recognizable black dialect; they sounded faintly like New York City cabbies, or stevedores from the Lower East Side. They were men dressed as apes acting more or less like men, which is to say hairless apes. The race, if any, that they were meant to embarrass was the human race.

A succession of Kovacs vehicles followed. He filled in during summer evenings of 1951 for the children's puppet show *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, appearing under the kiddish title of *Ernie in Kovacsland*. Then he returned to morning work on a Philadelphia-based show called *Kovacs on the Corner*. The show was one of the few in which he had, or played at having, an audience. In a forerunner of Monty Hall's *Let's Make a Deal*, a woman viewer bartered for a knicknack by offering him a wrapped package, which turned out to contain a two-piece set of long underwear decorated with a rose. Kovacs, sounding more than faintly like Groucho, muttered, "Remind me to wrap that up and throw it away when the show is over." He also staged "yoo-hoo time," a parody of the popular show about urban tenement-dwellers, *The Goldbergs*. For variety, the show included, as virtually all his later work would, appearances by a lush-looking, classically trained young singer, "Edythe Adams." (The spelling would change more than once before everyone settled on "Edie.")

The setting for *Kovacs on the Corner* was an urban street, complete, on occasion, with an organ grinder and a monkey. The humor, too, had a stronger immigrant resonance than most of his work. Immigrant humor had reached its expressive peak in vaudeville sketches, which depicted a world gone crazy. The craziness, of course, lay in the impenetrability to outsiders of a New World that seemed perfectly straightforward to those who were running it. Vaudeville evoked all the

apparent illogic of this world—the strange customs, the linguistic runarounds by those in petty authority, the vanity and unaccountability of doctors and lawyers and judges, the cruelty of a society that maintained that ignorance could not be an excuse in the eyes of the law.

Underlying many of the vaudeville gags were confusion, mistrust and, often, a deep anger toward America. Kovacs's humor was rarely so bitter. Most of what he did in a vaudeville vein was more whimsical, as in a reference (on a show aired January 14, 1952) to a girl whose job was to put warts onto pickles. At the start of that same installment Kovacs came out of a "barber shop" all soaped up for shaving, licked at some of the foam, and said accusingly but with a snicker, "They promised me marshmallow." Yet he could be acerbic, as in a sketch from January 23 of that same year: He was abruptly appointed "acting mayor" of his show's little city and promptly embarked on a campaign of vote-buying and corruption as foul as any that ever disgusted the immigrants recruited by Tammany Hall. In the name of America's sacrosanct democracy and free will, Kovacs began plying "citizens" with Cadillacs, Old Grand Dad, and "the secret of the atomic bomb."

This sequence seemed all the more corrosive because it came at the end of an innocuous show dotted with such sophomoric stuff as Kovacs's slapping a piece of bread onto either side of his face and thereby making himself a "ham on rye." (Indeed, up until the snide mayoralty bit, most of the installment had revolved around the uncontroversial theme of sandwiches. In mock homage to the sort of hostess who serves tiny crustless specimens to her ladies' group, Kovacs whittled away at a mound of bread and meat until it was microscopically delicate, then boasted, "There—nobody would say they'd enjoy *that*." Later he put together a submarine sandwich almost the size of a submarine and purported to use it as a harmonica on which to play "Swanee River.")

At this stage Kovacs was still working within the smallest of budgets and with the scrappiest of props. He often made a virtue of necessity by developing a style for his shows which depended on clumsy, all-thumbs drawings; stick-figure cartoons; ill-lettered, handwritten explanatory cards; cutesy salutations ("It's been real") and credits ("Portions of this program have been performed live"); and broad-as-the-Mississippi sight gags (for example, focusing on a bin labeled "trash" which is then picked up by someone closely resembling Ernie Kovacs). This style was further refined, if that is the right word, on *Kovacs Unlimited*, the daytime show for which Kovacs jumped to CBS in April, 1952, the first move in what would become his almost annual network-switching. The new show allowed him to introduce or refine characters that would later be cannibalized by everyone from Johnny Carson to Peter Sellers. The geekiest was a storyteller who sounded like Inspector Clouseau but made rather less sense. Speaking in an easy, earnest, deadpan tone, he asserted, "Most of the children who watch television speak only French or Latin," and on that basis proceeded to tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood in a polyglot muddle no one could follow without a road map.

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The daytime show lasted almost two years, Kovacs's longest network tenure ever. CBS also gave him a prime time show, a fully sixty minutes every week, which was billed as "the short-

est hour on television." It was at least among the shortest-lived. Scheduled opposite Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater* on NBC, *The Ernie Kovacs Show* opened at the end of December, 1952, and sputtered out by mid-April. Kovacs's daytime show was dropped in January, 1954; that spring he jumped to the DuMont network, not a smart career move even by his impulsive standard. One episode that survives is known as "the rehearsal" because it was a tryout for a further network run. It was a fiasco, and it contains some of the most grating and obvious stuff Kovacs ever produced. He may have known that himself. At the outset he said to the audience, "We're having the show kinescoped tonight—that's guts!" Blotchy and at times almost indiscernible, the tape image is not quite poor enough to drown out the several sequences featuring sex-kittenish women. Or an endless "interview" in which Kovacs uses primitive tape-recorder technology to play games with everyday sound. Or an excruciating impersonation by Edie of Marilyn Monroe. Or an even more inane takeoff of Edward R. Murrow by Ernie. (Dismal, it nonetheless ends adroitly: A tight closeup of an ashtray shows it filled with dozens of stubbed-out cigarettes, a barbed reflection of Murrow's stagy puffing, using the fumes for atmosphere and stabbing with the lighted smokes for emphasis.)

By late 1955 Kovacs was ready to jump networks again, this time back to NBC, which gave him a daytime show and then, the next year, a variety slot in prime time. His material, which had always been unsettling, began to become downright macabre. One show featured an extensive sketch about a "witch doctor's kit," ostensibly on sale in "Nairobi, Africa." That seemed an almost willfully defiant response to those who found racist undertones in The Nairobi Trio. Among the kit's purported contents were "a voodoo doll," funeral services gift certificates, ground glass in both coffee percolator and drip pot sizes, a volume of poetry from "ax murderers all over the world," and the pièce de résistance: "instant curare." Kovacs also offered distasteful gags about natives and headshrinkers. Pursuing an apparent policy of outraging audiences just for ratings' sake, Kovacs at one point urged that children electrocute their fathers for refusing to raise the kids' allowances. He spotlighted a strong man who vowed to hold back charging horses and who was, as a result, torn to pieces. That grim scene was part of yet another Kovacs parody, this time of a rather namby-pamby DuMont/ABC series called *You Asked for It*. The original version responded to audience requests by displaying the likes of Good Samaritans, acrobatics, and animal acts. Kovacs called the venue for his vile dismembering *You Asked to See It*, and thereby strongly hinted agreement with P.T. Barnum's cynical contention that no one ever lost money underestimating the taste of the American people.

Despite such violence, this NBC series is noteworthy for having introduced some of Kovacs's best visual imagery. His budget and technical facilities were at last beginning to catch up with his imagination, so that audiences could see these vignettes: Kovacs not only goes out on a limb but saws it off—and the tree trunk falls while the limb remains standing; he shoots a hole in his forehead and puffs cigar smoke through it; he pours water upwards; he shaves off a bushy beard with one touch of a razor; he shoots a cap pistol and thereby topples the baddies in an old TV movie; a woman immersed in a bubble bath sees a periscope rising in the middle of her tub; the RCA symbol, a dog, hovers next to a fire hydrant; in another sequence, a presumably much-sprayed hydrant is seen squirting back at a dog. Kovacs asked the reasonable question, "Does alphabet soup come in other

languages?" He used in one sketch a countdown from sixty seconds that irresistibly reminds present-day viewers of the logo of *60 Minutes*. And he showed off a new character, Mr. Question Man, a forerunner to Johnny Carson's Karnac the Magnificent. Mr. Question Man was more idiot than savant. Asked what Orville Wright, Eli Whitney, and Thomas Alva Edison had in common, he mused a while and then proclaimed with an air of discovery, "Not one of them was born on a Tuesday." In response to a letter from the panicky family of victims taken by particularly bloodthirsty kidnappers, he said with terrifying assurance, "These men are bluffing. Just hold out for a few days more and they'll know you mean business." To a quick algebraic problem, he answered, "What goes with x? Ham, or possibly bacon." Thrown an astronomic poser by "Ralph Nebbish, a schoolboy in Metuchen, New Jersey," Mr. Question Man just glowered in silence until the announcer said the show had run out of time. At about this period, Kovacs was drafted to fill in for Steve Allen on the *Tonight* show twice a week, because Allen was in addition competing head-to-head with Ed Sullivan on Sundays. Kovacs claimed that Allen's writers consistently ripped off his material, minimally altering sketch ideas and sometimes lifting laugh lines whole. Allen denies knowing of any plagiarism but doesn't categorically rule it out. Because both men worked for NBC, their writers might have gotten away with cheating, and because of the amount of air time each performer was filling, the staffs may well have needed to "borrow." In any case, Allen's verbal humor remained superior but his visual humor never equalled Kovacs's ingenuity.

Although Kovacs was a star, neither he nor Edie insisted on much glamour. They could either look handsome or hideous as the sketch demanded.

Although Kovacs was a star, neither he nor Edie insisted on much glamour. They could look either handsome or hideous, their features either refined and noble or coarse and basely sensual as the sketch demanded. They played more pratfalls than romance (Edie frequently appeared skimpily clad, and in one of the 1956 shows her dress appeared to fall off) and what romantic scenes they had were not generally played opposite each other. Although the show was undeniably theirs, especially his, there was very little cult of personality. Indeed, what eventually became one of Kovacs's best-known gags was a blast at just such star vanity: A woman in an evening gown sashays in, à la Loretta Young, the leading actress–hostess of the day, and each time she enters, something goes wrong. Her dress catches, the door won't stay closed, her fingers get caught in the piano she caresses grandly, or she gets a cream pie full in the face. Kovacs's goal was to make the idea, the joke, become the star. The performers were not the emotional center of the show, they were just the vehicle for telling whatever jokes could not be delivered by purely mechanical means.

It was at this point in his career that Kovacs made the great leap forward, *Eugene*, and that show epitomized his desire to downplay the performers. Although there was a character called Eugene, and Kovacs played him, the show was not about Eugene. It was about the lunatic world he found himself in, a place in which even gravity had gone haywire. Superficially, Eugene resembled Jackie Gleason's The Poor Soul, a wide-eyed sufferer, a butt of humor. But the real purpose of each Gleason skit was to make the viewer admire himself for being a kind and loyal friend to this friendless jerk. Kovacs focused on the objects Eugene saw

and was betrayed by, not on his pathetic responses.

It would have made Kovacs uneasy to be discussed in philosophic terms, but much of the imagery in *Eugene* comments on the essential nature of language and symbol, the devices of art and indeed of all thought. Kovacs draws a light switch on a wall and turns on the light; he sketches a lamp and it becomes a three-dimensional, illuminated floor lamp, as if by magic; the image is identical to the thing itself. He cartoons a door on a wall, then tears a hole through the apparently solid wall and walks through: The imposition of a symbol not only turns it into reality but changes the reality of already substantial things. Walking down a corridor, Eugene passes a statue of beauty, which appears to move and beckon him; he returns to make contact, and not only his expectations but also the statue itself shatter and fall to the ground. A moose head mounted on a wall turns out to have a body on the other side of the wall; the head comes to life and takes a bit out of Eugene's hat. When Eugene looks at a "dirty book," a framed reproduction of the Mona Lisa snickers. When he opens a volume of *Camille*, it coughs. Over and over, the show commented for a mass audience on such age-old scholarly questions as the link between the literal and the abstract.

Of course there were earthier gags as well. But they, too, played on big questions that reverberate in the psyche. In an auditory essay on the embarrassments caused by everyday body noises—stomach-gurgling, belching, flatulence, and the like—Kovacs made the sounds as fierce as a cannonade, as loud as a waterfall. Perhaps the most clever sequence involved setting a table and chair at a slant but re-positioning the camera to match the angle so that everything appeared to be level. Thus when Eugene opened a lunchbox and began to eat, olives and fruit and eventually milk and the thermos it came in would all slide down the surface and end up in the lap of a stuffy-looking man. The skit played simultaneously on people's fears of appearing clumsy or ill-mannered and their belief that when they did goof, it was because the physical world or the fates were conspiring against them.

Eugene proved Kovacs was the most creative man in television. Ironically, it also marked the temporary end of his television career. In 1957 Kovacs left New York and headed for Hollywood, where he devoted four years to making mostly forgotten films. The movie industry offered him a chance at more money, greater prestige, a more relaxed life-style. It allowed him to rub shoulders with the likes of Billy Wilder (at whose home Kovacs partied on the night he died). But movies took Kovacs away from what he did uniquely. He was not to return to his real *métier*, television, until the final months of his life.

Three joys for Kovacs fans made 1961 a year of delight. He restaged *Eugene*. He made a batch of commercials for his new sponsor, Dutch Masters, that were as creative as any of the sequences in the shows they supported. He also undertook a monthly series of comedy specials for ABC, his final network. The re-mounting of *Eugene* replaced *The Flintstones* for a night. It is at once sad and funny now to hear an announcer thank the sponsor of *The Flintstones* for yielding the time, and to reflect on the gulf in sophistication between Kovacs's natural audience and the children-of-all ages who would have turned out for the buffooneries of *The Flintstones*. That half-hour featured some of the Dutch Masters commercials. In the best, Pocahantas struggles to persuade her father to spare the life of Kovacs, trussed and ready for beheading. He sweats and strains as the hours stretch on. When at last he is released, with the aid, of

course, of a cigar, there is a stunning, surreal moment: He points theatrically to the moon, which then becomes a spotlight tracing down his back to illumine the text of a further pitch for Dutch Masters. At the end of the show, the names of the "cast" were superimposed on a plaster cast encasing a human leg. The show also featured a complicated sequence in which a woman was imperiled by an ax, a circular saw, darts and other dangers; finally she was threatened by what turned out to be a toy train. Once again, even in a slot normally devoted to a show for little kiddies, Kovacs was demonstrating that terror is essential to humor.

The ABC specials featured many of Kovacs's familiar gimmicks, his favorite snatches of music, his established characters and gags. But they were more than a sentimental journey—they were a distillation of his art. In the May installment, a man went into a darkroom and emerged looking like a photo negative; it was a quintessential Kovacs image for a basic Kovacs theme: man's inability to control his environment. Similarly, in another sequence an artist sketched a man in a Dutch Boy suit, then decided he didn't like his work and erased the image's face; he looked over and saw, in a further instance of nature-run-amok prevailing over human intention, that the erasure had caused the human model's head to disappear. In other bits, Kovacs's doomed-hostess character tossed a flower onto a piano and it crashed through the floor; rhythmic music dictated the piston-like eating patterns of a family at the table and of a Chinese man consuming rice with chopsticks; these were still more instances of man not in control of himself and his surroundings, of physical logic gone astray. The show also included one long, consciously arty sequence, a major departure of style in that it ended with neither a joke nor an emotional payoff. Instead, this wordless musical sequence, set on a street lined with tenements and full of disconnected, faintly surreal images, just traced the menace of night and the exhausted relief of morning. The closing credits included such cracks as "Associate Producer (this is like *stealing* money) Milt Hoffman," and denoted the show as "a production of an El Cheapo subsidiary." This installment also included an airing of the best-loved of the Dutch Masters commercials, a cowboy shootout in which Kovacs peppers a rival with bullets who nonetheless remains standing. As the tension eases, the apparently untouched foe lights up a cigar, whereupon puffs of smoke emerge from holes throughout his torso.

In September of 1961, Kovacs aired a show with a running gag of a Houdini figure who apparently drowns while attempting an underwater escape. His loyal entourage stand by through day and night, week and month, and gradually set up house on the pierfront, waiting patiently for him to emerge. In the same show Kovacs balanced this image of ever more poignant faith and loyalty with a mirror-image recurrent gag of growing animosity and violence between a track runner and a starter with a pistol. Their confrontation finally resulted in murder. Elsewhere in the show, he introduced a self-peeling banana. (Eventually, in a cross-fertilization of gimmicks, the starter's pistol exploded in perfect quarters and looked just like a peeled banana.) He offered a pure symphony of movement by inanimate objects—ice melting on a griddle, a birdlike figure with a thermometer shaking and then wilting as the heat rose. He moved the pseudoscientific style of commercials of the era by interpolating one to promote putting corks in bottles, versus leaving them lidless, as a way to prevent spillage.

The October show offered a Dracula who bit a girl's neck and broke his own

teeth. A man who was bored by a Little Red Riding Hood story shot his TV and a corpse sagged through the screen. An ad offering an "invisible girl friend" showed a woman's form draped in clothing, but no face or body could be seen; then the vision undressed and nothing at all lingered, except a salacious memory. A hospital operating room sequence to throbbing music, as scary as anything ever staged by Alfred Hitchcock, turned out to be a turkey-carving ceremony at a dinner attended by a flotilla of doctors and nurses. Kovacs, who seemed obsessed with plumbing, returned to the ever-reliable bathtub gag, and this time the woman clad only in soap suds watched as a man, a woman, a child, and a dog all climbed out of her tub, each properly dressed and apparently not wet. To mock TV's obsession with reducing sex and violence, Kovacs envisioned Peter Rabbit as a gangster and Louisa May Alcott's Little Women as heavy boozers. The script included the line, "After a hard day in a deserted garage chopping down cops, I like to be sure I get my nourishment."

The last show that Kovacs ever made aired posthumously, just a week after his death. Commercials were eliminated, even though the Dutch Masters pieces were among his finest work, and an old Nairobi Trio sketch was interpolated to fill the time. The show indicated no presentiment of disaster but it admirably summed up the reasons why so many revered Kovacs. He mocked sentimental story-telling with a sequence of a girl offered the choice between a poor but faithful young lover and a rich villain who wiggled a diamond necklace in front of her; the villain won. Kovacs indulged anew his fascination with technology by drawing a line that turned into an oscilloscope line, then demonstrated the effects of sound on that squiggle; the last image showed the oscilloscope line reduced to a puddle of white fluid on the floor. In one of his best skewerings of the pretention in modern art, Kovacs introduced a farm woman as a noted primitivist painter, a sort of young Grandma Moses. She showed off her portraits of a silo, a newborn calf, a hoedown; they were pure geometric abstractions, circles and triangles and wavy lines. Capping the joke, she said in her folksy twang, "I guess it's silly putting obvious titles on them." Another sketch in the same show explained that a Jean Arp-style sculptor had put a hole through the middle of a statue of a woman's torso, not to convey any deep meaning, but by clumsy accident. In a characteristic blend of the ridiculous and the sublime, Kovacs included a quick sketch about a sink cleanser that shattered sinks; he thereby simultaneously mocked commercials and touched on the deep conviction of every generation that life is continually falling apart. The image renewed his message that there is a tyranny of things—that objects require care and then disintegrate from it, invariably proving their owners somehow wrong. The same theme cropped up in visions of a guitarist electrocuted, of a laboring Betsy Ross getting word that Alaska has been added to the Union, of a hula hoopist being split in half by the heretofore harmless toy.

The show ended with a brief and apt memorial tribute: "He was a rugged individualist, a creative genius, but he was always ready to listen and slow to judge." Kovacs's career ended, however aptly and honorably, far too soon. He should have had decades of life. He should have had the chance to exploit computer video technology, which would have delighted and challenged him (although one suspects he would have complained that the new whizbangs made everything too easy.) He should have been able to take advantage of the new candor about sex and race and politics, indeed almost everything, that improved television in the 1970s and 1980s. He should have had the chance to work in color. Some people think Kovacs might never have

made it in the modern TV era, that his work was too costly, too idiosyncratic, too special to have been trusted by network executives and perhaps too cerebral for current audiences. Even in his own time he was a class more than a mass phenomenon, best understood only by the very intelligentsia he mocked. Still, Kovacs was probably the best mind that has yet been drawn to create television. His legacy is at once glorious and too brief. ■

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VIEWPOINT

"To acquire the independence it needs, PBS must have more money and insulation. One possibility is to adopt a small excise tax on the sales of radios and TV sets, putting the proceeds into a tamper-proof trust fund. If PBS didn't have to worry about where its next meal would come from, it would be free to cook up a more interesting array of public affairs programs. This freedom would assure that member stations, as well as independents, would have the means to produce works of high artistic and journalistic merit.

"Having a certain amount of financial independence to start with, PBS could then ask corporations to contribute to a general fund for public broadcasting, rather than underwrite a particular show. Without a wall between the politicians, the corporations, and the broadcasters, public television will continue to fail in its mission to provide alternative programming in the critical area of public affairs."

—S.L. Harrison,
The Washington Monthly

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"WHITHER THE CONGRESS AND THE SUPREME COURT?": THE TELEVISION NEWS PORTRAYAL OF AMERICAN NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

BY RICHARD DAVIS

Does network television news tell us too much about the presidency and not enough about other aspects of American national government? A recent ABC News poll suggests people are beginning to think so. Forty-one percent of the public felt the networks offered too much coverage of the presidency, while only 13 percent thought there was too little. Conversely, thirty-eight percent thought not enough coverage was given the Congress while only 17 percent thought there was too much.

What has taken place in network television news coverage of American national politics in the past decade or so that would account for this? Evidence suggests that the public's perception of overexposure of the presidency is quite accurate. The presidency is news. Simultaneously, the other institutions of national government—the Congress and the Supreme Court—have been seriously slighted by the networks.

Television news coverage of American national government is woefully out of balance. Moreover, network television news is unique in the extent of attention to the presidency and slighting of the Congress and the Supreme Court. I believe that this institutional imbalance has affected the development of the national public policy agenda by favoring issues the presidents want to discuss, such as Nicaragua contra aid, tax cuts, and education. Moreover, the imbalance may have altered the public's expectations concerning what roles the presidency, the Congress, and the Supreme Court are supposed to play in American national politics and government.

Recently, I conducted a content analysis comparing television and newspaper coverage of the presidency, the Congress, and the Supreme Court. Through simple random sampling and a stratified sampling procedure designed to obtain a sufficient number of Supreme Court-related stories, 672 news stories from three news media were obtained and coded. These three media—*CBS Evening News* (171 stories), *Los Angeles Times* (313 stories), and the *Syracuse* (New York) *Post-Standard* (188 stories)—represented a network evening news program, an elite daily, and a small metropolitan daily.

One network was used to represent

all three since previous content studies have demonstrated that the content of the three networks' news programs is highly similar. The sample of stories drew from weekday evening news programs and daily issues of the two newspapers over a time period extending from 1969 to 1983. Federal election years (even-numbered years) were omitted to isolate "normal" years uncontaminated by the forces of electoral campaigns and news media campaign coverage. This extended time period was employed to avoid the criticism that the data was time-bound, i.e. limited in application due to the confluence of particular events unique to a more limited time span such as

Bloated Coverage of the Presidency

I found that network television news of American national government was heavily dominated with coverage of the presidency. Sixty-three percent of all the CBS stories on the three institutions were identified as stories primarily about the presidency. (Thanks to the "beat" system of reporting where a network assigns a reporter to a certain Washington beat—White House, Congress, etc.—the identification of a primary institution in a story was rarely a problem.) By comparison, in only one of three TV news stories was Congress the major institution and only four percent of the stories were primarily about the Supreme Court.

Moreover, that dominance of the presidency appeared to be on the increase during this period while the Congress lagged further behind. The number of presidency stories on television news jumped by more than a third between 1969–75 and 1977–83. Meanwhile, the Congress, like the Cheshire cat, began to fade from view. The number of Congress stories fell by nearly half.

Another study of network news coverage of Congress, conducted by political scientists Norman Ornstein and Michael J. Robinson, also found frequency of news stories of Congress had fallen by more than half between 1975 and 1985. This precipitous decline in the airing of stories about Congress seems remarkable given the explosion of Congressional press relations staff and facilities and the ready, almost daily, availability, since 1978, of a sizeable amount of visuals and sound "bites" through the live cable system broadcasting of the sessions of the House of Representatives, via C-Span.

Not only was the presidency the dominant actor in the majority of television news stories, but it also appeared prominently in the rest of the stories as well. Three of four Congress stories on *CBS News* also included references to the presidency. That finding may come as no surprise since the Congress and the presidency share responsibility for issue resolution. However, what is surprising is the lack of reciprocity of mention of Congress in stories of the presidency. Only one in three presidency stories also made reference to the Congress. News stories of the presidency enjoyed a stand-alone quality. While much of what the Congress did was reported in reference to the presidency, the opposite was not true.

The dominance of the presidency is more than a television news phenomenon; it is also true of the daily print media. However, network television news exceeded the print media in the extent of presidency dominance. Fifty-seven percent of the *Times* stories and one-half of the *Post-Standard's* were presidency stories. While the Congress was the focus of one-third of the *Times* stories, the *Post-Standard* featured the Congress in four of ten stories. The Supreme Court was the primary institution in ten and eight percent of the stories of the *Times* and the *Post-Standard* respectively.

The *Post-Standard's* greater cover-

age of the Congress in relation to the presidency may be indicative of a conscious editorial decision, in the face of limited news space, to balance wire stories of the presidency with those of the Congress. The *Times* with more ample space allocation for national news perhaps could still provide quality coverage of Congress with one-third of the news pie. However, *CBS Evening News*, with time constraints more similar to the situation of the *Post-Standard*, appeared to ignore balance.

It should be noted, at least in passing, that this study is limited to the evening news. One could argue that the imbalance is even greater when televised addresses are included since they heavily favor the president.

The two dailies were also slightly less likely to tilt towards the presidency over the years. The stories of the presidency in the *Times* rose by 29 percent and the number of Congress stories fell by 38 percent between 1969–75 and 1977–83. In the *Post-Standard*, the change was even less marked: Congress stories fell by only 28 percent and the number of presidency stories remained essentially unchanged.

Presuming that the length of stories did not change significantly, the conclusion can be drawn that the network evening news increased coverage of the presidency and decreased coverage of the Congress, and did so at a rate more dramatic than that of the print dailies.

One could argue that the explanation lies not with the network news, but with the presidency and the Congress. Perhaps with Watergate and the presidencies of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, the presidency became more newsworthy during the 1970s and the early 1980s. Though obviously these years were characterized by dramatic events in recent presidential history, the argument is flawed.

The disparity between the two types of news media—print and broadcast—suggests the networks have probably made conscious decisions to focus even greater attention on the presidency. The office holds various advantages for television news. The embodiment of the institution in one individual offers a greater ease in coverage. The single individual is easily identifiable.

A comprehensive story of presidential activity and action is simpler for television to portray than an attempt to report daily Congressional activity. These factors weigh heavily given the stringent constraints of time. And the visual component of presidential coverage—a single, recognizable individual, the clarity of a solitary voice, the backdrop of the White House—are more aligned with television news imperatives than the characteristics of a more fragmented Congress.

Congress: A Reactor

Not only is coverage of Congress by the network evening news diminutive compared to news attention to the presidency, and even shrinking, but when the Congress is covered it is usually as a reactive body to the presidency. Christopher Matthews, press secretary to former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill, summed it up succinctly: "We're the hamburger helper to the White House story."

The Congress story often serves as a response to the presidency—a defense or refutation of presidential news. A presidential speech, decision, activity, or appointment prompts reporters on Capitol Hill to seek immediate pro-and-con Congressional response. The connection, though, need not be that explicit. When news coverage shows Congress tackling presidential policy interests (i.e. tax reform, military budgets, Contra aid etc.), the Congress is still acting as a reactor to the presidency; it is the president's policy interests under discussion. To employ a theatrical analogy, the story line followed is one with the starring role

played by the president and the plot consisting of the fate of the administration. Though the president need not be on the stage at all times, for the other supporting players, especially the Congress, the drama of the performance remains the fate of the president's program. Congress tries to thwart the will of the president.

The plot thickens as the drama unfolds with network reporters posing the cliff-hanger questions: Will the Congress acquiesce with the president winning still another victory? Or will the Congress muster enough courage and vote down the president's plan? Even the rejection of the president's initiatives does not then change the story-line because the Congress usually does not possess the ability to replace the president's agenda with its own.

Though the reactive role is limiting for Congress, an even worse fate could be in store. The decline in separate Congress stories may suggest either the Congressional response now is more likely to be integrated into the presidency story or the Congress won't even be able to act as a reactor.

The Supreme Court: A Bit Part

Quite frankly, television news coverage of the U.S. Supreme Court is highly sketchy or, in most cases, nonexistent. However, the problem is not unique to broadcast news. A *Journalism Quarterly* article describing a study of newspaper coverage of the Court concluded that the *New York Times* failed to cover 33 of 145 decisions during a single term of the court and, more typically for American print dailies, the *Detroit News* did not report on 70 percent of the decisions. A study of newsmagazine coverage, also discussed in *Journalism Quarterly*, determined that only 20 percent of the court's decisions were being reported.

The findings of my study confirmed these earlier conclusions of sketchiness of news coverage. Of 32 randomly selected *CBS Evening News* broadcasts (with an average of stories per broadcast ranging from 14 to 20), only one Supreme Court story appeared out of a pool ranging from 448 to 640 news stories. The frequency of print media stories was not dramatically dissimilar. Nine stories in the *Times* and five in the *Post-Standard* wer obtained through simple random sampling.

Even when Court stories were broadcast, they suffered from lack of substantive content, especially concerning the Court's decisions. Most Court stories on CBS reported the announcement of a decision, and briefly related the theme of the decision, the numerical vote, and the names of the dissenting justices; usually, they included little actual description of the decision. Stories were choppy as the reporter usually provided a brief description of the decision, but then moved on to provide some interpretation of the decision and include reaction from various interested parties—all within 90 seconds.

Air time devoted to reactions, usually those of interest group representatives, almost always exceeded time alloted to the decision itself. Result: Viewers learn much more about the reaction of other people to the decision that they do about the decision itself.

In defense of the press, and broadcasting, the networks' coverage of the Supreme Court can not be wholly attributed to the news process. The infrequency of news coverage can also be attributed to the position of the Court as a national political institution. The Court distances itself from the relationship between the presidency and the Congress. The court normally handles issues long after the other two institutions, and after the issue has lost the interest of journalists. Further, because the Court speaks only once on a case, the justices of the Court re-

fuse to engage in "action-reaction" which is so endemic to news reporting. The infrequency of Court stories also is a function of the Court's own press policies.

The Court has purposely adopted an aloof posture towards the news media. Justices have readily joined in this institutional reserve. The court's deliberative process is closed to the public and the media.

When reporters occasionally succeed in puncturing the secrecy of the Court's conferences, as ABC News reporter Tim O'Brien, especially, has done several times, the justices respond by tightening security and limiting further access. Justices rarely provide interviews, and even more rarely televised interviews.

Recently, some justices have appeared for television interviews. In 1986, Justice William Brennan was interviewed on the *Today* program on the occasion of his 80th birthday. While he was still chief justice, Warren Burger appeared on *Nightline* and, at his retirement, held an extensive televised interview with Bill Moyers. However, these examples are dramatic exceptions to the rule of avoidance of the media, television in particular.

The networks, however, do not escape blameless. Though the task of the network reporter in obtaining interviews and visuals is more difficult at the Court, the job of obtaining information is not. Oral arguments, conducted throughout the year, are open to the press. The Court issues a mountain of written decisions made available to reporters during the course of a Court term. The press office even distributes supplementary materials to help reporters understand decisions. The announcement of decisions, especially at the end of a term, is spread across several days to avoid overloading journalists with important decisions.

The networks don't cover the Court extensively not because of lack of information, but because reporters and editors don't like the information they receive in the form they receive it. If the justices will not provide thirty-second news "bites" and visuals of judicial sparring with attorneys or each other, the networks ignore the Court's activities.

Even when the Court is covered, the actual decision of the Court is given short shrift in favor of instantaneous reaction from special interest groups. On network news, the Court is covered sketchily, if at all, because the highly-reasoned, well-crafted decisions are dismissed with two or three brief sentences in favor of interviews with interest group representatives who offer hasty responses to decisions they have likely not even had a chance to read.

The burden for inadequate coverage of the Court rests primarily not with the justices or the nature of the Court, but with network reporters and/or editors and producers who do not report adequately on the Court and its decisions, because the Court's operations do not fit the needs of the broadcast media. Should the Court adjust to the needs of the networks or should the networks adjust to the institution? I would much prefer the latter, especially since the former would likely result in no better and perhaps an even worse environment for the public's understanding of court decisions and the Court's ability to function in the resolution of public issues.

Does It Matter?

A common reaction to this news of presidential overexposure and neglect of Congress and the Supreme Court may well be: so what? Beyond a greater public awareness of presidential activity—from a presidential operation to an internal White House staff squabble—does it really make any difference? I argue that it does. The imbalance in coverage of American government affects the nature of the national policy agenda, favoring the

president's policy interests and may alter public expectations about American national government.

The overexposure of the presidency is the overexposure of the president's policy proposals versus those of other political institutions such as the Congress and the Supreme Court. National political figures vie to interpret the public will concerning the direction of the nation and define what issues will be discussed. The struggle for the nation's policy agenda is a struggle for power. Political Scientist E.E. Schattschneider has argued that "He who determines what politics is about runs the country because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power."

Excessive coverage of the presidency by television news offers the president a signal opportunity to press his policy agenda. The first year, especially, is marked by successive stories of the president's policy initiatives. But even during the remainder of the term, the president's policy tends to dominate. Teddy Roosevelt called the office of president a "bully pulpit." Television news has transformed the office into a national bully pulpit with an enormous potential reach for the president.

This is not to say that presidential coverage necessarily translates into legislative success for the president. Critical news reports may even hamper chances for policy enactment. However, thanks to the overabundance of news coverage, the president still possesses a powerful tool for affecting what issues should be discussed when his policy interests constitute the dominant theme of television news content about American national government.

News media preoccupation with the presidency also may contain implications for public expectations towards the roles of the presidency and the Congress. More intensive exposure of the president, coupled with decreased attention to the Congress, may distort public awareness of the presidency's capabilities to enact policy and simultaneously dampen public regard for, and expectations towards, the role of Congress in the resolution of public policy issues. Increasingly, the public may look to the president as the chief problem-solver of the nation's ills and minimize, or even ignore, the substantial role of the Congress and the necessity of presidential-Congressional cooperation in the policymaking process.

Public expectations of presidential capability, when not based on actual constitutional or, more significantly, political strength, are doomed to lead to ultimate public disappointment in the presidency. The president enters office with high public prospects for achievement and usually leaves with public disappointment over actual performance.

I believe television news emphasis on the presidency contributes to that cycle of raised and dashed hopes by saturating the public with extensive coverage of presidential doings and, while maintaining the searchlight on the president, detailing the president's actual, invariably more limited performance in office. The contrast between hopes and reality serves to diminish the presidency. Although Ronald Reagan, until recently, seemed to escape this fate, his experience, when contrasted with those of his predecessors, is more exception than rule.

Television news moreover, nationalizes policy discussion, by its nature as a national medium, and corresponds to the only national political institution with a national electoral base—the presidency. Television news moves policy to the presidency and places responsibility for policy primarily on the shoulders of the president. No president in our system of government possesses the kind of power the television news portrayal expects him to have. Eventually, the frailities of the presidency become ap-

parent. But the result is a rejection of the incumbent in favor of another rather than the replacement of the unrealistic network news portrayal.

Changing the News

I recommend television news executives seriously consider altering the newsgathering process to correct this imbalance in news coverage of American national government. Alterations should be undertaken throughout the newsgathering process, from the allocation of resources to the final editorial and production decisions before airtime. It is not for me to dictate possible changes, but merely to make news professionals aware of the results of their decisions and the need for change.

The nature of the televised news image of American national government matters greatly in a democratic society where public participation serves as the keystone of political legitimacy, and where television has become a major mode of linkage between the governors and the governed. ■

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"QUOTE UNQUOTE"

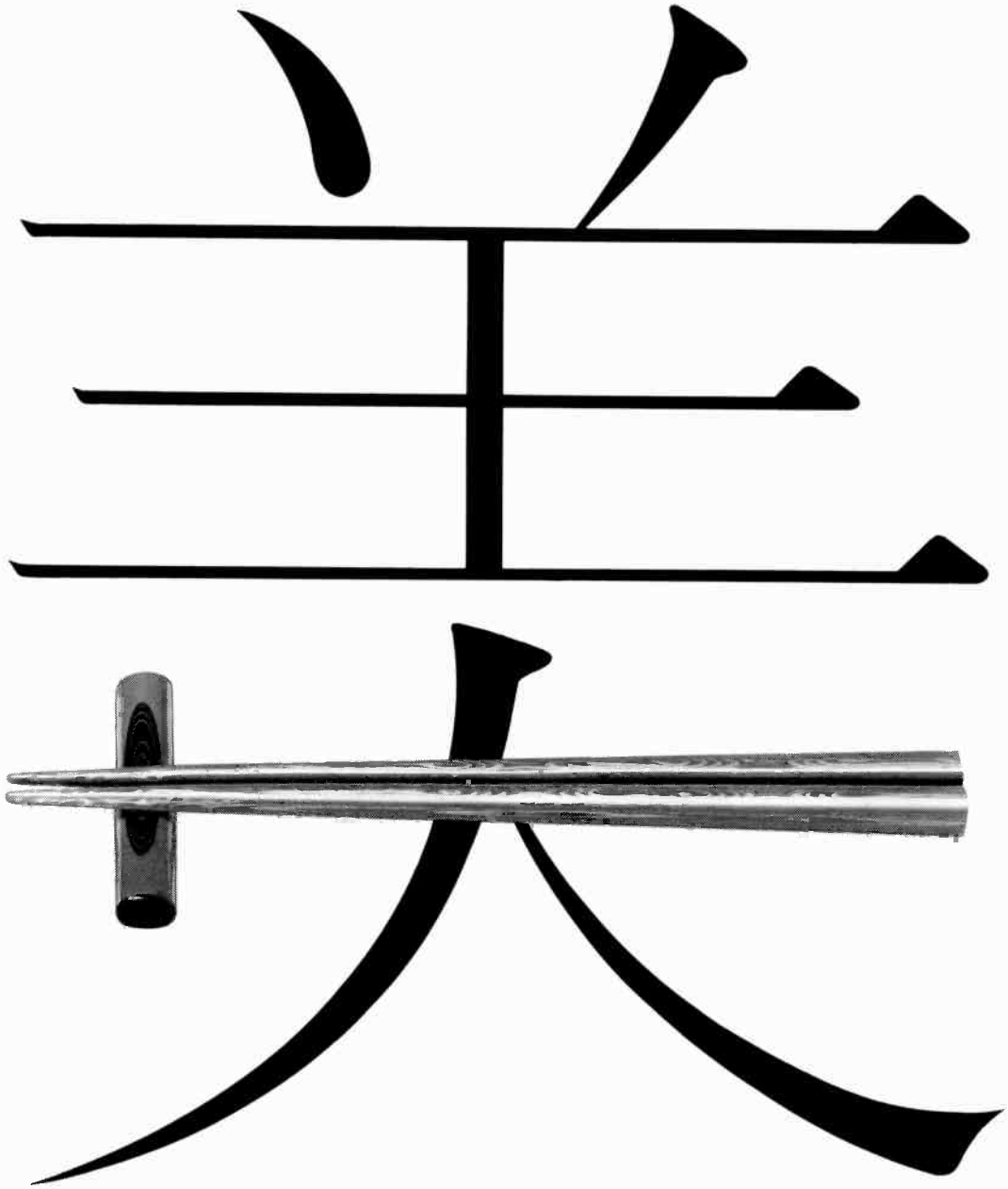
Game-show Skills

"One of my favorite pastimes when I'm out of work, or otherwise relaxing, is watching game-show contestants. I like to see them get excited, especially when they win. 'How is it possible that all game-show contestants, when they win, jump and get excited the same way?' rhetorically asks Erik Barnouw, author of the TV trilogy A History of Broadcast in the United States, *and TV viewer emeritus.*

"Prof. Barnouw wonders if the contestants' reaction is attributable to: (1) genes, or (2) an acquired environmental attitude, as behavioral scientists, such as B.F. Skinner, say?

"Or do they go to a jumping and clap-clapping school of animated contestants, where they train these people to be so animated?"

—Marvin Kitman,
Newsday



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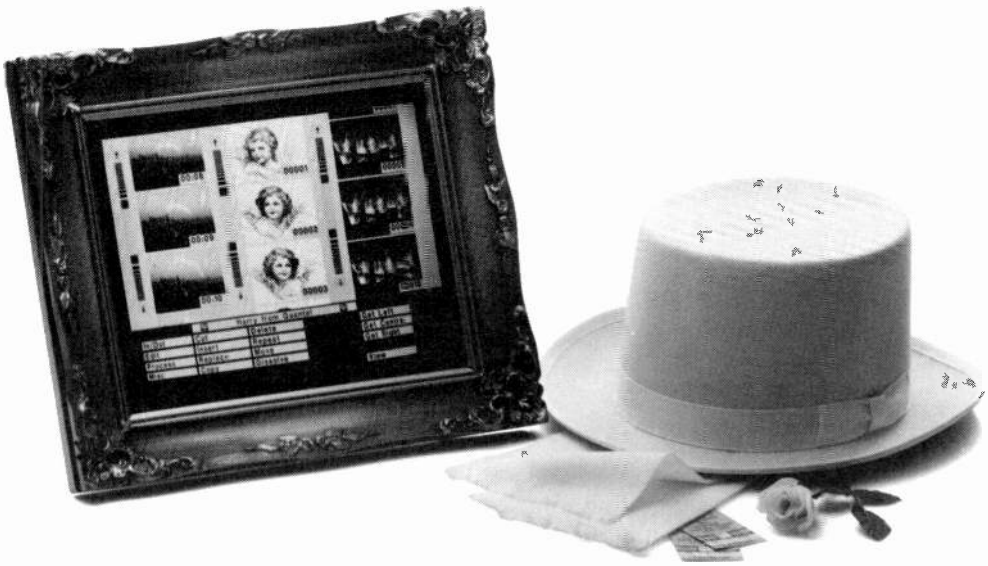

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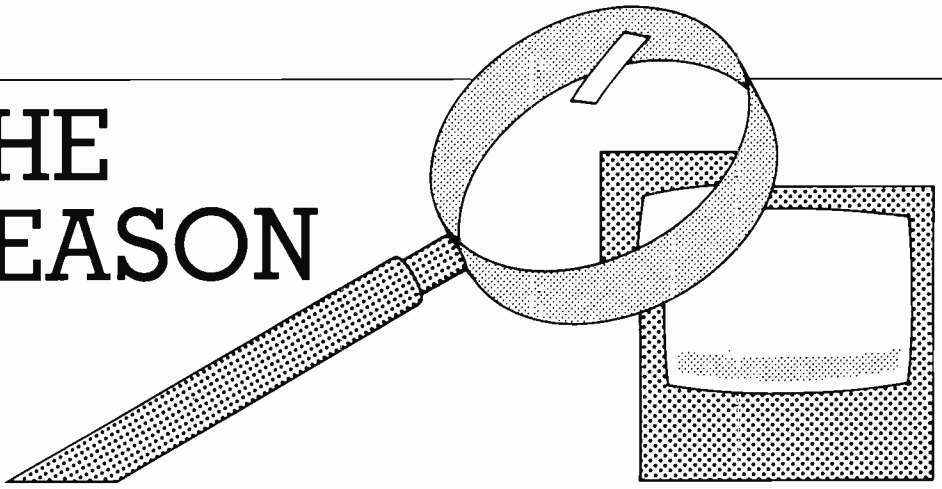

BY ARTHUR UNGER

The 1986 television season started off with the usual corporate ambivalence—the three commercial networks were offering 24 new series . . . hopefully, nervously, tentatively. Eight from NBC, 7 from CBS, 9 from ABC.

"Come Home To NBC" said NBC as Grant Tinker made arrangements to leave home; "Share The Spirit" said CBS disspiritedly; "Together" said ABC, in the process of falling apart.

But the normal Nervous Nelliness of the presentation of the new series to agencies and critics was actually upfront bravado, a last-chance show of machismo because everybody suspected the real truth: the big excitement of the season ahead was not going to take place on the television screens anyway—it was to be enacted in the boardrooms of the networks.

There, experienced broadcasting executives were already playing hide-and-seek with bottom-line-accountants calculating by the New Network Math: 1200 personel times one corporate takeover = 800 personel. Or less.

NBC's new Chief Executive Officer Robert Wright, fresh from his General Electric duties, and seemingly determined to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory for first-place NBC, suggested an across-the-board budget cut of 5%, an employee-checkoff political action committee and, as to innovative programming, had the grand idea for an on-air auction show selling, perhaps, gold chains or GE refrigerators.

CapCities/ABC head Thomas Murphy and CBS CEO Laurence Tisch also concentrated on budget cutting as their way of improving their network's dire financial outlook for the years ahead. Tisch's method of reassuring staff was to call them by their first names, assure them he was a great admirer of their accomplishments, only at $50 million per year less for news as he put those accomplishments on the market. Aging Bill Paley, wringing his hands nervously, presented a ghostly figure of past excellence, constantly reminding newcomers that CBS was once great and could still be great again as CBS began to take on the appearance of Woolworth's masquerading as Bergdorf's.

All the financial studies showed that the future is dimming for broadcast television, brightening for cable. Maybe not as fast as had been predicted in the past, but certainly beginning to happen. Viewing audiences are slowly but surely moving downward. VCR's, already eating into movie admissions, were beginning to affect TV audience ratings in unexpected ways—viewers were recording programs, then neglecting to delete the commercials so the advertisers were not as upset as they were expected to be . . . yet. But, on the whole, advertisers were also beginning to

recognize that the numbers and demographics were beginning to favor other media, special kinds of buys, a new look at the marketplace. Networks started to panic and began cutting costs now in anticipation of hard times three years ahead, a self-fulfilling activities which can only serve to speed up the prophesies.

Suddenly, the accountants were discovering that network news programs are not very profitable. Ever since *60 Minutes* did news programs the unknowing disservice of becoming a profit center for CBS News (around $100 million per year in profit) the money men have been lured by the smell of potential profits in the newsrooms, forgetting that network news has always been a prestige image-maker for networks. News has always been recognized as a public service part of broadcasting which paid back the public just a bit for the networks' right to utilize the limited number of airwaves which belong to the public without paying a fair rental for them. Now that has gone by the board and the profit race for TV news is on. Fewer technicians and cutting corners can only make television news leaner, hungrier . . . and, probably, inadequate.

A few trends were discernible in 1986. Family shows were obviously in. With the fantastic success of *Cosby* everybody was trying for togetherness of one kind or another. Many unorthodox family units were organized, some with virtually no traditional families in evidence. Or, as in the case of NBC's *ALF* with a creature from another planet as a live-in relative.

Comedies were the thing this year with many more new sitcoms than action/dramas as producers believed that viewers wanted light-hearted escapism from such disasters as terrorism and Chernobyl. That resulted in ABC's *Better Days*, a kind of *Welcome Back Kotter* without "Kotter" . . . or anything else which would cause anybody to watch. And none did for more than a few weeks.

Maturity was embraced, too. There was a new-found belief, reinforced by the success of *Golden Girls*, that viewers would once again watch shows in which mature people play major roles. So there were older characters in just about every new series, in most cases merely attached to youngsters, but they were there. When they were left on their own as in the Lucille Ball and Ellen Burstyn Show, they died quickly.

Of NBC's 8 new series—*ALF*, *Matlock*, *Crime Story*, *1986*, *L.A. Law*, *Amen*, *Our House*, and *Easy Street*—7 still survive with *1986* the only one definitely dead. Maybe they couldn't figure out how to gracefully change the name to "1987."

Amen, *Matlock* and *L.A. Law* manage to hang in there usually in the top 20. With *Matlock*, Fred Silverman has finally made it back to the big time after discovering how difficult it is for a producer to get a fair hearing.

The rest could go at any moment. *ALF* shows some signs of becoming a cult hit . . . but a cult among precocious youngsters too sophisticated for E.T. Not enough of those, thank God.

Of CBS's seven starter of the season series—*My Sister Sam*, *Designing Women*, *The Wizard*, *Together We Stand*, *Better Days*, *Kay O'Brien* and *Downtown*, only *Kay O'Brien* and *Downtown* have totally disappeared. *My Sister Sam* made it through the early days unscathed, in the top 20 usually. *Designing Women* was yanked and then reinstated; *Together We Stand* was yanked and reissued sans Elliot Gould as *Nothing Is Easy*. *The Wizard* is on against *Cosby* but shaky . . . as who wouldn't be.

Meantime CBS added to the second season with a seemingly successful long shot, a fine ethnic comedy, *The Cavanaughs*, with the universally beloved Barnard Hughes and Christine Ebersol.

ABC started the new season with

nine new series: *Jack And Mike, Head of the Class, Our World, Sidekicks, Sledge Hammer, Starman, Life With Lucy, The Ellen Burstyn Show,* and *Heart of the City.*

Although *Our World,* a clip-show of different eras in our history hosted by Linda Ellerbee and Ray Gandolf consistently runs last the ratings, it is so inexpensive to produce that it still makes money for ABC. It is my favorite show of the year. The other nets are looking longingly at it and there may be several other variations on CBS and NBC soon.

Head of the Class is still hanging in there with Howard Hesseman, of Johnny Fever fame, playing a teacher in an honors class. The show might have been called "The Revolt Of The Nerds" since its main theme seems to be that studiousness is next to friendlessness.

Sledge Hammer also just barely hanging in there with seven of ABC's nine new series since ABC simply doesn't have the replacements ready, is just what we don't need—a satire on violence. Sledge, not Mike, get it?, Hammer, is a cop so trigger happy that he fires warning shots over the heads of jay walkers. Although sometimes funny, it tends to trivialize violence and is thus dangerous in its own snotty way.

The PBS Season: PBS introduced its new season with little fanfare mainly because it was a schedule without "sexy" easy-to-promote shows. There was no *Jewel In The Crown* or *Brideshead Revisited* or *Cosmos* or even *The Brain* this year. However, there were eight new series in addition to the return of most of the regular popular series such as *Nature, National Geographic, Nova, Masterpiece Theatre, Frontline, Mystery!, Washington Week In Review, The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour,* and *Live From Lincoln Center.*

New series which were particularly noteworthy: *The Story of English, Eyes On The Prize,* and the controversial *The Africans: A Commentary,* which aroused the ire of those who believed that an anti-Western pro-African bias had no place on PBS even if it was clearly identified as such.

The schedule as usual abounded in wild-life programs and, as usual, it was these programs which pulled the highest ratings—mainly *National Geographic* and *Nature.* As Robert MacNeil told me amusedly: "Sometimes I think all we'd have to do to up our ratings is open each show with a couple of animals fornicating. . . ."

Well, the fornicating creatures may get better ratings for PBS but they still haven't eliminated the constant need for stations to bang the tambourines and beg for funding each year. It has become evident that, while PBS is now recognized as something of a national treasure for alternate TV, it is time to figure out a new method of funding it. Congress seems to be thinking about reorganizing the CPB-PBS relationship which, considering the constant bickering between the two organizations, obviously needs reorganizing.

Perhaps it is even time for a new third Carnegie Report to consider such solutions as user or excise taxes, advertising taxes or revenues, etc. PBS President Bruce Christensen is speaking out as clearly about the need to rethink PBS funding as man can who is caught in the midst of a national budget crunch. His greatest asset, though, seems to be a strong constituency in and out of Congress on both sides of the political fence.

So, by Jan 1, of the 24 new commercial network series, there were only four in the top 25 that could be called unqualified hits—*Amen* (NBC), *Matlock* (NBC), *L.A. Law* (NBC), and *My Sister Sam* (CBS); five shows that were killed as unqualified disasters; fifteen which were still hanging on until they either made it or replacements took over. Two of CBS's replacements—*Outlaws* and *Cavanaughs*—were still

question marks, with some signs of life ahead. In number of hits, it was just about an average year but, unlike previous recent years, the nets were slower in yanking the failures.

There were still lots of specials, but the illness-of-the-week fact-based drama was beginning to pall on viewers. And research departments had prevailed upon programmers to cut down in maxi-miniseries, so there were only a few two-night miniseries, except for *Amerika* which aired from February 15 through Feb 22, taking 14 and 1/2 hours. Almost all the programmers and researchers (ABC's included) agreed that the long-form maxi series was over, that two or at most three nights was all the viewer would stand for now; there was a definite reaction against the networks attempt to force a change in lifestyle on would-be viewers. ABC, however, refused to concede that there might be some rethinking of its 35-hour version of *War And Remembrance* originally set for the 1988 season. Maybe 1989 or 1990 now?

There was one news documentary which stands out far above all others this year: *Bill Moyer's CBS Report: The Vanishing Family—Crisis In Black America*. It was two hours of incisive, sensitive, provocative, totally relevent TV sociology, worthy of all the prizes it will win this year and in years to come. Some of the best dramatic specials and miniseries, all of which focused on important sociological issues: *Promise* (CBS), *A Year In The Life* (NBC), *Unnatural Causes* (NBC), *Penalty Phase* (CBS), and *Resting Place* (CBS). *Shadowland* a superb fictional account of the marital relationship of C.S. Lewis and an extraordinary biography of the Wyeth Family which appeared on *Smithsonian World*.

True, the commercial networks were soon zipping in replacement series to try to recover some of the damage. CBS offered, besides *The Cavanaughs*, *Outlaws*, *Nothing Is Easy*, the redo of *Together We Stand*, *Hard Copy*, and *Shell Game*. ABC tried *Gung Ho*, *Dads*, and *Ohara* in quick succession. NBC did mostly reshuffling of its schedule. Then at the end of the season and a five-year contract, despite entreaties from many top CBS executives, Bill Moyers, the conscience of American television, made a decisive act of conscience which symbolized, not only the year but the whole era. Surveying commercial TV, its methods, motivations and future possibilities, he moved back to PBS where, he implied, at least the moneygrubbing existed to pay production costs rather than takeover profits.

Following, in no rational order whatsoever, are some personal observations about The Season on commercial TV (PBS needs a story all its own) and what it brought to American television viewers. They are very personal observations, perhaps influenced by too many hours spent in front of that flickering rectangle:

SOME OF THE BEST SERIES OF THE SEASON, NEW AND OLD

L.A. Law (NBC): the best of the new shows, well written, acted, directed. Its continuing characters, overlapping story lines, appeal to intelligent viewers as well as entertainment buffs offers fun combined with relevence. Co-created by Steven Bochco, of *Hill Street Blues*, *LA* is complex, sensitive, moral, immoral, unrelentingly truthful about a sometimes unethical profession. It's a prime example of the new realism in TV series drama.

Cagney And Lacey (CBS): unequivocally the best written, acted, produced regular series on TV.

Hill Street Blues (NBC): Losing some of its sting as it fades slowly but still up there most of the time.

Cheers (NBC): Cleverly written, well-acted, closet comedy but beginning to show signs of wear.

Kate And Allie (CBS): Beautifully written and acted, an amusing off-the-wall sitcom which takes into account the fact that two women and their offspring can make a valid nuclear-age family group.

The Cavanaughs (CBS): New, refreshing ethnic family comedy with the most delightful romantic team in Barnard Hughes and Christine Ebersol since Archie and Edith Bunker.

Our World (ABC): Anything Linda Ellerbee does bristles with brilliance, humor, incisiveness. This clip-show, which will be copied by each network in the years ahead, is like an American history textbook by Will Rogers.

FINE SHOWS BUT WHAT MORE CAN YOU SAY ABOUT THEM?

The Cosby Show: A family series about an upper middle class family which happens to be black. Might be amusing for them to play it in white face one week to see if it makes a difference.

60 Minutes: The granddaddy of all the magazine shows. Fine reporters who know how to ask the right questions but blessed with a brilliant producer—Don Hewitt—who knows how to put it all together like nobody else in television.

QUESTIONABLE SUCCESSES

Family Ties (NBC): Faintly amusing premise completely dependent upon the supportive apron strings of Dr. Cosby immediately before.

Golden Girls (NBC): Hilarious people in too often smarmy situations with gags sticky with innuendo. Doesn't need that since it could make it with wit rather than grossness.

Wheel Of Fortune (Synd): Who says a great idea always wins? this one managed with a cumbersome wheel, innocuous questions, complex procedures, bland host and a sexy pointer.

Amen (NBC): Has only one thing going for it—a spot immediately after *Golden Girls*. Otherwise it's *A Pew for Mr. Jefferson*.

PRIMA DONNAS OF THE NEWS

How long will the marriage last between MacNeil and Mudd? Robert MacNeil, who hurriedly added Roger Mudd to the *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* reportedly rather than accede to pressure to welcome Bill Moyers as commentator, may soon discover that a prima donna in the PBS hand would have made a lot more sense than a prima donna from the NBC bush. Roger just doesn't blend into anybody else's newshour chorus line—he's a specialty act who demands top dollar and star billing even if it means the show goes broke. Oh well . . . there's always a job for Roger as Teddy Kennedy's press secretary. . . .

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO . . .

The concept of *The CBS Morning Program* as an entertainment show? Within the first week most of the entertainment gimmicks had been dropped and almost all the interviews and features were duplicates of material which might have appeared on the two opposition shows. Plus the quarter-hour news breaks made the show into as much a morning news show as it ever had been. Best of all, CBS started the morning with a solid

hour (6:30–7:30 a.m. of straight news) before it segued into the *CBS Morning News* with Mariette Hartley who tried very hard (and succeeded) in not sounding like a newswoman, but just a pleasant lady who reacted with a sense of fun she once displayed in those Polaroid commercials. Well, maybe it might have worked better if Jim Garner were there too.

Hughes Rudd? A top national newsman with a wry sense of humor, the ability to write about the meaning behind seemingly insignificant events, and a marvelously raucous delivery of his own lines. Last heard from at ABC, he was quietly allowed to retire to his farm in France where, for all we know, he may just be marking time until a smart news executive recognizes that his peculiar brand of sugar and spice is urgently needed on television news.

Howard K. Smith? A newsman who never hesitated to make his own opinions clear even when they collided with the general point of view. Men like Smith were replaced by bland, innocuous smilers. Where are you HKS now that we really need you to add zing to the evening news?

Sally Quinn? She started the *CBS Morning News* craziness, then crawled back to the *Washington Post* where she married the boss, made a good baby and a bad book? Hopefully she has retired from TV news for good.

Phyllis George? Who continued the *CBS Morning News* tradition of placing inadequately prepared, attractive women in key spots? Where does Phyllis dwell these days with her multimillion-dollar payoff and her righteous indignation about the unfairness of a world which is up in arms when she suggests a man unfairly accused of rape, start the day by giving his accusor a teeny little kiss?

PREDICTIONS . . .

Mary Tyler Moore will return in a show in which she plays her own 50ish age . . . and will succeed gracefully.

Grant Tinker will come up with a string of series hits for CBS and move them into first place within two years.

ABC will fight Fox TV for third place in a big four-network battle for dominance.

Condoms will be commonplace in commercials on all prime time programs. The big battle will be with those who wish to place them on Saturday morning children's shows.

WNET, Channel 13 in New York, will select a new president from outside its own organization. Norman Lear would have been a good candidate except that he would be too political for many WNET fatcats.

As Mike Wallace approaches 70 next year and his contract is up, CBS will attempt to break all its own rules and sign him up for another round on *60 Minutes*. Bill Paley will take the lead at Don Hewitt's urging.

If the *CBS Evening News With Dan Rather* falters any further, Diane Sawyer will be brought in as special correspondent and if ratings are bolstered, then as co-anchor. Dan Rather will offer to return to *60 Minutes*.

If ABC's *Amerika* controversy continues, ABC News will start a news program à la *Our World* to be titled *1998* to contain futuristic newsreel footage along *Amerika* lines.

New co-hosts for Fox Morning Show: Mr. Rogers and Dr. Ruth if she promises not to ask him any questions about his sex life and he agrees not to hold her on his lap.

MOST OVERRATED CULT SHOWS

Moonlighting (ABC): Occasionally amusing, repetitous, self-consciously acted, endlessly rerun, okay but why acclaimed?

It's The Gary Shandling Show (Showtime): Looking into the camera and saying Hi is not that original. Some of the wackiness works sometimes. But, mostly it is nice-guy sophormoric piddle which couldn't make it in the big broadcast time. But, I guess cable needs its own cult, too.

The David Letterman Show (NBC): Cruel, condescending and scapegoating—deified by kids who don't know better than to laugh at unsuspecting innocent people being poked with pointed sticks.

Saturday Night Live: Sometimes irreverently funny but too often simply substitutes grossness for wit. And often even that isn't funny. Most objectionable are some of the commercials which so resemble real commercials on the air that viewers watch them, thereby giving actual advertisers an unfair advantage. Youth cracks up too easily at programs not all they're cracked up to be.

The Dr. Ruth Show (Lifetime, syndicated): Is masturbation really the cure-all Dr. Ruth seems to believe it is? And why does she have hair on the palms of her hands?

The Phil Donahue Show (syndicated): Poor well-meaning Phil takes himself too seriously and doesn't seem to realize that the women's movement has left him far behind. They're busy working at jobs, choosing new sex partners, raising children, while he's still fighting for their right not to wear bras.

The Joan Rivers Late Show (Fox): She's redone face and body almost as much as Phyllis Diller and now looks almost as good as Phyllis. Should have spent more of the money on vocal coaches. The most amusing part of the Rivers act was her incredibly vulgar insult humor; now she has toned it down. What's left are Johnny Carson reject guests.

Pee-Wee Herman Show (CBS): Is as inexplicable to me as the Jerry Lewis cult in France. Maybe he needs subtitles, too.

SAD TV LESSON

Lucille Ball learned that Chaplin was the only comic who could manage to maintain his on-screen personna indefinitely. On TV, audiences see comics more intimately and expect them to age gracefully. Lucy's talent is there . . . it just needs to grow some silver threads among the henna.

SADDER TV LESSON

For Ellen Burstyn who followed Lucy with a fairly funny sitcom on ABC. It's better not to follow a classic comedienne who isn't allowed to age gracefully on camera.

EVEN SADDER TV LESSON

TV can learn something from Broadway—satire is what closes on Saturday night. *Fresno* proved that you can't stretch a little 10-minute sketch about wildcatting for raisins to miniseries length even with Carol Burnett flaunting her new jaw.

NEW GIMMICK

In March and April, 1987, all three networks instead of here and there putting on failed pilots, tried scheduling series still in development for limited runs of six to eight weeks. They obviously hoped some of these might succeed. The results are not yet in. The odd are not good.

VULGARITY MAKES A COMEBACK ON TV

Designing Women learned a bad lesson from *Golden Girls*: that sharp-tongue women can be as vulgar as they wish without incurring the wrath of censors. *Golden Girls* has so far managed to handle such allegedly lady-like humorous subjects as death during coitus. *Designing Women*, once flaccid, is trying desperately to become tumescent once again with such gags as "if you were fast food, there's be a golden arch over your bed."

A LITTLE PREDICTION

No longer will TV programmers feel free to change the lifestyles of millions of Americans by scheduling a week of miniseries drama, no matter what *Amerika* did in the ratings. Negative reaction is becoming stronger even among agency buyers who believe that long miniseries are driving TV viewers to VCRs, or even worse, to books and family conversation. Future miniseries will go for two or three nights maximum. So, what about, you ask, ABC's 35-hour *War And Remembrance*? Well, it was only a little prediction. . . .

SPECIAL DICTION AWARD

To Barbara Walters who managed to solve her lifelong problem with R's and W's the easy way: she gave them all to Tom Brokaw. He is now trying to pass them on to Dr. Ruth Westheimer, who has her own enunciation problems which she inherited from Eric Von Stroheim.

FASHION AWARD

To Vanna White of *Wheel of Fortune* who is always dressed exactly right for that show.

SPECIAL BUDDY AWARD

To *Today Show* hosts Jane Pauley and Bryant Gumbel for discovering the secret of guest interviewing: Jane lures the guests by smiling sweetly and nursing her babies while Brian sneaks up behind them . . .

THOSE I MISSED MOST ON NETWORK

Eric Sevareid and Hughes Rudd.

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO

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THOSE WHO I WILL MISS MOST ON NETWORK

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* * * * *

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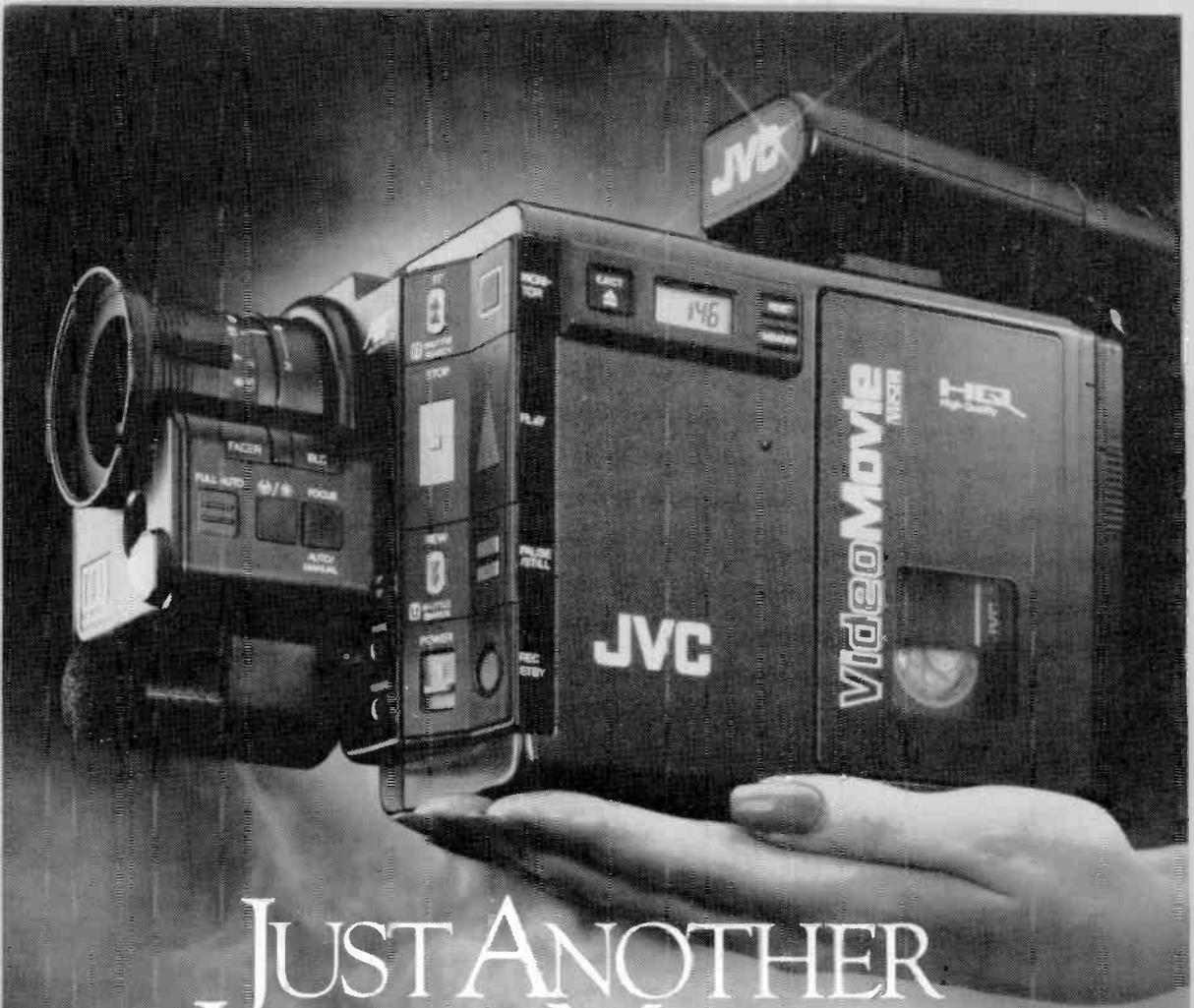
Arthur Unger is entering his fifteenth year as television critic for the *Christian Science Monitor*. During those years, he estimates he has written critiques of more than two thousand programs, and has survived all those many TV seasons.



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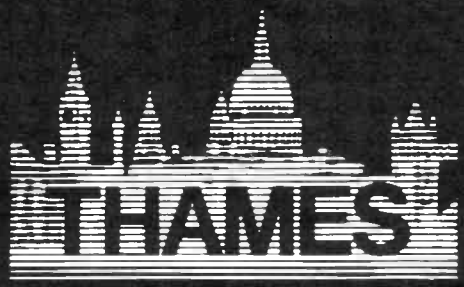

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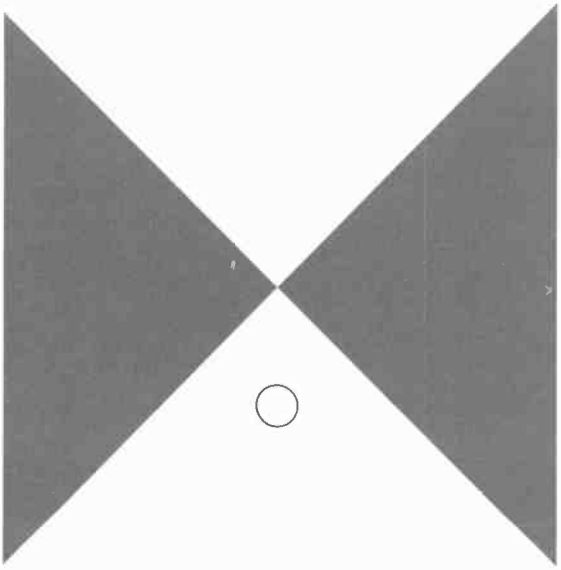

We would like to thank the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for honoring Abekas with an Emmy Award for the development of the A62 Digital Disc Recorder.

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BLACKS AND WHITES, DAYS AND NIGHTS

What makes *The Cosby Show* such a smash hit? Besides the fact that it's funny, this observer suggests some less obvious reasons for its success.

BY ROGER STEVENS

"Why does it work? Because Bill Cosby is funny; that's why!" And so, with minor variations, more than one average-viewer questioned in an informal poll analyzed the cause of *The Cosby Show*'s overwhelming success. Assuming several installments to be fairly representative of the series' quality, this churlish poll-taker hastily thinks, "but he's not THAT funny," and somewhat uncomfortably mumbles, "and neither is the show itself." Whatever the pleasure a person may experience when watching the show, the bedrock reasons for the popularity it enjoys prove elusive.

Often, when a work captures a mass audience, the reason for its allure and ability to enthrall huge numbers of people has only a marginal connection with the work itself. The reason may be quite unrelated to any objective evaluation of the actual quality or artistry of that work; the out-size dimensions of the success have little to do with anything consciously integral to the lauded work. The spectacular acceptance is a by-product. Only after the phenomenon of immense success is evident may some tenuous reasons be advanced to explain what has happened.

Frankenstein becomes a classic not because of a quota of shocks and scares, but because it touches some barely discerned feelings which we have as individuals, feelings that we are somehow monstrous in our humanity, and that we are to our God as the Creature is to Dr. Frankenstein, his Creator. *Dracula* permits us to engage vicariously in forbidden sexuality and our uncivilized lust for power, and then punishes the Count, not us.

Beyond the gadgetry and superficial excitements, the James Bond films allowed men and women to exercise sexual fantasies that were not wholly fashionable, putting them in touch with a less-than-admirable ego ideal. An added bonus lay in providing a ready, easy identification with the young, virile president who was a Bond enthusiast. The fact that that president seemed to be governing as though he were considering first how 007 might have handled the situation is something else again. Soap operas bring an exciting life right into the living rooms of people who barely have any life at all.

Elvis Presley provided an entry into what was not even perceived consciously: the forbidden, yet enticing world of black sexuality. The overt sensuality of Presley supplied the magic carpet on which white females and males could safely, and unknowingly, experience black sex.

Currently, another miraculous event involving blackness enchants millions every Thursday evening at 8:00 as *The Cosby Show* is aired by NBC.

Some episodes, aired last season, reveal elements to be praised and some deserving of criticism, but nothing which would begin to explain the huge popularity of the show.

One may admire the inventiveness of moments of comic business such as brightened one episode—the squeamishness of the wife as Cosby attempts to examine her banged-up toe; a fashion show engaged in by Cosby and Claire (Phylicia Rashad) so that their children may judge one of them to be the "smoothest"; husband and wife "table dancing" while seated. Pleasure could be taken from the comic action of another installment, action stemming from a keen observation of human foibles and behavior. Here, Cosby good-naturedly shakes a can of soda as a means of "getting even" before handing it to the watchful Claire. Later, son Theo is coming down the stairs to the living room as dad is about to show a tape, for the umpteenth time, of himself racing. Theo, realizing what is about to happen, quickly steals back upstairs to avoid becoming a captive audience.

Although the Huxtables brood has been sanitized and romanticized, they are not without a goodly degree of identifiable normalcy. A parent can identify with parents Cliff and Claire, equate their wisdom with his own.

Amusing and accurate as such moments are, they do not justify the great breadth of the show's popularity. Neither do the homey little messages tucked into the shows, messages such as the one delivered by Earle Hyman as Cosby's dad instructing us that "you need to lean on someone or something. Support can be a very important thing." Not even a warning about the dangers of cocaine or the admonition to study hard because "this is your life, so you gotta do something with it" can account for the ratings. Simple and reassuring material for crocheted samplers does not generally translate into a singular success.

Actually, any dissection of the surfaces of the programs misses the reasons for the fame that the series has achieved. Those reasons are subliminal and, if not ineffable altogether, then shadow-shrouded images flickering with various intensities.

American sentimentality over children plays some part here. For many, the presence of children in their lives offers the only justification for their own lives, the only motivation to get them up in the morning, to endure their jobs, to get through another day. One's child provides the tightly-grasped reason for living, and validates the time that the parent has spent on this earth. A majority of commercials seizes upon that desperate embrace of one's child to sell their products. Cosby makes use of that need for children and the need to love one's children—whether one does or not—to sell his sit-com.

He even offers a bonus: although the Huxtable brood has been sanitized and romanticized, they are not without a goodly degree of identifiable normalcy. A parent can identify with parents Cliff and Claire, equating their wisdom with his own. If his children are developing less successfully than the Huxtable clan, obviously the reason is something other than his competence as a parent. One need not allow such a potentially troubling thought to surface though—just look at this family on the tube and, in so doing, reaffirm the beauty and necessity of family life. Children, at heart, are really good. By removing some of the treacle, Cosby allows the fantasy to flourish.

Cosby imbues his character with a

certain degree of crustiness and allows him moments when he is less than thrilled with his children. By allowing negative feelings which are generally suppressed to float to the surface, however gently and sparingly, Cosby enables the viewer to admit to such times of ambivalence with his or her own children, and to do so without paralyzing guilt. The viewer recognizes a common experience, and the fact that he is not alone in feeling unappetizing things about his children allows him to achieve a sense of equilibrium. The reality that he does not always like his children no longer condemns him as a freak, a fiend, or some sort of monster who must not be forgiven. The individual's isolation, conscious or not, is removed via kinship with an approved celebrity.

The program offers another form of reassurance: life is manageable after all, even though our days come shorn of commercial interruptions and our problems may take a bit longer than twenty-two minutes or so to unravel and solve. *The Cosby Show* seems to avoid being so schematic that a difficulty of large dimension is raised, only to be dishonestly represented as being treatable in no time at all. Rather, the situations presented are the makings of the everyday; deep psychological problems are not shown, and then minimalized.

Even the plotting and structure of the episodes reflect some of the random mixture to be found in life other than that on a television screen. The very mildness of the program with its relaxed and relaxing old-slipper atmosphere produces smiles and something of a pat on the back. We, too, are capable of dealing with the routine problems of life and family. We are like enough to Claire and Cliff so that if they can cope and handle the day-in-day-out snafus, well then, so may we.

Yet more assurance is delivered: a happy marriage is possible after all. Forget the divorce statistics and discard the shards of one's own broken relationships! A healthy, lasting relationship is within the realm of the possible, and so strong is the show's optimistic tenor, that one feels that it is even probable. As depicted in the writing and embodied in the Cosby-Rashad chemistry a perfectly wonderful mating is easy. If both people are equals, considerate, sexual, sunny, playful, bright and funny, then eternal bliss awaits. Simple. Even if an individual's own circumstances and reality are at odds with the show's, the fantasy-as-reality that Cosby presents seems so natural that one may take heart. No form of marriage counseling is less expensive.

Just as the regularity, the adherence to required formula and the very predictability of the functioning of the heart is essential to remaining alive, so too, comedy is often dependent upon compliance to a certain degree of expectation if it is to be alive. Our desire to have fun prepares us to welcome the comic with something akin to open arms. Our very willingness to do some of the work, to enter, uncritically, into the spirit of things may be proved, someday, to be born of biological necessity—a chemical/electrical process in which amusement and laughter, as well as the feelings of good will and well-being which accompany comedy, are discovered to be a means by which the body restores itself. An emotional renewal may be proved to be a critical element in the physical rejuvenation of the human mechanism.

Norman Cousins has advanced the beginnings of such a theory in his *Anatomy of an Illness*. A comic work in which the rhythm feels right, in which aspects of the story remind us of something pleasant or of other material which we have loved, and which does not thwart our expectation of development and outcome is one that we will feel comfortable with. Cosby uses a variation on *The Tortoise and the Hare* to good, and comforting, advantage in a script revolving around Cliff's desire

to strut his stuff in the Penn Relay races. Another script includes a familiar family conference. "If you ever get into any kind of trouble, no matter how bad it is, feel free to come to your mother and me," Cliff advises.

"Uh huh," we feel, remembering, however dimly, similar moments, and looking forward to what we just know is going to happen.

"Your father and I really want you to know that you can come to us," adds Claire.

"You'd get mad," Theo says, trying to explain why his sisters and he would all go to a friend before they would seek out their parents.

Claire, denying that she and Cliff would become angry, lets them know that "we'd get serious . . . very serious."

This is comedy happily fulfilling what we want from it, comedy with heart for the heart.

No one gets ugly or disrespectful. No shouting, no threats. The youngsters put their folks through some tests. Of course, mom and dad have trouble coming through with those time-faded flying colors. Nothing happens to disappoint our expectation that all members of this family will behave well and, finally, do the "right thing." Nasty, unsettling surprises are nowhere in sight. This is comedy happily fulfilling what we want from it, comedy with heart for the heart.

I do not remember who first mentioned that characters have to be attractive in some way if we are to invite them into our homes week after week. They must be likeable people whom we enjoy knowing and spending time with. The characters on *The Cosby Show* all receive the highest grades on the likeability test. Whether idealized or not, this wife always has a smile at the ready, so affable is her basic nature. The children may whine a bit, but just a bit.

Not one of the young people has any discernable acting ability, but then none has been around long enough—though one or two are on the borderline—to learn the tricks and bad habits. Charm they do have. Everyone is on his best behavior; company's coming—we are ringing the doorbell. Even when slipping, the slip is a minor one. No harm done. Noses are not picked; no one farts. Everyone has grace and decency. Physical attractiveness is combined with ready warmth. These people do not sulk; they get out of the right side of the bed, not even in need of coffee to become human. They are nice people to have around, and since we see ourselves, or would like to see ourselves in them, we know that we must be pretty decent people too.

The series illustrates the durability of "drawing-room" comedy, a familiar, and therefore, soothing form. Here it is updated to a brownstone comedy, its innate cheerfulness untouched. The pleasantness of its vision is even evident in the flimsy, glass-paneled front door of its set: there are no iron bars. Here, reality may be real, but not too real. This is a safer, nurturing environment. The lulling effect is also visible in the shy tastefulness of the set decorations, the comfortable sets themselves which turn their back on ostentation, and the ordinary, functional use of the cameras. All is familiar; all is well.

Dr. Cosby is also making something else familiar at a time when many men are asking, "What do women *want* anyway" as they try to re-define "masculinity" to include emotional openness, the expression of tenderness, and, frantically, whatever else might win the approval of women. He is accustoming men and women alike to a new vision of the masculine; for the confused, disgruntled and uncertain, Cosby is, perhaps, setting a new stan-

dard. As Cliff, he functions with an easy confidence, gently in command of himself and of his world. He projects a non-bullying assurance and sensitivity. He is emotional and sensual, communicating a wholeness of person, one having all parts in proper balance and harmony. He may very well be providing a subliminal role model, even a conscious one for those men already embarked on the journey toward a more fully realized self.

Cosby is doing nothing less than asking his country to see blacks differently. He is saying something that has not been said before on television.

"I am not an expert on blackness," Cosby stated on a *Donahue* show. Willing to take him at his word, one cannot help but feel that he, nevertheless, is motivated by a sense of mission, and one beyond those aphorisms proffered weekly on family living and child upbringing. As more and more people seem to be either unwilling to or incapable of thinking and reasoning for themselves, there is some value to having such a painless catechism available, but Cosby has a larger purpose.

Cosby is doing nothing less than asking his country to see blacks differently. He is saying something that has not been said before on television: blacks are not whites in blackface, as was *Julia*; they are not permanent dwellers in the lower economic classes and in housing projects where they must be subsidized, as they were in *Good Times*; they are not socially and culturally different, if not inferior, an exotic breed apart, as they were in *Sanford and Son*; they are not macho studs and little else, as they were in *Double Dare* and *Fortune Dane*; they are not people whom you may dress up, but really not take anywhere, as they were in *The Jeffersons*.

He is asking his country, his country of blacks, whites, and many other races to see blacks as whole people. Turning his back on images of the black that would make him ill-educated, and perhaps even incapable of educating; paying no attention to the view of blacks that places them on the level of dependent children in constant need of social-program diapering, he whisks blacks off the lines at the welfare and unemployment offices, off the street corners, and holds out the American Dream.

He raises a banner, and marches with his fellow blacks, in effect, inviting them to live their lives to the fullest and most productive. He refuses to stay mired in complaining and finding blame; he refuses to view blacks as being perpetually in need. Take responsibility for the quality of your own life he seems to say. Make your own life; learn; grow; "do it!"

By creating a family of people who happen to be black rather than a manufactured collection of positive images, he offers blacks true role models, and hope, perhaps even courage. Blacks are part of this country, a healthy part. No more excuses. No copouts. Live!

For the white viewer convinced that the black of the tabloid headlines and the black being led off in handcuffs on the evening news are representative of a majority of blacks, he says, "not so," but does so without the lectures which have failed for generations to be convincing. He allows a white viewer to see another black, the one whom any reasonable and decent person would love to have as a neighbor. For the white who fully supports the civil rights movement, while still harboring doubts about the educational and cultural capacities of the average black, he appeals once more to the inherent sense of fair play.

With the divisions between people who happen to be white and those who

happen to be black becoming sharper and irreparable, Cosby allows both a half-hour each week in which to approach one another anew, to look at one another freshly. For white and black, he holds out a message of hope. Life can be what you are willing to work to make it be, he says to blacks. To whites he says what most whites have yearned to hear: although there are problems and, yes, there are blacks who embody your most negative fears and stereotypes, those blacks are not indicative of the majority of blacks. Keep your good faith.

If, as Charles Silberman, the author of a respected work on criminal justice, suggests, with great despair, the United States is heading, permanently, into a schizophrenic condition wherein it houses two separate, essentially non-compatible cultures, Cosby, emphatically, denies this. He provides a weekly vision of a harmonious alliance, a nation united in human decency.

To blacks and whites who wish fervently for a time of on-going racial, economic, and social peace, it is this vision which lies at the basis for the unprecedented success of *The Cosby Show*. Even re-runs draw enormous audiences, so hungry are we for that message. ■

Roger Stevens, a graduate student in theatre history at Brooklyn College, works for Samuel French, Inc., the publisher. He used to be an actor and director.

CORRESPONDENCE

Editor
Television Quarterly

Dear Sir:

I owe an apology to Palmer Williams, who had a distinguished career with CBS News, mainly as a valuable colleague of Don Hewitt on *Sixty Minutes*. In the January issue of the *Quarterly* in my review of Don Hewitt's book, I mistakenly referred to Palmer as "the late" Palmer Williams. While Mr. Williams has retired from CBS News, he is, Mr. Hewitt has graciously reminded me, very much alive, good humored as ever and an occasional visitor to the scene of his many triumphs at *Sixty Minutes* headquarters on W. 57th Street.

Sincerely,

Jim Snyder
Vice President, News,
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WERE THE OLD SHOWS BETTER?

Errors of perception and generational differences cloud the way we look at the past. Looking at the hits and misses of 20 years.

BY JIB FOWLES

"Prime time television used to be so much better. It's pretty crummy now," a friend said to me recently, voicing an opinion I have heard from others as well. What prompted his thought was a program which recently reprised scenes from old shows—"The 20 Shows That Changed TV" on *Entertainment Tonight*.

He could have based his view on any of the growing number of broadcast antiquities being offered up on our sets nowadays. The expanding number of channels seems to have space for just about everything saved over from the 50's and 60's. Networks and cable companies are recycling old footage on shows like ABC's *Our World* and HBO's *Time Was*, while independent stations shower us with old movies and syndicated series. My friend now gets nightly episodes of *The Honeymooners* not on one, but on two channels.

Later, though, I began to wonder if he were right. Are current programs inferior to older ones? Is the good stuff all behind us? I thought I should look carefully at a few more older series.

The opportunity to view some black-and-white programming came quickly to hand. My seven-year old daughter watches a cable channel which reruns series like *My Three Sons*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *Dennis the Menace*, *Lassie*, and *Mr. Ed*. Together we spent several evenings watching episodes from these shows. I genuinely enjoyed myself, chuckling along with her and the laugh track. She calls these "my shows," preferring them to anything else on television. Not only were they her favorites, but I learned they were the favorites of her second-grade classmates too.

Yet in spite of my friends' insistence, and my daughter's, I found myself resisting the idea that programming was better then and is worse now. The more I thought about it, the more I felt such a qualitative change was unlikely.

My resistance to the idea of an overall decline in the quality of television shows stems from this observation: the aims of programmers have remained constant through the short history of the medium. From the outset, prime time schedules have been targeted at the largest number of viewers; they have not strayed from this course. Under these conditions it is hard to believe that production values have changed much, or the level of the writing has varied, or the range of the acting talent has shifted. Color has come it, but otherwise quality has remained

about the same.

I looked up the top ten shows of twenty years ago, and of thirty. In 1967 they were:

The Andy Griffith Show
The Lucy Show
Gomer Pyle, USMC
Gunsmoke
Family Affair
Bonanza
The Red Skelton Show
The Dean Martin Show
The Jackie Gleason Show
Saturday Night at the Movies
Bewitched

And in 1957 the nation was enthused about:

Gunsmoke
The Danny Thomas Show
Tales of Wells Fargo
Have Gun, Will Travel
I've Got a Secret
Wyatt Earp
General Electric Theatre
The Restless Gun
December Bride
You Bet Your Life

They were all wonderful shows, I am sure, but I am not going to concede they are necessarily superior to the top shows of this year: *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, *Murder, She Wrote*, *Cheers*, *60 Minutes*, *Night Court*, *Golden Girls*, and *Moonlighting*.

So it appears to me *not* that old shows are objectively better, but that many of us *think* they are. Why do we? Let me first deal with adults like my friend, and then I will get to my daughter and her crowd.

Generally speaking, the past is always going to look more agreeable than the present. This is an error in perception, and it is prevalent among humans. In truth, that far-off period was just as likely to be packed with problems and unpleasantries as the here-and-now, but it simply does not appear that way from a present perspective. The reason is that everything in the past is resolved; we know all the outcomes. The present, on the other hand, is filled with uncertainties and vexations. The past is harmless and the present cannot be.

Imagine a person standing close to a white picket fence. If he looks at the section right before him, he is aware of the gaps between the pickets, the blemishes on the surfaces. But if he shifts his attention and looks back down the fence, the distant sections look to be all of a piece, perfectly white. The immediate is marked by breaches, while the distant is intact and even. The distant appears better by comparison.

When we insert television into this general conception of a past which was better than the present, it looks pretty good back there. Present-day television can still have a tinge of the problematic to it: isn't this low-grade entertainment, and shouldn't I be using my time better? But television as recalled comes largely without such reservations. We viewed and it did not seem to do us great harm. That time is over and any doubts have receded.

Television has not been around long enough that the early programming has started to pick up the patina of sentimentality that descends on old forms of popular culture, like dime novels and radio serials, old movies and records. If someone was ever troubled about the plebian aspects of the medium, that concern dissolves with the passing of years, and a more mellow attitude sets in. What originally might have been perceived as trite broadcasting is now seen as folklore.

A positive attitude towards early television, at the expense of the current variety, is further encouraged when a person thinks of specific programs. Minds capable of generally misperceiving and overrating the past are also capable of remembering past programming in a highly selective fashion. It is the favorites which stick in our memories; the duds we conveniently forget. As a result, television

in the 50's and 60's comes to be equated with a few outstanding series, rather than with the entire broadcast schedule.

We are likely to forget, from 1957, such attractions as *Sally*, *Circus Boy*, or *Saber of London*. Similarly, from the 1967 season, do we recall *Cowboy of Africa*, *Daktari*, *He & She*, or *Maya*? Our memories spare us many of these. But if we switch on the set and take in today's shows, we are compelled to experience both the hits and the misses, both what we like and what we might not appreciate so much.

Another trick our minds play on us is to bring back not precisely what we viewed and liked, but what we think we *ought* to have viewed and liked. When people reflect on the early days of television, often they mention the original dramas presented live from the New York studios, like *The Philco Playhouse* and *Kraft Theatre*. These, they may claim, constitute proof that television was better then. In fact, a certain proportion of those theater pieces were painfully bad. The playhouse offerings figure larger in recollections than they did in people's actual viewing behavior, since the audience for them dwindled as the seasons passed.

One thing is absolutely certain about a person like my friend who judges earlier programming to be superior to recent—he has been getting older. The programs themselves have been frozen in time, thanks to the miracles of twentieth century recording technologies, but human beings age. A present appraisal of early shows is bound to be colored by the initial viewing experience. My friend is in his thirties, and he is responding to series that he first saw as a youngster. It is clear that on this count alone those programs are going to have a different significance for him than current shows. He is not anything like an objective observer of television programming; in fact, he could hardly be more subjective.

The early programs are part of his childhood, as they were part of the childhoods of many people who say that television was better back then. Almost all humans are subject to feelings of nostalgia—a word derived from a Greek root meaning "return home." We at times yearn for the warmth of the family hearth, where we imagine everything was nurturing and protective. For Americans born after World War II, an ingredient in this nostalgic picture is television. The programming, designed to lure huge audiences, was largely congenial, and remains so in memories. Most adults look back fondly upon it.

The positive and, in my judgment, inflated evaluation many adults have of old shows may additionally result from the fact that prime time series in the 50's and 60's were aimed more directly at a younger audience. The person who was within the targeted population for programming then may have matured out of it now, and feel less receptive to present series. Anyway, the subject of the fit between programming and audience leads me to my daughter and her shows.

Why does my seven-year old argue that the black-and-white series she views nightly are the best things on television? Why do her pals in second grade agree? In the face of such expert testimony, am I wrong to say that old programming is no better than current?

My daughter is forced to make her choices from a sharply curtailed range of offerings. A low birth rate during the 70's and 80's, a rising median age of the viewing public, and a finer sense among broaadcasters about who are and who are not good consumers all add up to little prime time programming for children. She has to search hard to find early evening shows which suit her level of maturity and taste.

What she has found are series that, when originally broadcast, were designed to appeal to young as well as

older viewers. They contain as characters children she can empathize with, who are growing into a society of adults not so remarkably different from the one she confronts. *Mr. Ed* and *Lassie* provide her with the magical, near-human animals she continues to enjoy. The jokes on these situation comedies are not so difficult that she cannot understand them or get pleasure out of them. And in these programs from the baby boom years, everything is going on in the context of family life—still the chief context for her young existence.

Another reason youngsters appreciate these old shows is not so pleasant to contemplate, but real nonetheless. Many of my daughter's classmates live in single-parent households. This is the era of the broken home, and children can find some solace in looking at the intact families in these programs. If the shows originally made up for whatever shortfalls there may have been in the two-parent family, in many cases nowadays they can help make up for its utter disappearance.

I have tried to explain why the young and the not-so-young look back wistfully at programming from the early days of television. Each group does it for its own reasons, but in neither case is it because the old shows are intrinsically better.

But in saying that older programs are no better and no worse than contemporary programs, I am not implying that they have no value in my eyes, or cannot be satisfying. I am enjoying "The 20 Shows That Changed Television" segments on *Entertainment Tonight*, and hope you are too. For me the segments are a gratifying nostalgic excursion, as the producers no doubt intended.

Nostalgic viewing is good for people, I think, on several counts. It is emotionally refreshing for those of us who saw the shows when they were initially aired. Here comes Marshal Dillon, there goes Ed Sullivan. By catapulting us back in time, the shows transport us to our younger years, to pleasant memories and good times. This can be a momentary salve for the duties of our daily lives.

There is a informational value to these programs too. They give us a touchstone in history, and make us aware of time's passage—always a good lesson, I think. It is wise to lift our faces every now and then from the grindstone of the present, and good to appreciate the past. It is a chance to review our own little histories as individuals, and our larger history as a people.

In truth, of the twenty programs selected by the *Entertainment Tonight* producers, seven are still in production—*60 Minutes, Today Show, Tonight Show, Saturday Night Live, CBS Evening News, Hill Street Blues,* and *Sesame Street*. Intrinsic merits aside, their significance lies in part with their longevity. The very fact that they have endured in the mutable world of television lends them importance.

The other thirteen may be equally ancient in their origins but their initial run is over. All of them are clearly notable shows in the history of the medium. There can be no denying that programs like *Playhouse 90, $64,000 Question, All in the Family, Laugh In,* and *Roots* have had their impact upon the tastes and perceptions of the audience, and upon the style of television fare.

Yet I am a little surprised that entire genres have no representatives among the ET twenty. Obviously sports broadcasts have meant a great deal to the American public, football chief among them. Why not a segment on *Monday Night Football* or on the Super Bowl games (which amount to the one holiday that television has added to the national calendar)? Soap operas have become central to the viewing

and consciousness of much of the audience, yet find no place on the list. I would have traded one choice for *Peyton Place*, which was the first to succeed in the prime time hours and was the harbinger of much evening programming in the 70's and 80's.

In my eyes the most glaring omission is the instantaneous coverage that occurs at times of momentous events. It is as if television has had nothing to do with hearings and nominating conventions, elections, with assassinations, moon landings, wars, or terrorism. It does not take a sage to tell us that such programming has been pivotal in the history of the country, changing the way the citizenry perceives and responds to national events. Clips on the death of John Kennedy and its aftermath could have illustrated this special duty and power of the medium.

Moreover, a case might be made for other entertainment shows as having more popular influence than the ones showcased by *Entertainment Tonight*. I think of *Your Hit Parade*, *The Honeymooners*, *Dragnet*, *Bonanza*, *Beverly Hillbillies*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *Love Boat*. If the producers had empowered me alone to do the picking, I would have slipped in my personal all-time favorite—*Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. But they didn't empower me, so I am going to stop quibbling. What they did pick, I do like seeing once again.

It is evening as I write this, and from the other side of the house I can hear that my daughter has switched off the television set. She will soon be asleep, and after she is, I will, as I have been doing often lately, sneak past her room and turn the set back on again, keeping the same channel to catch a few minutes of *Route 66*. ■

Jib Fowles, a frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, is Professor of Human Sciences and Humanities at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, Texas.

VIEWPOINT

"Amerika fosters hatred and prejudice and misunderstanding. This program is completely flawed in the fact that I don't think the United States will ever conquer the Soviet Union, nor do I think the Soviet Union will ever conquer the United States; in my opinion, it's just absolutely ridiculous and old-fashioned and not real at all.

*"I'm patriotic and I feel good enough about my country that I don't feel threatened by the Soviet Union or any other nation—*except *for accidental nuclear war.* That's *the thing that worries me.*

"I think any kind of film that promotes hatred—racial hatred, or political hatred—should not be made. We should not be using the medium to foster hatred or prejudice or bigotry or misunderstanding. And Amerika *in my opinion does all four of these things."*

—R. E. "Ted" Turner,
WBTS interview

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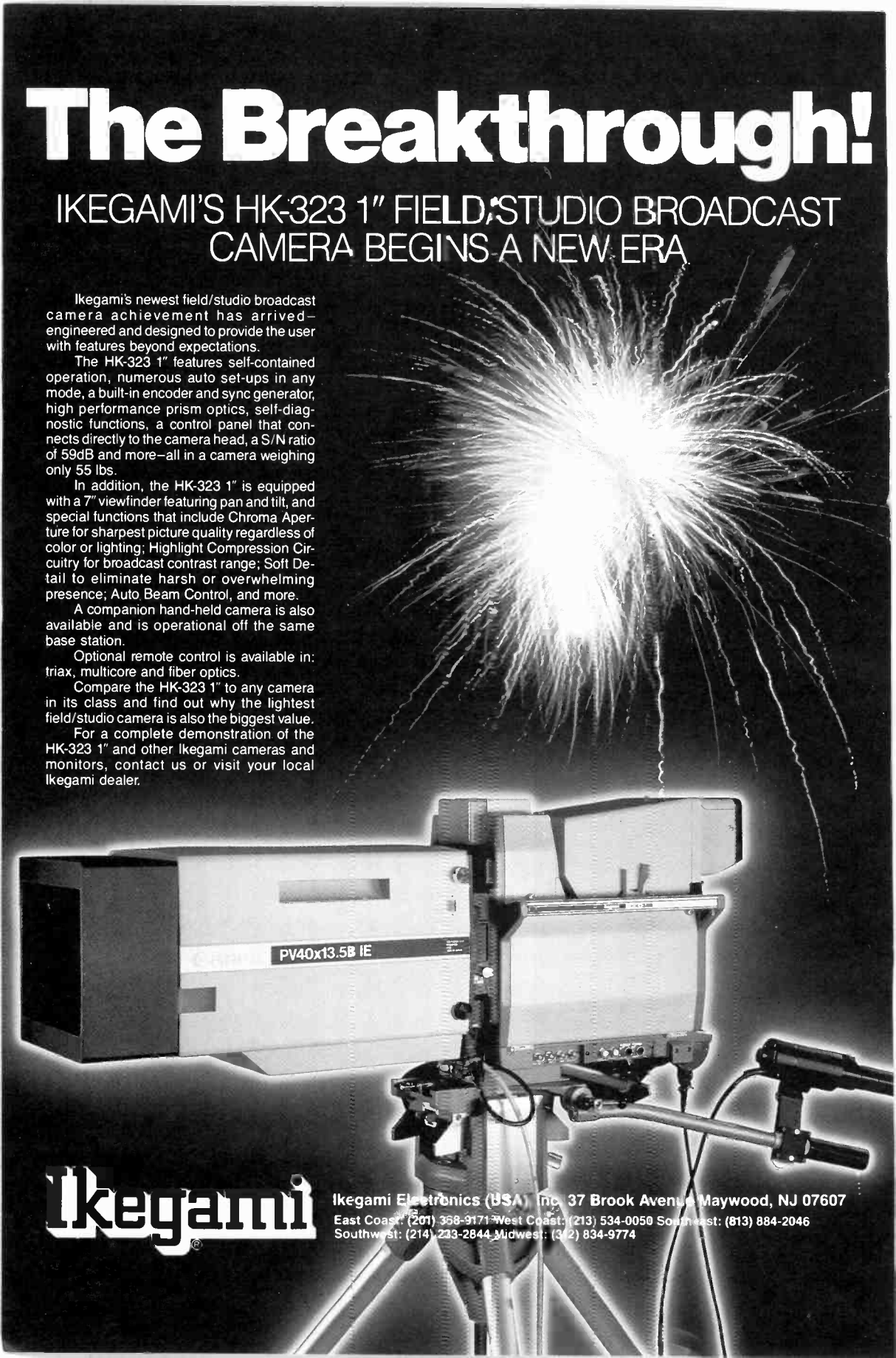

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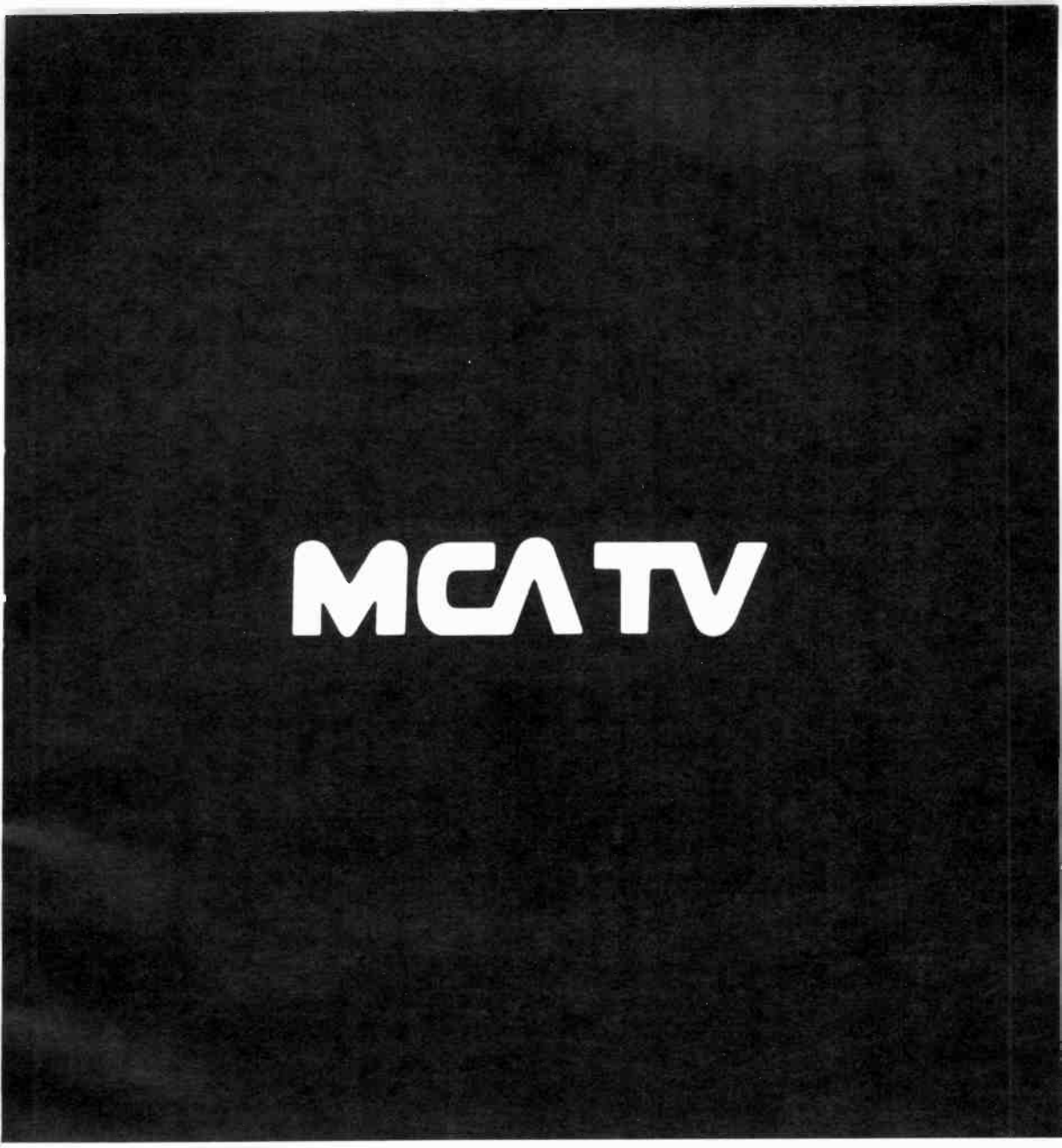

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THE MAYBE GOLDEN DAYS OF LIVE LOCAL TELEVISION

It was "LIVE from New York!" Not just Saturday night, but daily. A survivor tells the story.

BY RICHARD PACK

Once in the dear old days of early early television that are not beyond recall, there must have been tens of thousands of hours of shows that were never recorded. Did you ever wonder where they all went? Are they still floating somewhere in outer space, lost like abandoned satellites? What an idea for a sci-fi story: a mad genius invents a VCR that can capture all those disappeared programs, and becomes wealthy from this boundless treasury of reruns.

Of course, most of these missing shows were local productions, because Life Before Tape meant nothing was recorded locally; only network shows were put on kinescope, and not all of them.

Nostalgia is now the game of all generations, young as well as old in this era when even twelve year-olds wistfully enjoy the reruns of the *Lassie* shows they watched at age six. So a senior television citizen can be allowed the nostalgia of recalling what it was like in the early years of local programming, during the pioneering period when viewers moved up from the 12-inch sets to really big screens—sixteen inches, courtesy of RCA, Philco or Dumont.

From 1952 to 1954, I was Director of Programming and Operations for WNBT,* Channel 4, the New York key station of the NBC Network. (At the same time, I was also programming chief of WNBC radio, but that wasn't much fun.) For the network, it was also the era which later was dubbed Golden, the time of Milton Berle, *Philco Playhouse*, Sid Caesar and Howdy Doody. And Pinky Lee. Golden? Well, maybe. . . .

At NBC, "local" was a world apart from the network, and the two worlds never mixed. Locally, we had our own directors, writers, producers, salesmen, talent, and executives, and many hours of time to fill each day. Unfortunately, we had to rent studios and engineers from Big Daddy NBC, and they really socked it to us, because somehow that made their books look better.

Most of the network brass looked down on us local yokels, did not know what we did and cared less. As one of the upstairs VP's said to me with lofty condescension, "All you guys do is make money by putting spot announcements in between our programs."

Well, what we really did was to program all those hours that then were not serviced by the network; all things considered, we did it rather well, and although we were not appreciated, we had the quiet satisfaction of knowing we were doing a difficult job with skill and style. It was an exciting time.

*The call letters later were changed to WRCA-TV, and then to WNBC-TV, the present identification.

Looking back now, I wonder how we ever managed, limited as we were by staff and budgets. For WNBT produced more than fifty-five hours of local programs each week, most of them live. Most shows had no camera rehearsal, a few had a half-hour or less. We had very little film available in those, the *Cisco Kid* days of syndication, and obviously no tape. Weekdays, the island of local programming which WNBT occupied, were something like this:

Four local inserts in *Today* at 7:25, 7:55, 8:25, and 8:55; 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.; 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.; 6 to 7:30 p.m., 10:30 p.m. to signoff around 1 a.m. No prime time access then, since the network news (*The Camel News Caravan* with John Cameron Swayze) rode from 7:45 to 8 p.m. But that very prime half hour from 10:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. was still local territory.

How did we do it, day after day, faced with such a staggering production load? Maybe because we didn't know any better.

We had a lot of time to fill over the weekends, too, for the networks had not yet marched boldly into Saturday and Sunday day time. WNBT was local all day Saturday until 7:30 at night, and following *Your Hit Parade* with Snooky Lanson, from 11 p.m. until signoff. I must admit we could not afford much on Saturdays, and we filled mostly with old Westerns and older features. Sample: *Passport to Heaven*, described by TV Guide thus:

Released from prison, a cobbler needs a job to get his passport back, but no one will hire him without a passport. Albert Basserman, Mary Brian.

On the Seventh Day we did not rest. WNBT was local all day, except for the standard network religious and public affairs programs like *The American Forum of the Air, Youth Wants To Know* and *Meet The Press*, plus Milo Perkins and *Zoo Parade*. Our local shows included a familiar radio retread, The Horn and Hardart *Children's Hour*, kid variety with Ed Herlihey, and not bad for its time, and other kiddy stuff like *The Magic Clown*, and artist Jon Gnagy.

It was difficult to pry loose a crew from the network on Sundays, but when we finally did manage a small studio and two cameras for a 3 p.m. half-hour, we produced *Let's Look at The News* with John Wingate our nighttime anchorman, an experiment of which we were justly proud. As far as I know, it was the first attempt at news for youngsters.

How did we do it, day after day, faced with such a staggering production load? Maybe because we didn't know any better. Or perhaps it was the creative juices that bubbled in all of us, the exhilaration of being pioneers. We enjoyed working in a new medium that had not yet found all the answers, set its boundaries, defined its terms. Ideas and formats were not yet frozen, and the clichés of the business had not yet been manufactured. And we could afford to make mistakes. We made plenty of them, but we also had a few hits.

Another force in our favor was the General Manager, the late Ted Cott, a young and difficult man, yes, but a manager who created an unsuppressed environment of showmanship, what *Variety* used to call razzle-dazzle. You needed a leader like Ted. There never has been a showman like him, running a major television station. He was also the first big league TV G.M. to have graduated from the ranks of program managers, rather than sales.

Our staff made up in quality what it lacked in quantity. My directors included men and women who later went on to become major network directors like Dwight Hemion, Bill Harbach, Mike

Gargulio, Ted Nathanson. Enid Roth, today a top director, was one of our AD's (she should not have had to wait as long as she did to become a director!). Barbara Walters was assistant to the station's Publicity Director, Phil Dean, and for a while a staff producer. Our Director of Community Affairs was ex-baseball great, Jackie Robinson.

Schuyler Chapin, who later became Manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company, and now is Dean of Columbia University's School of the Arts, was Executive Producer of *The Tex and Jinx Show*. Bob Stewart, a staff producer, is today one of the major game show packagers and creator of shows like *The Price Is Right, I've Got A Secret* and *The $20,000 Pyramid*. Steve Krantz, now a Hollywood feature film producer of hits like *Fritz The Cat* and *Cooley High*, and major network miniseries, was the station's Executive Producer. Pete Affe, now a VP of Disney TV sales, was our Production Manager.

You had to be young and eager to work the hours those men and women did, especially the directors and producers. (Most of the directors, by the way, were combination director-producers, an excellent system.) A director might be assigned, say to *The Richard Willis Show* five days a week at 1:30, and then have to come back in the early evening for a fifteen minute daily across the board program. Bill Harbach, for example would direct/produce *The Faye and Skitch* Show at 6 p.m. (Faye Emerson and Skitch Henderson) and then have to return for a live station signoff feature aired around 1 a.m.

To be a bit of a character also helped. It eased the tensions and lubricated the creative juices. Bill Harbach was not only an immense talent, he also was colorful and offbeat.

There was the time, Harbach recalls, when he was assigned *The Nancy Berg* show. Show? Well, it was a gimmick way of closing down the station, that made *Time* magazine and the wire services. Nancy Berg, a top model of the period, was hired to sign off the station each night with some chatter and promotion for the next day's schedule, photographed seductively in bed, clad in a lacey nightgown.

I can claim neither the blame nor the credit for this historic program, since Ms. Berg was already a WNBT attraction when I joined WNBT.

Anyway, this particular night, Bill Harbach was suffering from a bad cold, and after the *Faye and Skitch* show he went home to get some sleep, but when the alarm woke him before midnight he still felt too sick to work.

So what Bill did that night (*Now* he tells me!) was to phone the station, get the Technical Director in the control room for the Nancy Berg epic and tell this TD, "Joe, keep this line open and listen carefully . . . when I tell you, just fade up on camera one, and then I'll tell you when to pan and when to go to flip cards, and when to get close on Nancy . . ."

Harbach recalls those wild days with some affection and a remembrance of dyspepsia lost, for those were the years of local cooking shows.

So Bill Harbach became the first—and only?—director to direct from his own home.

Harbach recalls those wild days with some affection and a remembrance of dyspepsia lost, for those were the years even at the NBC flagship station of cooking shows. "I can hear myself now," Bill recalls. "Pan left on the ketchup—okay, pull back on the schnitzel—dolly in on the cream puffs, but not too tight."

All over the country battles waged around cooking shows, not just those skirmishes after each show between

members of the cameramen and the stagehands for the food, but also between program executives like myself and the sales managers.

Even though by 1954, we all knew that local cooking shows were audience chasers, the salesmen still insisted on selling them, because they were bringing in the easy bucks. One of my early victories at WNBT was finally getting sales to go along with putting the cooking lady into an entertainment show, as a brief daily segment rather than a half-hour on her own.

Another delightful character in our WNBT family was the late Richard Willis, who had been a Hollywood makeup man, and ran an afternoon series called *Here's Looking At You* which was a guide to fashion and makeup, and never dull because it was enlivened by Dick's wry, and sometimes, sly wit. Willis himself was an elegant dresser, who wore only the most expensive, custom-tailored suits.

Cott was not just a program savvy GM, he also was very commercial. Having just convinced the low-priced Robert Hall men's clothing chain to try a big local TV spot buy, and only on WNBT, Cott baited the deal with a special inducement: each of the station's many male program personalities would wear Robert Hall suits, and appropriately, credits for each program would include in big type a line like "Mr. Willis' clothes by ROBERT HALL."

When dapper Richard Willis heard about the deal he flipped. "I will not wear Robert Hall suits!" he announced angrily.

"My suits cost $400 each, and you want *me* to wear schlock $40 suits from Robert Hall and the plain pipe racks. But Never!"

Cott kept insisting. Willis wouldn't budge. Finally, Willis's wife, Astrid, came up with a compromise which Dick accepted: he continued to wear his luxurious handmade suits, but inside of each of them they sewed a new label, in case anyone challenged the validity of the program credits. A Robert Hall label.

The goings-on sometimes were rough on newcomers. Bob Klein who now heads his own Hollywood promotional agency, Klein &, recalls his first day as producer of *The Tex and Jinx Show*. He came into the control room during Tex's first interview of the day with a famous mountain climber. Tex McCrary had a habit of directing directors while a show was on the air, and the directors didn't like it. His directions arrived not via intercom, but directly over the air.

"Jim, Jim!" Tex was shouting, "Take a closeup of *this*!"—and he pointed at the climbers right hand—"Get a closeup of his hand here—he lost a finger from frost bite during his big climb—get up tight, Jim!" Jim Elson, the director, ignored him.

So then Tex yelled orders at the cameramen themselves: "Camera One, dolly in for a closeup! Camera Two, dolly in!"

Both cameramen lost their cool, forgot Elson and began to dolly in, but fast—and suddenly in the control room Jim realized both cameras were on a collision course.

The floor manager was screaming "Stop them somebody! Stop them! Quick!"

At the moment when the cameramen finally woke up to what was happening, turned around and narrowly averted a smashing collision, Elson, white-faced, stood up, slammed down his clipboard and stormed out of the control room. Ten minutes later, after the commercial break, Elson returned, and continued as if nothing had happened. Klein had been inducted into the WNBT family.

WNBT turned out a lot more than specialized service programs, talk shows, and variations thereof. Our major attractions included several entertainment shows. First of the day was *The Morey Amsterdam Show*. A really big show. Big for a local station, that is. Morey, plus Milt DeLugg and a small house band combo, Francis Lane, an

all-around vocalist, and various members of the small production staff including the program's Gofer, and producer Bob Stewart doubling as stooges in the comedy sketches.

A comedy variety show five hours a day, five days a week, and a pretty good one, too. It was wild, woolly and free-wheeling. And genuinely entertaining. Only Morey a trouper, veteran of years of vaudeville and bigtime radio, who brought to the show his boundless energy, cardfile mind of gags, and a gift for improvised schtick, could have brought it off successfully day after day. That and a producer like Bob Stewart who also wrote bits and gags, and directors like Dwight Hemion and Mike Gargulio.

One of the show's delightful ingredients was the unexpected. Like the time, Bob recalls, when the Man from Gimbel's (one of their major sponsors) unwittingly became a comedy stooge.

Every morning Gimbels upholstery department sent over one of their upholsterers to do a pitch for their fixit business. One day, Bob wanted Willie Stein, the show's utility assistant and occasional gag writer, to play a bit part which called for a large Groucho Marx mustache. The studio makeup man arrived late, saw the Gimbels man sitting in the wings patiently waiting to go on with his plug, assumed he was Stein, walked over, stuck a funny hat on his head, and painted him with a huge Groucho mustache.

Eventually, WNBT acquired another star, in addition to Morey Amsterdam: Steve Allen.

The Gimbels man never blinked. When his cue came he calmly walked in front of the camera and did his commercial, hat, mustache and all. Seems that it was his first appearance on TV and he assumed that such things were standard practice.

The Morey Amsterdam Show really flourished when the program was moved uptown from Rockefeller Centre, where it had been forced to use a small network studio, to a large new studio in West 67th Street (now an ABC studio) which was set aside exclusively for WNBT programs. Another large studio at the same location was used for a big weekend network variety show and that provided Stewart with a splendid opportunity. Strictly unauthorized.

"Every Monday, the sets they had used over the weekend were stored for a couple of days in a workshop next to our studio," Bob remembers. "So I was able to 'borrow' some of their sets for our show. If they had a Chinese set, Morey would dust off one of his Chinatown routines; if we found a Western Saloon set, we'd cook up a Western skit, and so on. We never told Cott. He used to compliment us on how lavish the show looked, despite our tiny budget."

Eventually, WNBT acquired another star, in addition to Morey Amsterdam: Steve Allen. I suppose this is the time to set the records straight:

In '53, WNBT was being clobbered most nights from 11:20 p.m. on, because WCBS-TV the CBS, Channel 2, was spending a great deal on movies to supply their new *Late Show* strip. All I had to compete against them with were some awful British-made imports which were so bad they had never played in American movie houses. Anglo-American relations suffered from those films; so did our ratings.

Finally, I decided we should abandon movies, and I recommended to Cott that we counter-program with a daily variety show. Cott agreed. "Who'll we get to do the show?" he demanded.

I must confess that my candidate was Jack Carter. Fortunately, Cott had a better idea: Steve Allen, who had just finished an unsuccessful run on the CBS daytime network.

So we launched a daily 45-minute variety show built around Steve Allen. It was called . . . not the *Steve Allen Show* . . . but, appropriately for those days when sponsors usually forced their names into show titles, *The Knickerbocker Beer Show*, since we managed to sell a major local brewer full sponsorship.

From the start, it clicked, and in a month we were beating Channel 2. We had a bigger staff than usual: Dwight Hemion as fulltime director, Bill Harbach as fulltime producer. One writer: Stan Burns. A fulltime secretary and general assistant, Doris Benson; an AD, Virginia Dunning. No stooges for Steve yet, other than the bandleader and a small house band. Steve Lawrence and Edie Gorme joined after a few weeks.

After a 13-week run, the sponsor decided not to renew, which pleased everyone except the sales manager because without agency interference the show was really able to take off, on the road that eventually led to the network bigtime. Steve was happy, too, because we changed the show title to *The Steve Allen Show*.

He was also pleased that we were able to get rid of the sponsor's stock opening which each night called for a fat, costumed Father Knickerbocker to waddle on stage, ring a Town Crier's bell, and in a high-pitched voice invite the home audience to ". . . have fun with Father Knickerbocker's old friend, Steve Allen!"

Finally, after a run of more than a year as a local attraction, *The Steve Allen Show* was easily converted into *The Tonight Show*, aired coast-to-coast as *The Tonight Show—with Steve Allen*.

What happened was simply this: Pat Weaver, NBC VP in charge of programming, (and later President of NBC) the great showman who created *Today*, *Home* and *Tonight* and so many other innovative television concepts, had always planned to have a *Tonight* show to parallel his successful *Today* show. And it was supposed to have been a journalistically news-oriented format like *Today*, a sort of night edition of *Today*.

Somehow, Pat was never able to find the right combination of production and performing talent to build *Tonight* the way he had originally intended. Finally, he decided that since the local *Steve Allen Show* was doing so well, to convert it into . . . *Tonight*.

In typical Weaver fashion, he wisely had his executives keep the original gang together, and along with Steve to the network went Hemion, Harbach, Burns, Steve and Edie, and the others from the original local gang. Added eventually were an additional 45-minutes daily, more money for sets, music, a second writer and supporting cast, and, in time, those wonderful Allen characters like Bill Dana and Louis Nye.

The show also, acquired a regular theatre with first-rate audience facilities, the old Hudson near Broadway, which made Steve, Hermion and Harbach ecstatic. At the 67th Street studio, which in the earliest years of TV had been built on the fallacy that directors would want to hide the studio audience from the cameras (!) the audience had to be seated high up in a balcony, with so many lights in front of them that they could never see the action, except on small, badly-placed monitors. What was worse, whenever Steve wanted to do one of his bits with the audience, he had to climb up a high, shaky ladder to reach them.

In the early fifties, news was still a sometime thing in television. NBC network news with John Cameron Swayze at 7:45 p.m., CBS network news at seven-thirty with Douglas Edwards. ABC network? John Daly at 7:15 p.m. Locally most stations had only ten-minute news programs, once or twice an evening, and some only had five minute news periods.

As program head of Channel 4, I had some responsibility for news, in a cu-

rious way: the network news department "packaged" the news for us. I selected the anchor men, which annoyed the network people. I was also supposed to have some sort of creative involvement in the production of local news, which meant I was assigned to submit my ideas and criticisms to a network news executive, who ignored them. I remember one fight with the network, when I dared to suggest that since we got very little local newsfilm from the nationally-oriented network news staff at least we ought to use some still pix. The putdown was instant: "Unless pictures move, we don't want em."

Fortunately, our competition was weak. WCBS offered a 15-minute early evening thing at six, with five-minute segments each of news, features and sports with Bob Trout, Bill Leonard and Jim McKay. We saved our news for a more solid presentation of 15-minutes at 6:45 (*The Esso Reporter*). As for WABC-TV, they didn't compete at all in the early evening.

At 11 o'clock, we beat WCBS easily because an opportunistic local sales department at Channel 2 had apparently persuaded management to break the daily 11 o'clock news strip by putting in a fully-sponsored program break called *Chronoscope* Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 11 to 11:10 p.m. which featured dull interviews with Washington personalities, sponsored by Longines; if anything it was even duller than their old Symphonette radio concerts. And the WCBS-TV news? That was scheduled only at 11 the other nights of the week! (As if news did not happen on Mondays, Wednesdays or Fridays.)

In that era, 11 p.m. news programs with the exception of a few stations which preferred five-minute formats, were only ten minutes long, followed by five-minute weather and five-minute sports, or vice versa. Each was a separate segment, because sponsors liked it that way.

Before news programs became spot carriers, it was impossible ever to convince a sales manager that the sports and weather ought to be integrated into the news. And no one would have ever dreamed that eventually news programs would be expanded to a half-hour . . . an hour . . . an hour and a half . . . two hours.

Feature films were not yet a significant part of local programming. The major studios enforced a ban on the sales of any of their product, old or new, to television. Later that decade, when first RKO, next Warner Brothers, and then Twentieth-Century allowed their pre-1948 libraries to be sold to TV, the era of local TV movies flourished. Stations now were able to schedule as many as two and three film strips each day; a Big Movie, an Early Show, and Late Show, and a Late Late Show, etc. Finally, the majors decided to make even their post-48 movies available, and movies on TV became bigger than ever. Locally.

Network movies, however, were still in the future. For more than a decade the three networks had rigid policies—they would not program movies (even if they were to be made available). Strangely, this was out of an unfounded fear, that if the networks began to program movies, somehow it would undermine the need for interconnected national networks.

I remember one NBC affiliates convention in Miami Beach where David Sarnoff, the RCA chief, warned the stations about the perils of feature films, and scolded them for showing too many movies locally.

As for movies made for television, nobody thought then that it would ever be possible economically or creatively to produce feature films just for television.

By 1953 on the local scene, syndicated film was starting to become available. The Age of Ziv was upon us. In the fifties, it was still possible for a syndicator to produce acceptable

first-run drama and sitcom film series for local only, and make money doing it. Most of the Hollywood Majors, displaying their usual lack of foresight, still had not entered TV production, either for network or local, because they apparently feared they might knock the glitter off the golden goose of theatrical exhibition.

Remember *Foreign Intrigue*? *The Ruggles*? *Boston Blackie*? *The Cisco Kid*? *Annie Oakley*? *Range Rider*? *Ramar of the Jungle*? *Sheena*?

Still, we didn't have much to choose from when the syndicators came peddling their product. Judged by today's standards, most of the film series were rather poor, but slotted in the right period (7:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m., 6:30 or 10:30 p.m.), you could build a substantial audience. Remember *Foreign Intrigue*? *The Ruggles*? *Boston Blackie*? *The Cisco Kid*? *Janet Dean, Registered Nurse*? *Annie Oakley*? *Range Rider*? *Ramar of the Jungle*? *Sheena*? *Highway Patrol*? *Navy Log*? *Sea Hunt*?

Since most network shows were live, there were no network reruns to slot in local time. Besides, most of us probably would have thought then that network reruns would not have performed effectively in local time; we were overly afraid of reruns.

Still, we did experiment. I remember one day when John Mitchell of Screen Gems, who later became President of Columbia TV, came to pitch a bold idea: *The Ford Theatre*, a filmed network series—an anthology program—was now available for local. How would we like to try it out, and see if under a new title (*Story Theatre*) reruns would attract an audience?

We decided to take a chance. And it worked—at 7:00 p.m. instead of a live local show. Maybe it was the beginning of the end for live local production?

Were the early fifties the good old days for local programming? Well, yes and no. A lot of the stuff we churned out at Channel 4 was trivial, some of it mediocre or worse. But we blazed some trails, and we developed first-rate talent, for on the air, and off the air—performers, producers, writers, program managers, executives. Shows like *Tonight*, among others, grew out of roots at WNBT.

Our public affairs and cultural programs, like *Through The Enchanted Gate*, the Museum of Modern Art's first TV series, a program on art for children, and *Princeton '54* that university's first adventure in video, can stand up with any current local series. And above all, we lived every workday in a climate of creativity, enjoying ourselves in an atmosphere of challenge and opportunity.

At the same time, this was happening not just in New York; certainly WNBT was not the only station where local production was booming. I knew then that there was also a lot going on in some of the other major markets, especially Chicago, Cincinnati, Boston, Los Angeles, and even smaller cities like Columbus, Ohio, at WBNS-TV under the late Tad Reeves. And do you remember that wonderful and sometimes wacky era when the Los Angeles independents—KTLA, KCOP, and notably KTTV were battling it out with all sorts of local shows, great, good and just plain lousy? Raise a toast, too, to the old WPTZ, Philadelphia, where their local morning show was built around a young comic named Ernie Kovacs.

Nevertheless, I must admit that too much of local television in those years consisted of cooking shows, plus one-man or one-woman gabfests, most of which were even worse than some of those morning local talk throwaways which still clutter up so many stations today. Plus guys in firemen's hats, clown costumes or policemen's suits

who fronted all those daily cartoon shows.

But something is missing today. For the most part, local stations are no longer a wonderful training ground for programming, production and performing talent. Too many program managers have become mostly glorified film buyers, jugglers of schedules, and master shufflers of paper, lacking show savvy and the skills to build and develop programs. ■

Richard Pack migrated from WNBT in the mid-fifties to Westinghouse Broadcasting Co. as national Program Manager, the first group programming manager in the industry. He became Senior Vice President Programming and Production, a post he held for more than fifteen years. He was also President of Group W Films. He is currently a TV program consultant, as well as editor of *Television Quarterly*.

R E P L A Y

Murrow on Management

"One of the basic troubles with radio and television news is that both instruments have grown up as an incompatible combination of show business, advertising and news. Each of the three is a rather bizarre and demanding profession. And when you get all three under one roof, the dust never settles.

"The top management of the networks, with a few notable exceptions, has been trained in advertising, research, or show business. But by the nature of the corporate structure, they also make the final and crucial decisions having to do with news and public affairs. Frequently, they have neither the time nor the competence to do this. . ."

—Edward R. Murrow, speech to the Radio-Television News Directors Association, Chicago, October 15, 1958

THE EMMY STORY

According to legend the film statuette *Oscar* got its name because it looked like somebody's uncle. *Tony,* the theatre's highest award, is an abbreviation of Antoinette Perry. Now it's time for *Emmy,* and for historians, here's how *Emmy* got her name.

Emmy history goes back to the first ceremony.

The TV Academy's constitution empowers it to "recognize outstanding achievements in the television industry by conferring annual awards of merit as an incentive for achievement within the industry..." In 1948, Charles Brown, then president of the young organization, named a committee to select award-winners for that year. He also asked for suggestions on a symbol and what it would be called.

Some thought "Iconoscope" (for large orthicon tube) would be an impressive title, but it was pointed out that it would be shortened to "Ike," a name reserved for Dwight Eisenhower.

Another television favorite was *Tilly* (for television). But in the end, *Emmy,* a derivative of *Immy* (a nickname for the image orthicon tube) was chosen. The name was suggested by pioneer television engineer Harry Lubcke (president of the Academy in 1949-50).

Once the name had been selected, the next chore was the symbol. Some one hundred-and-eighteen sketches were submitted to the committee and when the candidates were cut to only two, designer Louis McManus presented an entry and the committee knew it had found its Emmy.

On January 25, 1949, the first annual TV Awards were presented at the Hollywood Athletic Club with Walter O'Keefe as host. Of the six awards presented that evening, one went to McManus as a special tribute.

As McManus was called to the head table, he was told, "Louis here she is...our baby. She'll be here long after we're gone." McManus was then presented with a gold, lifetime membership card and an *Emmy*.


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MAX

BY TED SENNETT AND BURTON LEHRENBAUM

"COMEDY!," Max Liebman exclaimed. "What has happened to television comedy?"

With faltering gait but clear-eyed determination, Max had climbed the short, winding staircase that led from the sixth-floor elevator stop to his office atop the old City Center Building in New York. We had opened the door to greet him as usual, and characteristically, without so much as a "good morning," he had started to enlighten us with the depressing details of the program he had seen the night before.

In a matter of minutes, the veteran entrepreneur, as he liked to call himself, had launched a discussion that embraced many topics: the perilous state of television comedy and variety; memories dredged from decades of achievement, not only in television; flattering observations on the durable figures of the entertainment world, coupled with less-than-flattering comments on contemporary entertainers. (On *Saturday Night Live*: "They call themselves the Not Ready for Prime Time Players—and they're right.")

Pushing eighty (very gently, very wistfully), and speaking with a forcefulness that belied his years, this frail, slight man dispensed wit and wisdom every time we met. He acknowledged our own few comments politely, never once turning off his hearing aid. We listened with affection, admiration, and not a little awe.

For several years, we were privileged to be friends of the showman who had changed the face of television forever. The friendship had started when he consented to offer up his vast storehouse of materials for a book on *Your Show of Shows* (Ted Sennett—Macmillan, 1977), and happily the friendship had continued until his death. During those years, he had allowed us to work out of his office on various projects and gratefully we had leaped at the opportunity. In that office (actually several connected offices), we were steeped in television history, surrounded by ghostly echoes of the many gifted people who had worked there. Inevitably, there were framed telegrams from performers Max had introduced to television ("Dear Max: This is one of the happiest nights of my life. Thank you, Maurice.")

There were also walls of filing cabinets stuffed with often yellowing or crumbling reviews and articles, and a low credenza bearing medallions, statuettes, scrolls, and plaques from the fifties ("Man of the Year," "Best Television Series," "Best Television Special," etc.)

But for us the hallowed ground was a large closet containing the kinescopes of every show Max had ever conceived and produced. Occasionally, Max would dust off a slightly rickety projector, and on a wall he

would show, for our edification and delight, excerpts from his most cherished editions of *Your Show of Shows*. Seeing the flickering images of Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca in one of the movie satires, or one of the sketches involving the battling Hickenloopers, we would be continually astonished at the freshness and durability of the humor. We were also touched by the deep pleasure the material stirred in Max; behind his thick-rimmed glasses, his pale blue eyes seemed to sparkle with enjoyment, tinged, perhaps, with a wistful sadness.

Most of the time, though, he wasn't sad. Indignation comes closer to describing his attitude, indignation at what was happening to television in general and television comedy in particular. Arriving at his office about 10:30, he would hold forth for hours on the subject. And we sat there listening, sometimes with skepticism at the beginning but almost always, at the end, admitting to each other, "Max was right."

Three decades earlier, Max Liebman had been at the peak of his success in television, fully recognized and honored as one of the medium's true innovators. With the launching of *Your Show of Shows* in 1950, he had turned television comedy and variety in a new direction, moving from the standard formats derived from vaudeville and nightclubs to the more sophisticated style of the Broadway theater. Drawing on a permanent group of enthusiastic and talented people, both behind and in front of the camera, Max combined witty, irreverent comedy and first-class singing and dancing into ninety minutes of live, original, Broadway-caliber entertainment.

Without benefit of tape or canned laughter, he created a weekly television show that both audiences and critics could admire and cherish, which they did in abundance for the more than four years of the show's existence. For legions of devoted fans, *Your Show of Shows* became essential viewing on Saturday nights, as well as a landmark against which all other shows of its kind could be judged.

Boldly, Max injected elements into each show that would ordinarily be looked as anathema to television viewers. He offered fully staged excerpts from opera, featuring such Metropolitan luminaries as Lily Pons and Robert Merrill. The luminous Alicia Markova joined a corps of dancers in beautifully wrought ballet sequences. Above all, Max defied the usual aversion to satire by introducing sharply satirical humor into many of the show's sketches, poking sly and sometimes malicious fun not only at popular targets such as the movies but also at human pretensions and absurdities.

Right from the start, he refused to underestimate the intelligence of his audience. In 1950 he remarked, "One thing we take for granted on our show is that the mass audience we're trying to reach isn't a dumb one. It has a high quota of intelligence, and there's no need to play down to it. That is why we try to maintain a mature approach. We strive for adult entertainment without compromise, and believe that the audience will understand it." He was right. Audiences embraced the show's more "esoteric" elements as completely as they welcomed the antics of its gifted stars, Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca.

For Max, *Your Show of Shows* was the culmination of many years spent in entertaining people while honing his skills. Born in Vienna, he had come to America at an early age and had plunged into the theater world as a writer and producer for vaudeville actors. For many months he would work with his performers, changing their lines, perfecting their routines, and quietly prodding them to improve. (Max loved vaudeville and enjoyed recalling many of the sprightly songs from its heyday.) He also worked as a social director at summer resorts, finally

coming, in 1934, to an adult summer camp called Tamiment, located in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains.

At Tamiment, he created weekly original revues for the guests, acting as writer, producer, director, and supervisor of the costumes, scenery, and music. Every Saturday night, he was required to come up with a major production. (Later, Max remarked, "I was doing what you might call television without cameras.") Luckily, he could draw on a considerable amount of budding young talent, including Carol Channing, Jerome Robbins, Alfred Drake, Jules Munshin, Betty Garrett, and a genial sprite named Imogene Coca, who had already appeared in Broadway revues. He also came upon a lanky young redhead with an instinctive comedy sense and a style all his own. His name was Danny Kaye, and he was introduced to Max by Sylvia Fine, who later became Mrs. Kaye.

Leaving Tamiment in 1940, Max joined with Sylvia Fine in putting together an act for Danny Kaye. When Kaye was signed by Samuel Goldwyn, Max went with them to Hollywood, to work on Kaye's first feature film, *Up in Arms*. When it seemed as though Kaye would be inducted into the army, Max joined MGM as a writer and during this time and afterward, also served as a "play-doctor" to ailing scripts. "Pavlova," a parody of Martha Graham and one of the funniest songs he had written with Sylvia Fine for Kaye's act, was interpolated into Kaye's 1946 film, *The Kid From Brooklyn*. But it was another kid from Yonkers who drastically altered Max's life. Many years later, Max spoke about his discovery of a stocky, handsome young saxophonist-turned-comedian named Sid Caesar:

While I was on a hiatus from MGM, waiting for them to pick up my option, I got a call from Vernon Duke asking me whether I'd be interested in putting on a revue for the Coast Guard down in Florida in Palm Beach, called Tars and Spars. *The intention was to do a recruiting show that would get people to enlist. The show's star was Victor Mature but there was a guy named Sid Caesar in it. We did a full-length revue down there, but when it went out on tour, it played in motion picture houses. We appeared at the Strand in New York, cut down to an hour. And that's when Sid and I concocted the airplane routine, which he repeated in the movie with Alfred Drake.*

For Max, Caesar was a major discovery, an instinctive and prodigiously gifted comedian with virtually infinite potential. Several years after *Tars and Spars*, Max helped Caesar prepare his act for a crucial opening at New York's Copacabana, then watched with satisfaction as Caesar's enormous success led to his becoming a major attraction in nightclubs and theaters. In 1948 Caesar made his debut on the legitimate stage as one of the stars of the musical revue *Make Mine Manhattan*. The show ran for a year, and Caesar was given the 1948 Donaldson Award for the best debut performance in a Broadway musical.

Only a month later, again under Max's tutelage, Caesar was launching his television career as one of the stars of the *Admiral Broadway Revue*. It was also Max's first venture into television, both the previous summer when an advertising agency man named Sylvester (Pat) Weaver saw Max's Saturday night revue at Tamiment and became enthused about its potential for the new medium of television. Not long after, as a vice president of NBC, Weaver was in a position to act on his enthusiasm, and the *Admiral Broadway Revue* premiered on January 28, 1949. Using largely the same format as the Tamiment revues, each of the hour-long shows combined sketches and songs around a single theme ("Night Life in New York," "Cross Country"), with solo turns for the leading players, who included Caesar, Imogene Coca, Mary McCarty, and young

dancers Marge and Gower Champion. Despite largely favorable reviews and audience approval, the show ran for only nineteen weeks, closing on June 3, 1949.

At this time Pat Weaver reentered the picture and spoke to Max about producing a new and extravagant television revue that would run for a massive two and a half hours. Gasping at the prospect of filling so much time, Max finally agreed to take up ninety minutes with *Your Show of Shows*, with the remaining hour going to a vaudeville-oriented program of comedy and music starring comedian Jack Carter. Max immediately began to assemble the cast and crew, drawing on many of the people who had worked with him on the Admiral show: Caesar and Coca, writers Mel Tolkin and Lucille Kallen, choreographer James Starbuck, set designer Frederick Fox, conductor Charles Sanford, and others.

Talented people were added: dancers Mata and Hari; opera singers Marguerite Piazza and Robert Merrill; the Billy Williams Quartette; dancers Bambi Lynn and Rod Alexander, and a dance group called the Hamilton Trio. On hand, too, for each week's show were the clean-cut singers-in-residence, Bill Hayes, Judy Johnson, and Jack Russell. Using guest stars as rotating hosts, *Your Show of Shows* brought forth a dazzling array of comedy and music that ranged from solo turns by the stars to elaborate production numbers. It premiered on February 25, 1950.

For every edition of *Your Show of Shows*, Max insisted on the finest, most professional performers. However, the show's kingpin and central force remained Sid Caesar. From the first, Max had recognized in him the touch of comic genius that transcended the one-line, stand-up comedians of the day. Driven by the need to perform comedy only in the way *he* could, Caesar insisted on sifting his material through a sieve that was purely personal. It was what Max called "Caesarizing" the material. Max remarked, "No matter how it went in, it came out as Caesar." Even at the peak of the show's success, Max understood the nature of Caesar's comedy. He wrote:

Characterization, not gags, is the main ingredient of his technique. He is blessed with a kind of magical truth, the uncanny ability to project the core and humanity of the character he is playing. Beneath the surface humor there is a wry commentary on the conventions and hypocrisies of life and manners. No stand-still comic is Caesar, but a powerhouse of energy spawning routines that become classics."

Caesar's variety of gifts—his ability to execute pantomime and triple-tongued dialects, or to breathe life into inanimate objects—emerged most fully in his solo or tandem routines. As himself, standing before the curtain to introduce the show's host, he was something of a nervous wreck, awkward and painfully ill-at-ease. On stage, however, whether playing a gumball machine or a German professor of bottomless ignorance, he was almost demoniac in his supercharged energy, as he reacted to every situation in explosively comic ways. In his monologues he created a man besieged by life but unwilling to admit it, spewing forth a torrent of words that expressed emotions ranging all the way from happiness to fear, loathing, dismay, or desperation. Whether portraying a young man proposing marriage or a middle-aged man watching his son graduate from medical school or his daughter being married, Caesar captured the essence of Everyman in the middle of the twentieth century.

Caesar's costar in *Your Show of Shows* was Imogene Coca, the instinctively—and inordinately—funny comedienne who had appeared with him in the *Admiral Revue*. Max had immediately recognized the special gifts

in that tiny frame and expressive, pixieish face: her sublime sense of the ridiculous, her ability to parody human posturings and pretensions without an ounce of cruelty, and especially the quality of sweetness and vulnerability that permeates even her broadest comedy routines.

Audiences laughed at her culture-vulture Doris Hickenlooper, her smirking and seductive vamps, her slightly addled ballet dancers, and, of course, her jaunty and wistful tramp. But there was something else—something aptly described by the program's choreographer Jimmy Starbuck: "There is a substance, a kind of glow about her on the stage—a Chaplinesque quality, an air of poignancy and sadness over the laughter."

A veteran of Broadway revues and smart supper clubs, Coca (she was seldom called anything else) came to *Your Show of Shows* with a sharply honed professionalism that Max admired and appreciated. He noted that "Coca has the touch of greatness that can evoke tremendous sympathy from an audience, adding with characteristic wisdom, "In television, you have to have some quality that makes the audience love you. This isn't true in pictures, nor in any other performing area. In television, though, if the people don't love you, you're through. You never get started if they don't love you."

Separately, Caesar and Coca displayed their talents for pantomime and parody, but together they were inimitable in ways that made the routine television comedy of the day seem cruder and more antiquated than it already was.

Max himself could hardly explain the special rapport they enjoyed: "Here are two comedians who are helping each other instead of competing for laughs. It's screwy; it's something that doesn't happen. Yet it is happening, and it works." Confidently, he paired them in sketches and routines that would test and even stretch their comic skills. As Charlie and Doris Hickenlooper in a series of sketches, they delineated a marriage perched somewhere between heaven and hell: two mismatched people trying to cope with daily traumas.

In their cliché routines ("Isn't it a small world!"), they depicted two people with an inexhaustible capacity for stating the obvious on any topic (children, marriage, divorce), or for relating hilariously pointless stories. And in their brilliant takeoffs on silent movies, supported by "second bananas" Carl Reiner and Howard Morris, they recreated, without malice, the extravagant attitudes and gestures of movies in their early years.

Under Max's guidance, *Your Show of Shows* blossomed most fully in its satires on popular American and foreign films of the day. Satire has never flourished on television—throwing poison-dipped darts at sacred cows has never been a popular pastime with American audiences—and when it does turn up, it's often crude and heavy-handed. In what was a rather bold move for its time, Max decided to acknowledge—and respect—his audience's gray matter by spoofing the movies; either venerable genres such as the musical, the prison movie, and the medical movie, or widely admired boxoffice hits such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Shane*.

Often he would take advantage of his leading players's ability to simulate foreign languages by spoofing well-known French, Italian, or German films ("La Bicycletta," "Au Revoir, Ma Cherie"). British films were not immune—one of the funniest satires was a takeoff of *The Seventh Veil*—called "The Seventh Wail"—a psychological drama with a tormented heroine and lots of classical music.)

The satires usually became the show's centerpiece, as well as the rallying ground for everyone involved in creating each week's program. Max saw them as a golden opportunity to

expand the limits of television comedy. For the talented writers, including Mel Tolkin, Lucille Kallen, and later Mel Brooks and Tony Webster, they were a chance to send up the classic and currently popular movies with irreverence and affection. They were also a showcase for the satirical skills of the performers: Caesar as a hulking, brutish Stanley Kowalski screaming "Stella!" and Coca as a twittering Blanche DuBois; Caesar as a mysterious cowboy named "Strange" and Coca as the boy who worships him. For audiences reconciled to bowling, Pinky Lee, and wrestling, they were a happy surprise.

Your Show of Shows not only gave Max the chance to move television comedy into new areas but also allowed him to showcase many of the great performing artists in well-staged musical segments. Without using gimmicks to make the numbers more "palatable" to the average audience, he offered up the likes of Alicia Markova, Tamara Toumanova, Jacques d'Amboise, and Maria Tallchief from the world of ballet, and Lily Pons, Patrice Munsel, Cesare Siepi, and Jan Peerce from the world of opera. Occasionally, special guests would include such leading popular singers as Lena Horne, Pearl Bailey, and Nat "King" Cole.

Your Show of Shows came to an end in June, 1954 after many months of rumor about its imminent demise. Some critics who had acclaimed the program at its inception had apparently gotten used to its unwavering professionalism and were calling it overly familiar and in need of freshening. Untrue stories were circulating about differences between Max and his stars, and there was inevitable talk about Caesar and Coca wanting their own shows. Despite repeated assurances by the principals about their "mutual respect and regard" for each other, the future of the program remained in doubt. Finally, in February of 1954, the official closing notice was posted.

The final show reprised many of the favorite sketches and songs, including the silent movie about "Bertha, the Sewing-Machine Girl" and the French movie parody, "Au Revoir, Ma Cherie or Toot Toot Tootsie, So Long." Once again, Doris Hickenlooper served her first disastrous meal to Charlie. Most memorably, Coca repeated her Tramp routine to the tune of "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams," while clearly trying to keep herself from crying. Caesar and Coca spoke a few words, and there was a brief speech by Pat Weaver, then president of NBC. *Your Show of Shows* had become part of television history.

Now that the weekly challenge of *Your Show of Shows* was relegated to the past, Max turned to a new season, and a new concept. With his usual reverence for talent, he planned to produce a series of "spectaculars" over the 1955 and 1956 seasons—revues and book musicals that would star both established and fresh young talent. Looking over the roster of performers, one is astonished by the number of eminent and soon-to-be-eminent people who appeared in these shows over the two-year period.

Under Max's auspices, Maurice Chevalier made his first American television appearance in December, 1985. Musical revues with a class, style, and star-power that Broadway might envy presented such performers as Ethel Merman, Bert Lahr, Judy Holliday, Alfred Drake, Tony Randall, Nancy Walker, Steve Allen, Martha Raye, Ray Bolger, and Milton Berle. Book musicals were equally blessed: Betty Hutton in *Satins and Spurs*; Cyril Ritchard and Cornelia Otis Skinner in *Dearest Enemy*; Dennis Day, Wally Cox, and Barbara Cook in *Babes in Toyland*; Ann Sothern in *Lady in the Dark*; Eddie Albert, Janet Blair, and Boris Karloff in *A Connecticut Yankee*, and others. To these productions Max brought a glistening professionalism that was never seriously marred by the limitations and

restrictions of early television.

Max followed the "spectaculars" with *Stanley*, a situation comedy that starred Buddy Hackett as Stanley Peck, the proprieter of a newsstand in a fancy New York hotel. It featured a rising young comedienne named Carol Burnett as Stanley's girlfriend Cecilia, and Paul Lynde's inimitable voice was used for the unseen character of Horace Fenton, the hotel's manager. Running from September, 1956 to March, 1957, it would be Max's last television show. In the years that followed, he spent his days in his City Center office, creating ideas for television shows and writing notes for a play. In 1973, he put together a feature film called *Ten From Your Show of Shows*, which compiled a number of the best-remembered sketches from the program; it was widely shown and enthusiastically received.

During the time we knew Max, he conceived of a situation comedy that would reunite Caesar and Coca. For whatever reason, he had a difficult time reaching the television executives who could help him. And when he did reach them, he met with polite dismissal. We knew that it hurt him, and it distressed us terribly that the man who reshaped television could be so casually ignored.

Max Liebman died in 1981. To the end, his principal—almost his only—interest was show business in general, television in particular; to the end his ability to sift the good from the bad was unsurpassed. To the end, his principal worry was his wife Sonia, a charming, irresistible, totally warmhearted and generous woman who Max feared was getting old. (They had met on Long Island when Sonia was a young, aspiring opera singer and Max—Max Liebman!—was a horseback riding instructor.) Sonia lived on for several years after Max died, never really recovering from her loss.

But for a few years, we knew a Max who had all his faculties and some to spare, a Max who, in the course of a single afternoon, could do a little dance to a fondly remembered vaudeville tune, consume two bars of frozen yogurt on a stick without so much as pausing for breath, and expound on the precarious state of world affairs and/or television. Most important, Max still understood all too well what was funny, and what was not, and he was still sharply aware of the needs, demands, and fickleness of that all-seeing monster called television. Several months before he died, he permitted us to interview him and to record his ideas. Here are some excerpts from that interview:

■

You've been around comedy for a long time. What makes people laugh? What exactly is it that makes something funny?

In the broadest sense it's the unexpected, the element of surprise. Next it's the personality of the comedian, his style. To me, comedy—at least great comedy—cannot be achieved without great comedians. So far great comedy I would say, it's not *what* makes people laugh; it's *who* makes people laugh. It's the same in painting; if Picasso paints a garbage can, it's beautiful.

There's something people say about comedians; they use the phrase, "He's a funny man." They don't mean he's doing something funny; they mean he's doing something in a funny way. Incidentally, there's no comparable phrase for serious actors; nobody says, "He's a dramatic fellow."

So what makes people laugh are comedians. Great comedians make them laugh more often and more deeply. Amateurs can also make people laugh, sometimes just by accident. But great comedy can't be achieved without great comedians.

On the other hand, you don't need great comedians for successful comedy. Writers can create for actors with a feeling for comedy, and they'll be funny. Writers can even create for non-actors, or for tragic actors, and they'll

get laughs. But that doesn't define the best in the field, those who project star quality as comedians. To project star quality they have to have star abilities.

What besides the element of surprise and the element of personality makes a successful comedian?
Maturity. You can't be a teenager. You can have a child comedian, but you can't have a teenage comedian.

In my world, comedy is a distortion of nature, a tilting of the truth. First you have the truth and then you tilt it . . . and it's the extent of the tilt that determines the style of comedy: low or high, broad or subtle. But before you can distort reality you have to convince the audience that you've experienced it. That takes maturity; it takes maturity to have experienced reality and carry it to the audience.

The most slapstick of comedy must have an air of credibility or the audience won't find it funny, because somewhere there must be a place for the truth. A slapstick fall doesn't exist unless the real thing exists. The same is true of violence. One of the most popular sketches we ever did on *Your Show of Shows* had Imogene Coca swatting Sid Caesar with his own hat. That kind of scene demands that they both be mature. Two teenagers beating each other up would be completely unacceptable. You wouldn't take it from them; they're not entitled. They don't have the background.

Is there anything else that makes a good comedian?
Reaction: the ability to react skillfully to a situation rather than simply act funny. Sid Caesar is the best reacting comic I've known.

A comedian also needs to know his own strengths. Caesar, for example, always wanted his material to be just right for him. Sometimes he rejected a line because it was too clever, because any other comedian could use it and be funny. He has a sense of his own style, and the material he projects must be distilled—Caesarized. He doesn't have much use for the comedy writer who's only a purveyor of one-like jokes.

What makes a great comedian?
Nothing makes it; it's there. Look at Coca: Her last Broadway show was a musical, *On the Twentieth Century*, and she got the biggest laughs and the best reviews in the show. She wasn't even the producer's first choice, but she was probably the better choice because Coca can . . . run funny. There's a lot of running in the show, and Coca runs funny, and people laugh. If you can't run funny it's ludicrous if you try, although many comedians do try. It's not something that can be taught; it's a matter of instinct. It has nothing to do with physical fitness. Whenever Coca has to run funny, she will. It's the comic spirit that pervades her whole body. Everything she does is funny because it emerges from a comic source.

I'll tell you how you can know a great comedian. He's the one whose impact doesn't fade with the punch line, but whose performance can be savored time and time again. That's true of Sid Caesar.

Why aren't there more Sid Caesars today?
Some time in the sixties, content became more important than skill. What the comedian said mattered more than how he said it. It became enough simply to deride the Establishment, which encompassed all the villains, even their own family members. All you had to do was mention Nixon or Johnson or Kissinger and you aroused a reaction. You told the audience it was funny and they believed you, because they were of the same mind as you were.

What was the result? You've got young comedians who don't know how to do professional comedy, and a young audience that doesn't know what professional comedy is like. They're all working on content and sex appeal

rather than on comic technique and experience. But you can't disguise lack of skill for very long; sooner or later you're found out.

Why do you think that in most respects television today can't match the level of twenty-five years ago?
The people aren't there. One reason has to do with money: television can be very lucrative at times, but so are motion pictures—with half the work. One hit film can make an overnight millionaire out of practically everyone connected with it. But in television you have to be a hit night after night, season after season. So the movies have drawn away many of the best people, and those that are left—journeymen, most of them—are being treated as geniuses. They're getting genius money but they're not doing genius work.

Another difference between television comedy today and twenty-five years ago is that it's a lot sexier today.
That's often the doing of the network executives. The demands on comedians can be as desperate as the race for ratings, and the networks think the road to popularity is through bosoms and behinds. So they exert great pressure on writers and directors—and actors—to inject more sex into their shows. It's hard to resist that kind of pressure.

When the old, professional comedians came to television, they knew they could get laughs without being dirty; they had done it before. But the new performers lacked that experience, that confidence. Isn't that when you go for the dirty stuff?
Essentially, that's when you go for the easy stuff. There have always been cheap shots you could throw and get laughs with—gay comedy, sex comedy—and they were on television from the beginning. Today they've become emphasized almost to the point of pornography. Again, it's part of the race for ratings.

When you did *Your Show of Shows*, did you worry about ratings?
I worried about getting the approval of the audience.

You've said that good comedy is inborn and that popularity is a matter of love. That sounds as though everything depends on chance, as though all you can do is put on a show and hope it works out. Surely that's not so.
You need a sense of showmanship to blend the elements together. You need a feeling for what the audience will respond to, and how to give it to them.

That's not the same as giving the audience what they want. An audience wants a lot of things, and merely giving them what they want can lead you to the lowest levels of their appreciation. But with the right kind of showmanship, that level can be elevated to a plateau closer to your own.

The networks think they can do more than add showmanship, and in a way they're right. They can tinker with the scheduling—put new or failing shows in between popular shows, things like that. They can try huge advertising campaigns.

For comedy shows, the networks can do something else. They can add a laugh track, or enhance the laughs that are already there.

Most people think the trouble with the laugh track is that it fools the audience. They're right. What the networks do is tape a show before a live audience and then enhance the reaction: they make small laughs large, large laughs larger, larger laughs yoks. Then they proclaim, "This show was performed before a live audience," which is true. They don't add "—and then sent to the lab to sweeten the reaction of that live audience." It's not illegal, but it does seem like misrepresentation.

Early in television, comedy was done before a live audience, and what was

broadcast was the unsweetened reaction of that live audience. Their laughter was the measure of your success. You had to appeal to people who were passing judgment on you immediately, and that was a tremendous incentive to be good. Today there's no losing. There's not a joke or comic bit that doesn't get a laugh, even if the laugh's on tape.

So there's no barometer as to what works and what doesn't, and therefore one show is no help in preparing the next. To know where you stand today, sometimes it's useful to go back and look at your past. But with the laugh track the past is phoney: there's no way of learning anything, no measure of judgment, and consequently no way of knowing how to improve. And there's no incentive to improve, because there's no retribution from the audience. That's another reason comedy has deteriorated.

We'd like to talk a little about *Your Show of Shows*. Of all the sketches you did, what was the funniest?
Looking at an entire sketch, the funniest was the oldest, the least original, the least clever . . . the one called "Suicide." Imogene plays a wild lady telling Sid about her marriage to a drunkard, and every time she reaches the phrase, "he came home roaring drunk," she throws a rave. She beats Sid up, belts him with his hat, tears off his clothes. That sketch received the biggest audience reaction of all—and I'll tell you what the secret of it was.

What was the secret?
Sex. The physical element of sex.

Sex? Imogene is hitting Sid with his hat. That's sex?
His clothes are being torn off, and his skin shows. If he had been wearing an undershirt it wouldn't have been as funny. But when she tears off his clothes and the audience sees his skin, that does it.

Sid and Coca were great performers. But a great show also needs a sense of showmanship. Would you say that was your contribution to *Your Show of Shows*?
In a way. I picked the performers, the writers, the scene designers, the choreographer. I directed. But what I mostly did was bring a sense of showmanship to the proceedings. And I'll tell you what made the whole thing work. In every department, I was only comfortable with the best—according to my judgment.

In a way that makes life easy.
It doesn't make it easy. It makes it possible.

Will television ever have another Max Liebman?
Why not?

Because things are different. You came to television after thirty years in every aspect of theater. You learned the business from the bottom up, without the pressure of having to get instant raves. Does the opportunity still exist? Can there still be an impresario who knows the trade thoroughly?
I think so. There is theater flourishing now on the community level, much more than the so-called little theater or experimental theater of the past. And there are plenty of people who want to be entertained. The young grow up. Their tastes may change, but the fundamentals of comedy will never change, as the fundamentals of human nature will never change. Or so I believe. ■

Ted Sennett is an author and editor of books on film and the performing arts. His most recent book is *Great Movie Directors*, published by Harry Abrams. He also wrote *Great Hollywood Movies*, *Hollywood Musicals* and *Your Show of Shows*. *Burton Lehrenbaum* is co-author of *45—and Single Again*, published by Dembner Books. He is on the faculty at City College of New York.

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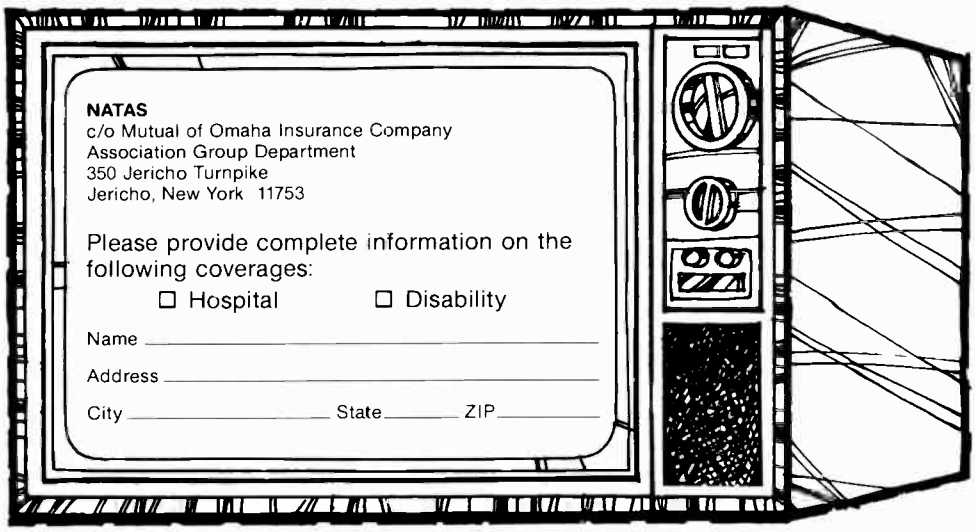

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THE ACADEMY

Review and Comment

THE GENERAL: David Sarnoff and the Rise of the Communications Industry

By Kenneth Bilby
Harper & Row, New York, 326 pp

BY LAWRENCE LAURENT

The story has been published so many times and in so many places it's difficult to conceive that it is untrue. This is the stirring tale of young David Sarnoff, sitting all alone at his radio receiver the night of April 14, 1912 and hearing the faint distress signal from the sinking S.S. Titanic, somewhere among the ice floes in the North Atlantic. Sarnoff responded heroically by signalling a near-by ship to go and pick up survivors and President William Howard Taft ordered all other U.S. radio stations off the air to help Sarnoff hear better the messages about the rescue and to copy down the names of the survivors. For three days and three nights—without sleep and with little food—Sarnoff remained at his post. And when the work was completed, he took a steambath and "went to bed famous. The name Sarnoff was known all over America."

Lawrence Laurent is the former TV-Radio Editor of *The Washington Post;* currently Vice President/Communication of The Association of Independent TV Stations (INTV).

The awe-inspiring tale appeared under the names of such esteemed researchers as Daniel Boorstin in his *The American Experience* and as Erik Barnouw in his landmark *A Tower In Babel*. The story was published in *The Reader's Digest* under the by-line of Sarnoff's cousin, Eugene Lyons, and it appeared in such magazines as *Fortune, Forbes, Time* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. And, I must admit that I recounted the story myself, when I wrote Sarnoff's obituary for *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

The problem is that the story isn't true. It never happened. No, Sarnoff never copied the message that the S.S. Titanic had struck an iceberg and was sinking. He never sent help.

His role was quite minor, even ancillary, in the days following the ship's sinking; but the accounts of what he was supposed to have done grew enormously with the passing years until Sarnoff's role—like Pinocchio's nose—became the most visible one. And it kept growing, for over 60 years.

The first challenge to this mythology came in 1977 with the scarcely noticed publication of radio engineer Carl Dreher's posthumous reminiscences, *Sarnoff: An American Success* (Quadrangle Books/The New York Times). Dreher was one of Sarnoff's contemporaries in the Radio Corp. of America, and I heard, by chance, about the book from a broadcast engineer.

I got a copy of the book and read with fascination Dreher's account of

the famous Titanic tragedy.

He notes, first, that the John Wanamaker store in New York where Sarnoff's radio station was located, wouldn't have been in operation on April 14, 1912 because that was a Sunday and the Wanamaker store didn't do business on Sunday. In addition, the sinking took place at night, when the store would have been closed no matter what day of the week. Finally, wrote radio engineer Dreher, the rig that Sarnoff was attending daily, as a promotion stunt for the store, was much too small to have picked up a signal from the distant North Atlantic.

Dreher didn't castigate the many tellers of the false tale, although he did reprimand the greatly admired Erik Barnouw for having included the *Titanic* tale in his otherwise splendid three-volume history of American broadcasting.

Still, if any doubts persisted, they have now been put to rest, once and for all time, one hopes, with the publication of Kenneth Biby's *The General: David Sarnoff and the Rise of the Communications Industry*. Bilby worked under Sarnoff for nearly 20 years, first at the National Broadcasting Company and later as Executive Vice President of RCA. Overall, he has written what, must be called an admiring book, for he certainly understands and appreciates the many contributions that Sarnoff made to a major industry; however, Bilby is also able to discern the truth among the flackery, no matter how painful those truths may be to those who hold to Sarnoff as a sacred, unblemished memory. The result is a book that will benefit every person who is interested in American broadcasting, one that enhances the scholarship in this field.

". . .Myths usually involve exploits of Gods and heroes," according to *Webster's New World Dictionary* while a legend is a "story handed down for generations among people and popularly believed to have a historical basis, although not verifiable." The story of David Sarnoff, the immigrant from Russia who became the leader in the development of a great American industry, is one that almost demands supporting mythology and legend. According to his good friend David Lilienthal, Sarnoff, himself was more "publicity-avid" than anyone he had known.

Sarnoff must have acquired the appetite early in life, for it is evident at every stage of his being and perhaps helps one understand the *Titanic* story. The facts were these: the sinking of the *S.S. Titanic* is a landmark event in the history of electronic communication. The tragedy, dramatized the need for radio communication and led to Congress' passing the Radio Act of 1912. The *Titanic* tragedy furnishes a benchmark, a date at which radio ceased to be a toy and became a necessity, for in the years that followed no ship was permitted to carry passengers unless it also carried radio equipment. And just what was David Sarnoff's role in this seminal event?

He was, in fact, a rising young star at the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, a radio operator with a sure "fist" at the key and swift skill in receiving the dots and dashes that form letters. His accomplishments were already notable within the company and at the age of 21 he was sent to be the manager of a two-man radio station installed as a joint promotional venture with the John Wanamaker department store at Broadway and Eighth Street in New York City. Sarnoff's assistant was J.H. Hughes and Wanamaker's had still another promotion venture going with Hearst's newspaper, *The New York Journal*. As a result of its promotion with Wanamaker's, the *New York Journal* carried a fanciful, exaggerated account of how Sarnoff and Hughes were copying down names of *Titanic* survivors who had been picked up by the rescue ship *Carpathia*. According to the *New York Journal* "eager thousands" rushed to the Wanamaker radio station, "clamor-

ing" for information and among the visitors was Vincent Astor, son of the merchant prince John Jacob Astor, who had gone down with the *Titanic*. Not even Hearst's newspaper made any attempt to portray Sarnoff as the solitary hero.

In later stories, Sarnoff would claim the event "brought radio to the front," adding quietly, "and incidentally me." However, Bilby conducted a diligent search of *The New York Times*, which devoted the greatest coverage to the event and never mentioned Sarnoff in any of its stories. Neither, for the matter, did any of the other 17 daily newspapers then being published in New York City. The matter rested for the next 11 years, until 1923 when Sarnoff told a writer for the *American* magazine (not the newspaper) that he had maintained a 72-hour vigil at Wanamaker's after picking up the faint distress signal concerning the *Titanic*. In this account, he was on duty all by himself.

Bilby writes: "Thus the snowball of legend began to roll. By 1930, when he became president of RCA at age thirty nine, *Fortune* devoted a major story to his unprecedented rise in industry, including a separate sidebar feature on the lonely *Titanic* heroics. But this time the retelling was not attributed to Sarnoff, it was simply presented as fact. *Fortune's* reputation for careful research perhaps influenced their publications to repeat it without attribution, and the snowball gathered speed and dimension. In Sarnoff's own mind, undoubtedly, the equation between fact and legend blurred as he continued reading in reputable publications of his singular feat. When he told the story in later years, he told it with the ring of truth, which it had undoubtedly become in his inner conviction."

This also tells us something about modern American journalism. Sarnoff was what reporters call "a prime source," the person who was a participant in the events that he recounted, and against this accounting American journalism has no real defense, unless a journalist is willing to look an industrial leader in the eye and call him a liar. I was in Sarnoff's presence a number of times, and I can't imagine anyone contradicting any first person reminiscence by this dominant, domineering, awe-inspiring individual.

William Yandell Elliott, the towering Williams Professor of Government at Harvard, was fond of telling his students, "Each loyalty is eventually painful," meaning that those people who stir our emotions and cause our pulses to race are the same persons who provide our greatest disappointments. Curiously, I don't really find my admiration for Sarnoff diminished; rather it gives him a more human quality and I, like Oliver Cromwell, prefer to have my heroes painted "warts and all."

Perhaps Bilby, to his sorrow, found more warts that he ever expected. Sarnoff was 5-feet, 5-inches in height. But he always insisted he was 5-feet, 8. He was celebrated for years by underlings for his appetite for beautiful women, particularly opera singers and actresses. Yet, when his cousin, Eugene Lyons, included tales of a few trysts in Sarnoff's official biography, Sarnoff complained that Lyons had "urinated on my leg in public,' completely rewrote Lyons' work and had the original fed through the shredding machine. We know, too, that he rewarded his closest personal friend, Major Edwin H. Armstrong, with the grief that reportedly drove Armstrong to suicide after they came into conflict over Armstrong's FM invention.

Major Edwin H. Armstrong was one of young Sarnoff's best friends, sharing experiments with him and having married Sarnoff's secretary. But when Armstrong's FM invention threatened to get in the way of the frequencies Sarnoff wanted for his television dream, friendship had to be forgotten. What followed was a lengthy, expen-

sive lawsuit over patent infringement that led to the Armstrong tragedy. In those days, corporate RCA had a simple policy concerning patent fees: RCA didn't pay patent fees; RCA collected patent fees.

Sarnoff was celebrated for his unwillingness to delegate authority; for his conviction that the technical aspects of broadcasting were more important than the stars who lured the listeners and later the viewers to the receiving sets. He threw a small fit when CBS introduced the long-playing recording and stubbornly insisted that his 45-revolutions-per-minute recordings be pushed off on the public, which obviously preferred the ease and convenience of the CBS model, which operated at 33 ⅓ rpm speed. And while he spent the last 20 years of his life revelling in the self-description of "practical dreamer" and "electronic prophet," he failed, completely, to grasp the importance of the most important development in communications after World War II.

This is the transistor, which replaced the vacuum tubes Sarnoff so dearly loved; the transistor, which—because of its impact upon high speed electronic data processing—is turning out to be one of the most significant happenings of this century. (Please note: I did not write "the invention" of the transistor. What changed the world was the explanation of the "transistor effect" by Bell Laboratories' Bardeen, Shockley and Brattain, who were awarded a Nobel Prize).

The same *Fortune* magazine that gave credence to the *Titanic* myth, also referred to RCA, under Sarnoff, as "the worst run corporation in America." It was the worst run, perhaps, by the standards now used in major business schools, but it was also one of America's most consistently successful corporations and, argues Bilby, a corporation that more American businesses would do well to follow. For whatever his faults, Sarnoff insisted that his company plough back some of its profits into research.

Unlike the average Harvard MBA, he was able to see beyond the bottom line of the quarterly P-and-R statement and to insist that pioneering research and development were the essential ingredients to long term, competitive success.

Sarnoff in his life and in Bilby's anecdote-filled biography embodied the Horatio Alger story so popular in his youth. He never had a childhood, time to play games or learn to swim or acquire the knack of small talk. He was what today's generation denigrates as a "workaholic," a company man, a publicity-hound and, with some justification, the possessor of a star's ego. At the height of the power years, he was never alone but always attended a phalanx of subordinates, who carefully transcribed on paper and later on audio tape his every observation. As a result, we probably have the most complete data bank on Sarnoff of any, American and most of it, unfortunately, completely uncritical, self-serving and not reliable.

Take, for example, his insistence on being called "General," even by members of his own family. Reserve officers in the United States usually drop military titles when they shed their uniforms at the end of armed conflict. The titles are kept, usually, only by persons in the sports business or in the lower levels of the public arts. Thus, some football coaches, radio entertainers and baseball players are called "Major" or "Captain" or "Commander" but not most industrialists. When I was a newspaper columnist, I noticed that Sarnoff's name was always preceded in RCA press releases by "Brigadier General" when I asked why, I was told that when Owen D. Young chose the very first president of the Radio Corporation of America he picked Major General James G. Harbord. Evidently, Sarnoff felt competetive with his predecessor.

What I didn't know in those days is that Sarnoff's total time on active duty during World War II was 16 months, seven of those months overseas but much of that time in Paris sweating out the issuance of promised military honors that were slow in coming. "The General" was even more ambitious, however, and the Washington lobbyists for RCA used every available bit of pressure in an effort to get President Eisenhower to promote Sarnoff to Major General (the same rank as Harbord). The campaign ended when President Eisenhower sent a "Dear Dave" letter saying "the only legal course" to the promotion was "six months of active duty, then await the decision of a selection board. Obviously for you this would not be a practical approach." After that, the RCA lobbyists concentrated on getting more medals for "The General."

Sarnoff decided that his greatest monument should be at the RCA Laboratory in Princeton, N.J. If one visits the place he will find Sarnoff's 27 honorary degrees and evidence of the shower of major awards that he received. The final edition of his RCA biography lists 105 awards, "probably more," writes Bilby, "than any other business and industrial leader ever collected before or after him." All this resulted, at least partly, for the existence of a large group of employees whose main job was to see that awards were given to Sarnoff.

The curiosity is that none of these trappings really did anything for the formidable Sarnoff reputation, and he certainly didn't need them to support his high place in the history of American broadcasting. More than any person, he brought to reality the source of information and entertainment that banished the ignorance and the loneliness of this century.

Twice he gambled his company on dreams; first, that television would be even more popular than radio and, second, that the addition of color to television would provide even greater pleasure and comfort to viewers. That he was correct both times added immensely to major changes in American life.

In terms of other industrial leaders, he certainly didn't get very rich. He never had a piece of the action. His income was salary and he didn't have, evidently, the modern-day habit of lining his pockets at the expense of his investors. He was modestly wealthy for a man who had produced such great wealth.

Meanwhile, RCA has come full circle; a story that is without parallel in the history of the American economy. It was begun, at the request of President Wilson and came into existence as a business that violated both the Sherman and Clayton Anti-Trust Acts. It was a blessed monopoly, for the simple reason that President Wilson would not allow the British to dominate electronic Communication in the twentieth century as the British had dominated cable communication in the 19th century.

RCA, as a consequence, went through four distinct reorganizations, partly through Consent Decrees with the Department of Justice, and partly through the negotiating brilliance of David Sarnoff. Gradually, RCA shed its founders and emerged as a full competitors to the corporations (mainly General Electric and Westinghouse) that had given it birth.

Now, in 1986, RCA is once more a subsidiary of General Electric and this, plainly, rankles Bilby. You can find his anger in the paragraph that concludes this excellent book:

"Had David Sarnoff been confronted with the *fait accompli* of GE and RCA together again, and had he achieved control of the merged entity, he quite probably would have shaped a different company than the one that will soon emerge. Its focus would have been purely on the electron. The household durables, the light bulbs, the airplane

engines, would be sold off. The GE Corporate Research and Development Center in Schenectady, New York, would derive its guidance from his laboratories in Princeton. The recapture from the Japanese of leadership in consumer electronics would be a primary goal. The GE committee structure that had always irritated him would, if it still existed, be wiped out. A small corporate staff beholden to him alone would guide the empire from 30 Rockefeller Plaza, which he considered the epicenter of the industrial world. Like Agamemnon sailing against Troy in the Hellenic wars, he would offer any sacrifice to ensure the sempiternity of RCA. Never, one can hear him confide with steely inflection, would he recapitulate to the heirs of the arch foe, Cordiner. The surviving company must be RCA—*the* RCA, as he always labeled it—the golden Radio of his youth, the RCA of monochrome and color, the RCA that cohered the nation with broadcast sound, the RCA that pursued the electron wherever it led. And, as always, the mission would be to innovate, to inspire, to create new wealth and new values where none existed before." ■

The Sunday Team

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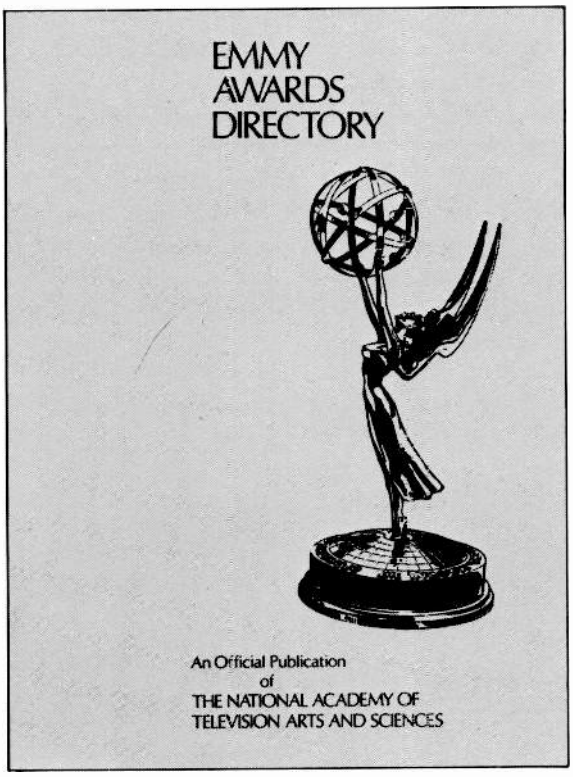
"We put on just about anything we wanted to during the two years the show was on because hardly anyone was watching. (The program was shuffled around to various times on Saturday afternoons).

". . . The program was uneven, to say the least, like my antic interview with three Japanese sculptors who didn't speak English. But it gave me a sense of what might be possible some day on big league television.

"In 1979, that big league program came into being: Sunday Morning, with Robert Northshield as executive producer and Charles Kuralt as Charles Kuralt. It's kind of a magazine, except that there are very few print magazines left that are as continually lucid, unpredictable, and illuminating over so wide a range.

—Nat Hentoff,
The Village Voice



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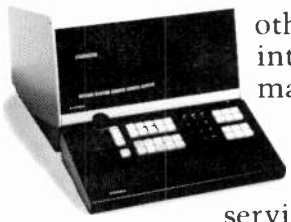

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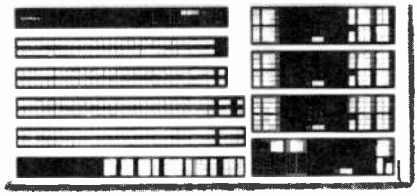

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