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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Grayson William Meredith, Jr., entitled "Opening Night in Your Living Room: History and Criticism of the Live Television Drama, 1928 - 1948." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a Major in Communications.

Herbert H. Howard, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

# OPENING NIGHT IN YOUR LIVING ROOM: HISTORY AND CRITICISM OF THE LIVE TELEVISION DRAMA, 1928-1948

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Science

Degree

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Grayson William Meredith, Jr,

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## DEDICATION

Above all, I would like to dedicate this work to my Mom, who lived to see her son's accomplishment, and to my Dad, who didn't. If I were to live for a thousand years, I could never hope to return all the love, patience, help and understanding these absolutely incredible parents imparted to me. Forced to abandon thoughts of higher education for themselves, they thought nothing of sweating and sacrificing in order to give my sister and myself the intellectual training that they so richly deserved. If the epitome of the American Ideal is indeed to sacrifice your own present for your children's future, then Myrtle Hughett and Grayson William "Preacher" Meredith, Sr. deserve the highest accolade possible.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to obtain information on the history of, and the critical reactions to the live television dramas broadcast between 1928 and 1948. Television in this country is generally acknowledged to have begun in 1947 with the beginnings of the regional networks, but, beginning with the institution of regular program service in New York by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1939, program types and formats were experimented with prior to these later years of the 1940's.

An issue-by-issue analysis of the radio and television pages of the two trade publications of the entertainment industry, Variety and Billboard, revealed reviews of 160 dramas broadcast between 1939 and 1947. Extensive notes were taken of these reviews, this material was categorized and analyzed, and the information was used in three ways. (1) A history of the early development of the television service and the live television drama was written, (2) a close analysis of the dramas was made (plays by year, plays by station, length of the dramas, plays by genre, plays with military oriented content, and directors of the dramas), and (3) the critical reactions of the reviewers were classified and analyzed (publications used, identity of the reviewers, reviewers comments on acting, directing, the development of the television medium, the technical aspects of the productions, and comparisons with radio, stage, and motion pictures, and dthe reviewerw' concern over the content of the media.

It was found that the 160 dramas were widely varied in virtu-

ally all categories. Lengths ran from 10 minutes to two hours, most of the plays were serious dramas (although comedies and musicals were also produced), except for the war years of 1942 and 1943 approximately 30 dramas were broadcast each year, "classic" plays were produced as well as inane murder stories and slapstick comedies, and the shows were produced in tiny television studios using primitive, but rapidly improving, equipment. Almost half of the dramas were broadcast on the local New York NBC stations, W2XBS/WNBT, but other local stations producing live dramas included New York stations W2XWV/ABD (DuMont station), WCBW/WCBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), as well as productions from Schenectady, New York (WRGB, General Electric), Philadelphia (WPTZ), Chicago (WBKB), St. Louis (KSD), Washington, D. C. (WNBW), and Hollywood (W6XAO).

The reviews of the dramas were equally varied. Both publications employed many reviewers who found the acting in most productions of a generally high level, the directors sometimes had troubles adapting to the peculiar demands of live television production, technical limitations of the medium were a hindrance to appreciation of the plays in the early years of the decade but these gradually diminished, and production aspects of the productions were also of generally high quality. Facets of these that were considered included lighting, camera movement (fuzziness, blurring), make-up, costumes, sets, and sound. Reviewers made comparison between television and film, radio and stage, but no attempt was made to denigrate any of the media.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

People are trying to come to grips with the phenomenon of television. Not just parents and educational groups, crouched in front of TV sets across the land, measuring knives and violence, but also writers and critics. We are staring back at the glass eye, expounding theories, histories, nostalgias, and lies, about television, past and present. Among these thoughts is the theory that TV, unlike most other mass media, attained its critical and artistic zenith not in the sobering years of middle age, but in the rowdy impetus of its youth. Television, we are told, is still the junkyard of Newton Minow's "vast wasteland" of 1960. "There's been nothing good on television since the McCarthy hearings!" the most devoted advocates of the theory chant, their eyes glistening with recollections of Joe McCarthy, Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Faye Emerson, and "Studio One." "Studio One!" Now there was a show! A phenomenon! A cultural oasis! A free door for your home that opened not into the back alley, but into the most revered theatres on Broadway. Not only "Studio One," but "Philco-Goodyear Playhouse," "Kraft Theatre," "Celanese Theatre," and "Robert Montgomery Presents Your Lucky Strike Theatre." Not just a specific play, or a specific genre, but the general <u>idea</u> of live anthology drama is what has excited the nostalgic mind of America.

In a civilization where stage productions are still a special event to most of us (partially because of the influence of TV and its free bread for the masses), it does not seem unusual that the prospect of polished theatrical performances, broadcast live, would be regarded as one of the nobler aesthetic causes the medium should choose to serve.

The ability to inject greater drama into any situation by broadcasting it live has been one of television's most valuable, yet increasingly ignored birthrights. For many years after the "Golden Age" (approximately 1948-1955), live TV broadcasting was limited to news and sports, leaving the standard dramatic fare to be filmed, a more economical and predictable process. Most present-day television drama is either filmed or videotaped; the filmed presentations try to be scaled-down movies, and the videotaped dramas, which do possess the feel of live presentation, also aspire to the cinema in that they are staged and edited in a cinematic manner. In Britain, where TV drama gains wider acceptance, many plays are videotaped in one uninterrupted performance without after-the-fact editing, thus keeping the feel of a live performance.

Despite their shortcomings when compared with today's sophisticated television shows, these early "Golden Age" dramas undeniably exhibited a youthful exuberance. Experimentation abounded, talented but unknown actors were allowed to star in many productions, and writers and technicians were faced with the weekly challenge of producing competent, if not always high caliber, dramatic productions. The American Myth has always exalted in the confrontation and suc-

cessful solution to such problems, and the "Golden Age" of television provides modern America with a recent but increasingly distant ideal of ingenious Man conquering the frontier.

The laurel boughs are indeed tossed in great numbers upon the brow of television's "Golden Age," but the fit is not altogether a satisfactory one. Whether or not this period actually deserves that glittering accolade is moot, for the title has become so firmly affixed in the public mind that little could be done to budge it, and the passage of time can only serve to reinforceits solidity. However, history, replete with "Golden Ages" (Greece, Rome, comic books, science fiction, etc.), has always insisted on a proper period of development and experimentation before it has allowed such a zenith. Such was also the case with television, which dates its beginnings from the 1920's and not from a few years before 1050.

Call it what you will--a "Silver Age," television's youth, the experimental years,--the period between 1928 and 1948 saw the development, the refinement, the experimentation with, and the broadcasting of virtually every television program type known today. Quiz shows, variety shows, sporting events, travelogues, soap operas, crime shows, situation comedies, and dramatic productions were all available on television in the 1940's. The productions were all local (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, other cities) since the technical capabilities for networks were not developed until later in the decade, the receiving sets were few and expensive, but the shows were there. The years 1948 through 1955 may have been a "Golden Age" and may have been

characterized by the great drama series, but nearly a full decade in the perfection of telecasting of live dramas had paved the way for those successes.

These were not isolated cases, but concerted efforts on the part of the television producing firms (it is incorrect to call them "networks" at this point in time--they weren't) to develop the drama as a regular staple of programming. Before the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) had beamed the first installment of "Kraft Television Theatre," in 1948 which was to be one of the most highly touted of "Golden Age" series, it had already produced and broadcast more than 80 dramas over its New York owned and operated station. Some of these were short "playlets," especially in the early years of the decade, but the list also included many major productions lasting up to two hours in length. NBC was not alone in their endeavors: the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), DuMont Laboratories, General Electric, and other groups were also vitally interested in the production of live television dramas. Nor did television simply fold up and fade away for the four years the United States was involved in World War II. Activity was limited in 1942 and 1943, but by 1944 the television production business, especially in New York city, was alive and booming.

These productions, as with many from the later "Golden Age," simply do not exist for our inspection. Videotape was not available until the later 1950's and they were not recorded on kinescopes (poor quality film shot from the cathode ray tube). What is available are the comments of the men and women who were regular staff writers

for the trade publications of the entertainment business, Variety amd Billboard. Both publications were amazingly thorough in reviewing the productions of the fledgling medium even though they knew not whether television would be an interesting toy, an expensive disaster, a poor sister to radio, a total conglomeration of other media, or the profound social and cultural influence it was actually to become.

This is a study of the history and criticism of the live television drama from the first dramatic telecast in 1928 through 1947, the last year of broadcasting before the rapid expansion of the networks. This study will show to what extent the live television drama was perfected in local New York production before it became a staple during the "Golden Age" of television 1948 through 1955. In addition, the study of the criticism will reveal the development of television criticism during the era as well as offering information on the plays.

## II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Since little work has been done previously in the field of television criticism, this study should have several important uses: (a) The early development of television criticism can be partially charted, perhaps aiding comparison with criticism of other arts;(b) Some attempt can be made to delineate certain types and trends of television criticism leading to answers for the following: Was there any genre criticism? Did TV criticism develop as an outgrowth of radio criticism? To what extent was TV criticism of live drama re-

liant on theatrical criticism techniques? Was there actually a solid body of legitimate TV criticism, or was a large part of it network public-relations information and Hollywood-type "gossip" reporting? To what extent did early TV critics also serve as reporters of the medium? (c) The study can give insights into the early years of television. (d) It is hoped the study can help answer the question "Just how 'good' was early television?" It is very easy and very fashionable to downgrade television (Charley-the-Tuna-and-his-unplugged-television-set-equals-good-taste-syndrome), retreating to such vapid comments as: "Television hasn't been sophiscated enough for me since "Studio One."

Only by objectively judging the quality of all eras of televican we hope to accurately develop standards by which we can judge today's program fare.

The idea for this project was developed through the writer's association with history and criticism. A wide-ranging interest in all facets of film resulted in the digestion of much film criticism, leading to an interest in the peculiar role of the television critic. Like the film critic, he has a potentially long-ranging chore, for he must attempt to chart trends in programming as well as partially rationalizing and crusading against the large amount of "junk" that TV contains. As a former history major, the writer is also fascinated by the crude beginings of massive social movements, such as the developed TV culture in the second half of the 20th century.

Benefits of the study are several. Foremost, the study will add

to the pitifully small body of work available on television criticism. Since television critics are often reporting on something they are seeing at the same time as their audience, it is easy (and overly simplistic) to totally discount the usefulness of the TV critic as a molder of public critical opinion and as a social historian. A critic should not only tell the public "This is good-watch it" or "This is bad-don't watch it," but should attempt to stir the collective American mind into thinking about the effects of television. One should not ignore a review simply because the particular show has already been viewed: a good critic should be able to reinforce and challenge one's own reactions. This study also helped show the role of the fledgling critic working in a fledgling medium as focused on one important television genre.

Genre criticism has been of increasing importance in film criticism, in part supplanting the auteur theory (the director as "author" of a film) as the most popular way to critically appraise film. Westerns, gangster films, film noir, musicals, and other genres have been isolated and defined, primarily through the work of film critics who have seen in the development of purely American genres a reflection of the different facets of the American spirit. No such critical analysis has been systematically applied to television, which can be seen as the equivalent of Hollywood in its heyday. By focusing on this one specific genre, the live television drama, it may be possible to determine the critical birth of television and its relation to stage, film, and radio.

There have been several doctoral level studies on the history of

the TV drama, and several on the development of broadcast criticism, but this project is unique in that it represents one of the first attempts to add to the historical knowledge of television by focusing on the critical reactions to a particular genre in a specific period of time. By concentrating on this limited subject and time frame, hopefully inferences can be made and conclusions drawn about this genre and the published reactions to it.

## III. FORMAL STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND HYPOTHESES

This study (1) charts the history of the live television drama in the United States from 1928 through 1947, and (2) determines the critical reactions to those dramas. These two goals will be interconnecting, since it will primarily be through the reviews and critiques of the dramas that information on the dramas will be accumulated. Under the general research questions of: (1) "What live television dramas were broadcast from 1928 through 1947?," and (2) "What were the reactions of reviewers to these plays?" there are other, more specific questions. These inlcude: When did the critical press first take serious notice of television drama? What was the stand of the reviewers on live drama? How extensive was criticism of live drama? Were there specific trends in criticism? What types of dramas were broadcast? What were their characteristics (length, genre, etc.)? To what extent did the reviewers concentrate on certain aspects of the productions (acting, directing, technical aspects, etc.)? Did reviewers compare television dramas with dramas in other forms (radio, stage, or motion pictures)?

Definitions.

Live Television Drama. A literary composition that tells a story, to be performed by actors and transmitted over television. The transmission is to be simultaneous with the performance. In addition, it will be assumed that the plays are self-contained units and thus do not presuppose any knowledge of the characters, situations, or locales by the viewer, such as with serial dramatic works.

Criticism. Published analyses of the dramatic productions, usually informing the reader of the perceived quality of said work (good/bad). Criticism and reviews will be used interchangeably for the purpose of this study even though criticism usually connotes an analysis of greater depth than review.

Trade publications. A regularly published journal devoted to the interests of a specific industry. For the purpose of this study, Billboard and Variety, weekly newspapers of the entertainment industry (films, stage, radio/television, music) will be used extensively.

Thesping. Trade publication slang for acting. From Thespis, Greek poet and originator of tragedy.

Sock, socko. Trade publication slang for excellent. Can be used in a variety of ways. (The play was a socker; sock entertainment, etc.)

Original play. Used to mean a dramatic work written specifically for the medium. Contrasted with adaptation of an existing play, or an original adaptation, a play written for television, but based on a book, stage play, short story, or film.

Assumptions.

(1) Available material will be limited. Even though a large

number of plays may have been reviewed, there were probably a number of plays that were never reviewed at all.

(2) The reviewers watched the show as any member of the audience would have and did not watch a dress rehearsal or the studio production.

(3) Much of the available material may be information generated by the public relations arms of the sponsors and networks.

(4) There will be a wide variation in the quality of the reviews.

(5) There will be a wide variation in the quality of the dramas.

Hypotheses.

Several differnt hypotheses have been tested during work on this study. These include:

1. Television criticism was often an outgrowth of radio criticism.

2. There were several established bodies of television criticism by several critics.

3. The general reaction to live television drama was not extremely favorable.

4. Criticism of live drama became harsher as more shows glutted the airwaves in the later 1940's.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

This study has used a combination of historical analysis and content analysis. The primary sources utilized were the two trade publications of the entertainment industry, Variety, and Billboard,

both of which were available on microfilm in the University of Tennessee library system. Both publications printed news about television in either the television section, or, if this had not yet been incorporated in the radio section. Every issue of the two publications for the nine year period (1939-1947) was inspected for (1) news on the development of the television service in general and the live television drama specifically, and (2) reviews of broadcasts of live television dramas. It was decided to try to scan all the issues for this none year period because (1) the lack of an index for either publication precludes obtaining the data in any other manner, (2) without knowing when the dramas were broadcast, it would be extremely difficult to generate any sort of random sample of the reviews, and (3) the use of as many reviews as possible will simply make this a stronger, more valid study, and will provide a better understanding of television as it existed in the late 1930's and 1940's.

Once the information (news items and reviews) was collected, it was analyzed in the following manner: (1) The plays were categorized chronologically (2) Information on the plays was notated, (this includes: the station which broadcast, the date of the broadcast, the play's length, the author of the play, the director of the play, and the producer of the play) (3) Information on the reviews was notated, (this includes: publication the review appeared in, the date of the publication, and the name of the reviewer. If two publications reviewed the same play, the information about both issues was notated). (4) The reviews were examined for specific references on a number of points,

including acting, directing, sound, lights, visuals, and sets. Once this information had been collected, it was rated on a scale from one to six, or, more precisely, Excellent, Very Good, Good, Average, Mediocre, and Poor, depending on how well the reviewer rated a specific aspect of the production. These interpretations were by necessity made subjectively. Once this information was collected, it was compared with information on other aspects, and by publication, etc.

In addition to this analysis, other aspects of the reviews were notated. These included actual comparisons with radio, stage, or film, information in the reviews on technical aspects of broadcasting and the technical aspects of the productions, and classification of the plays by genre (serious dramas, comedies, musicals, unknown).

The major limitation of this method was the quantity and quality of the reviews. Many reviews did not include all the desired information. Also, there was an opportunity for some corroboration of data between Variety and Billboard, but not to a great extent.

The choice of Variety and Billboard was predetermined: these were the only publications that provided regular, systematic sets of reviews of live television dramas from 1939 through 1947.

## V. LIMITATIONS

There will also be several limitations to the study:
(1) A lack of several potentially useful sources. The University of Tennessee library does have many of the useful newspapers and magazines, but several are not available, including the West Coast papers, the Chicago American and TV Guide.
(2) Lack of access to the actual shows, or remaining kinescopes.
(3) Inability to find information on a good number of the specific plays. With the large number of plays being produced in the late 1940's/early 1950's, it is doubtful whether all the productions were reviewed.

## VI. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Because of the somewhat hybrid nature of this study, the major portion of the body will be divided into three sections. A chapter (III) on the early development of the television will give a brief overview of the history of the American television service, with specific emphasis th the broadcasting of live drama. Chapter IV will take a closer look at the dramas. The dramas included in the study will be classified as to year, station that transmitted them, their length, genre (comedies, musicals, serious dramas), and by directors. It is the intent of this chapter to give an idea of what kinds of dramas were broadcast from 1939 through 1947.

Chapter V will turn to the content of the reviews in Variety and Billboard. These publications will be discussed at some length, as well as the limited information available in the New

York Times, and the authors of the reviews will be identified. Next, large portions of the reviews will be presented, classified under several headings. These include specific acting references, specific directing references, specific references to NBC's primary directors, Ed Sobol and Fred Coe, specific references to the development of television equipment and the American television service, specific references to the technical aspects of the productions, comparisons with radio, stage, and motion pictures, concern of the reviewers over content, and use of the term "TV." This section will be followed by Conclusions and a Bibliography.

# CHAPTER II

## INTEGRATED NARRATIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### I. INFORMATION ABOUT THE LIVE TELEVISION DRAMA

Even though the primary target of this study was the published criticism of the live television drama, 1928-1948, a study of the historical trends of the form was first explored in some depth. Much of the information was found by reviewing nostalgic memoirs of the era, contemporary books conjecturing on the future of the medium (and the employment possibilities in it), collections of television plays, and histories of the period.

One type of literature that flourished in the 1920's, 1930's, and 1940's was the speculative look into the medium's future. Usually off the mark and quite naive in their predictions ("Television will change the face of mankind and alleviate proverty and human suffering" school of thought), these writings are important since most writers included an emphasis on drama as one of the great programming trends in the future. Featured in newspapers, magazines, and books, these articles contained such looks at the future as "Movies by Radio" (Scientific American, 1929). Specific articles related to television drama were also found such as two in Theatre Arts in 1937, "From Studio Theatre to TV" and "Radio Plays in the Age of TV," that are glowing accounts of how television was to generate its own dramatic art form. Specific forecasts were also made by pioneers of the medium. Lee DeForest wrote a series of provocative and generally erro-

neous articles in the late 1920's and early 1930's, as did the soon to be famous David Sarnoff. Representative of these predictions were those made by Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., radio editor of the New York Times from 1922 until 1940, and then manager of RCA's Department of Information. Dunlap was also concerned with the software of the future: "When the theater complained of a death of material; when playwrights said they had used up all the stories and plots of generations past, along came the motion picture to word them all over again. The old material will be freshened, old ideas and love stories as old as the hills will be dressed up to amuse many millions over and over again." He also quotes another radio critic, S. L. Rothafel, on the future: "Television in twenty years, will be the mirror, mirroring the stage, and because of television, the stage will be greater than ever "(Dunlap, 1932, p. 101).

Closely allied to the "What will TV be like to 19__" school of journalism was the late 1940's glut of "How-to-get-a-job-in-television" books and articles, aimed at the returning World War II veterans and others interested in investing their careers in a scientific gamble. Titles included Your Opportunities in Television (Harrington, 1949), Your Career in Television (Derby, 1950), Selling and Promoting Radio and Television (Evans, 1954), Your Career in Motion Pictures, Radio, and Television (Jones, 1949), Getting A Job in Television (Southwell, 1947), TV Job Opportunities (Western Personnel Institute, 1950), and Television Primer of Production and Direction (Sposa, 1947). Although these varied somewhat by volumn, most were simplistically written and included chapters on

writing, directing, producing, musical needs, costuming, set design, titles, video effects, and make-up. Much analogy was made to stage techniques and most of the authors could offer little more than encouragement and places to write for applications. On the dramatic side, emphasis was given to the specifics of acting for TV, the extremely tight schedules, etc.

Similar to the "How-to-get-a-job" series was the "How-to-write-for-television" series, which is an expanded version of the many "How-to-write-for-television" chapers in the "How-to-get-a-job" books. These include How to Write for TV (Allan, 1946), The TV Writer (Barnouw, 1962), TV Techniques (Bettinger, 1955), A Guide to Radio/TV (Campbell, 1950), Writing a TV Play (Cousin, 1975), Screenwriting and Production Techniques (Curran, 1958), Professional Broadcasting Writer's Handbook (Field, 1974), Writing for TV (Heath, 1950), Writing for TV and Radio (Hilliard, 1975), How to Write for TV (Kaufmann, 1955), TV Program: Its Writing, Direction and Production (Stasheff, 1951), and Writing Radio and Television Programs (Willis, 1967). Most of these books supply sample television scripts, as well as hints on characterization, writing style, pacing, etc, and often concentrate on the pure mechanics of television writing: the technique of the "teaser," four short acts, dramatic climaxes in specific places, and limitations on types and scope of characters. Many of the books are bad, but several, especially Barnouw's do attempt to go beyond the mere technical side of writing and attempt to teach some of the philosophies and aesthetics of television dramatic writing.

Another valuable part of the contemporary literature were the

books and articles dealing with other facets of early 1950's television. Most useful in understanding the live drama was a public relations book published by CBS entitled Close-Up, a Picture of the Men and Methods That Made CBS Television. This is a picture book describing the illustrating elements of a 1949 "Studio One" production, "The Glass Key." Although a shallow depth (and not much text at all), the book is a fascinating social document of the problems that did go into a live studio presentation, from casting and rehearsing until performance. As the foreword says: "This picturebook will try to answer some of those questions. . . to show some of the processes and people employed in network television's second year, 1949 . . . . to freeze, as it were, an early moment of time in television's history." Also included in this category are books about ratings and audience attitudes, such as Three Years of New York Telesion, 1951-1953, January 4-10 (Smythe, 1953), which is a complicated and extremely in-depth report on a monitoring study done on program elements.

Another area in which there is an abundance of material about the evolution of television and the live drama is the historical survey of television. Several doctoral dissertations have dealt with this. Russell (1968) examined both major and minor trends in network programming, with one of the prominent ones being the decline of live TV dramas. More specific studies were done of NBC's "Project XX" (Abady, 1970), the teleplays of Rod Serling (Quinn, 1966), "Gunsmoke" (Sorenson, 1971), the now-defunct DuMont TV network (Hess, 1960), and the live anthology, the "U.S. Steel Hour" (Dunkia, 1963).

Increasingly popular are personal reminiscences of the "Golden Age of Television." Despite similarities amoung many of them several do provide more than the usual inanities and nostalgic jokes about the time someone died during a live performance. The most recent and one of the best is The Golden Age of Television by Max Wilk (1976), a former writer for "Ford Television Theatre" and "Studio One." In addition to presenting valuable information about writing, directing, and rehearsing, Wilk weaves a logical narrative that is long on both humor and insight ("Television came. We saw. It conquered"). Much information was gleaned from Wilk's interviews with those responsible for the shows, and from his descriptions of the problems associated with live production:

> Reflect on another problem, generic to those days - timing. No mater how carefully they'd been rehearsed and clocked, the actors could never play their scenes at precisly the same speed each time . . . Can anyone blame an actor who'd been on a steady treadmill of rehearsals for ten days or so for speeding up in the home stretch? So our fifty-four minute play carefully cut and edited down, timed out to the second, might go on the air and then run out of control, speeding up in performance to a point where the play ended a minute or so short. Stretch is the proper work for such an endless wait. Many a night, our credits moved like glue upward on the screen. (p. 16)

Happily, Wilk does not hesitate to point out the poor quality of some of the shows:

> The New York shows were all essentially anthologies, a different cast, subject to the absolutely rigid limitations of an NBC or CBS four-walled studio. Truthfully, you just couldn't turn out thirty-nine good plays a season on the eleven or twelve weekly anthologies. The writers were simply unable to provide that much material. (p. 260)

Not as successful is Robert Metz' CBS: Reflection in a Blood-shot Eye (1975), a semi-history of CBS that concentrates on randomly

chosen interviews and achieves none of the logical direction of Wilk's work. Very little information is given on the CBS anthologies, and the work is primarily a CBS public relations job.

Martin Mayer, in About Television, successfully combines history with a critical eye. He sheds light on one of the locally produced dramatic anthologies:

> When TV was young, expenses were much smaller and profit potentials were known to few, a number of unaffiliated stations in the larger cities attempted ambitious programs and extensive local coverage. In New York, Channel 13, then WNTA, produced a "Play of the Week" including full length dramas by Shaw, Brecht, O'Neill, Chekhov, adaptations of Turgenev, greatly increasing total audience for each and recouping the costs by broadcasting the same play five straight nights. (. 116)

Most productions of the live anthology shows were serious dramas, instead of lighter comedies or musicals. Mayer quotes Perry Lafferty, now head of West Coast CBS programming, on the reason:

> To some extent the format inclined writers and producers to a rather lugubrious product, because in the absence of an audience to laugh a comic play would lose timing, and even a synthetic laugh track played onto the stage would not help much. Anyway, the networks felt they were taking care of comedy in the variety shows. (p. 173)

The Emmy Awards (Michael and Parish, 1970) is a year by year account of the chameleon-like presentations annually given to the best achievements in television and first began in 1948. The first live anthology to be honored as Best Dramatic show was the local KTLA (Los Angeles) production "Pulitzer Prize Playhouse" in 1950, followed the next year by "Studio One." Remember Television (Lackmann, 1971) is a pictorial tracing of television by year since 1947, interspersed with comments about shows and the rising importance of the medium: "Programs were mostly live then. Plays and politics, crime and comedy

transformed our modest abodes into enchanted castles with little windows looking out over new and vast horizons." The volumn is visually interesting, but unfortunately makes the same kinds of general overpraising statements about "Golden Age" television that simply do not seem to be true: "Dramatic shows, telecast live, gave us more heroes to worhip . . .We saw dramatic art, civilized entertainment, and intellectual exploration that haven't been duplicated for a decade." (p. 4)

## II. ARTICLES AND BOOKS DEALING WITH CRITICISM

Why has television criticism always been such a poor sister? Whereas volumes have been filled and numerous magazines have been started dealing with film and theatrical criticism, only now, some 30 years after regular network service began, is TV criticism beginning to be looked at with any semblance of seriousness. Gilbert Seldes may have correctly identified one of the reasons: "Radio's career as an object of personal love lasted a year or so and television was denied it altogether. The TV set, like the radio receiver, made the passage from gadget to universal household appliance faster than the washing machine or the pop-up toaster." (p. 207) Television is just <u>there</u>, and in the minds of many it has always been there. To a greater extent than with film, a good or bad review of a show will be ignored (if read) by a large number of people. It now costs $3.00 to check the opinion of a movie critic, but a TV critic's object of appraisal is standing there blinking at you for virtually nothing. Once a person spends the time catching a show, it is doubtful that he will admit the

show was a turkey, even if it was. TV does require the investment of our time, and human nature refuses to admit that we may have squandered something.

Since the early days of television the medium has evolved from the "radio-with-picture" concept (the tradition out of which grew the live TV anthologies) to the concept of "scaled-down-movies," a change precipitated by the change to film production for the medium and the subsequent shift of the TV industry from New York to Hollywood. It could be argues that TV is the 60's and 70's counterpart of the Hollywood "B" feature (a shorter, less expensive,and more formula-oriented version of a regular film), and since U.S. TV movies and other features are exported for theatrical showings overseas it is difficult to deny TV's close relation with the filmic medium. Television, of course, has its own particular set of guidelines for criticism, but a look at studies conducted on film criticism will ehlp to point out some of the differences and similarities between the two.

Several doctoral dissertations have looked at the question of criticism. Prideaux (1966) states that "worthwhile motion picture criticism, like good literary criticism or an analysis in any area of study, is accomplished by first gathering the date, then applying the principles of criticism to the data, and finally presenting the results." (p. 104) Zoglin (1972) charted the recent development of film criticism and found that film critics have become more conscious of cinematic style, more aware of the film director as a creative force, more concerned with the larger context of each film, and more conscious

of the critical task itself.

A study by Seyfor (1974) of the highly touted critic, Pauline Kael, attempts to analyze the reasons for this acclaim. Kael sees film as personal history and "the form she has evolved for recording that history is a volatile mixture of personal essay, reportage, exegesis, memoirs and polemic." Seydor believes that "Kael may be throwing the greatest one-man show in American cultural jouralism since the days of H. L. Mencken."

One problem with the study of general television criticism is that of immensity. It is relatively easy to compare film critics' reaction to all the new films, but it is not as easy to compare the work of many individual TV critics on a specific show, let alone a specific episode. Jones (1970) studied TV criticism in selected magazines from 1957 and 1967 and found:

> As for trends and areas of TV criticism, 1957 critics were found to have been more interested than their 1967 counterparts in matters of regulation; in the controversy over live/New York vs. filmed Hollywood dramas . . . Some critics were as trite, unimaginative, and as repetitive in their writing as the television programming which they often found so boring and uninspired. On the other hand, much criticism obviously reflected perceptivity, intelligence, creativity, understanding, and a genuine concern for television's present and future. (p. 94)

The most heartening recent development in the study of television criticism is the Aspen Institute Program on Communications and Society, a series of workshops designed to investigate the effect of television on American life and culture. Two excellent compilations of essays from that workshop, Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism (1975) and Television as a Cultural Force, (1976)edited

by Richard Adler and Douglass Cater, attempt to redefine the role of the TV critic and point to new directions that TV criticism can take.

From the same series, David Littlejohn has written on the development of television criticism. He bases his study on three presumptions: (1) TV criticism is of a very low order; (2) there may be a number of ways to stimulate better criticism: and (3) Any discussion of future models for American TV criticism will be more rational and realistic if it is based on a judicious summary of the work done in this field over TV's first 25 years (Adlert Cater, 1976, pp. 148-149). Littlejohn finds the low esteem granted most TV critics rises from the assumption that much of what they write is not objective, but "olbique publicizing" of producer's press releases. The TV critic is somewhat unique in that:

> 1. Reviewers are expected to serve not only as aesthetic judges, but also as reporters and historians.
> 2. The sheer quantity of available American television forces a very demanding job of discrimination on the reviewer.
> 3. The serial structure of American TV present a frustrating challenge to most writers.
> 4. Few TV critics "use" television in the same way their readers do.
> 5. There are worlds of difference between the working conditions of the TV editor of a large daily newspaper, the TV critic of a weekly or monthly magazine, and the intellectual who offers his thoughts on TV in an essay or book. (Adler and Cater, 1976, p. 154).

# CHAPTER III

## EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE TELEVISION SERVICE AND THE LIVE DRAMA

Even though the hour long anthologies of the late 1940's and early 1950's are the most famous examples of live TV drama, there were numerous broadcasts in the decades before the development of a refined TV industry. The earliest dramatic television program was "The Queen's Messenger," a 40 minute one-act spy drama that was broadcast over Dr. E. F. W. Alexanderson's experimental TV station in Schenectady, New York, September 11, 1928. Orrin Dunlap recalls the broadcast: "The technique of handling this television drama makes it necessary for the actors to have two assistants, Joyce Evans Rector and William J. Toniski, whose hands "double" for the actors (Izetta Jewell, a former star of the legitimate stage and Maurice Randall of the WGY studio players). They are needed to manipulate the props before the television camera. This is necessary because, at the present stage of progress, only the heads of the two actors can be televised and broadcast " (Dunlap, 1932, p. 87).

Despite this television dramatic breakthrough, critics were not ready to herald the beginning of a new art form, especially since the broadcast was only experimental. The broadcast was intended to be received only in the same building from which it was sent, as electrical impulses were sent out by cable to the WGY transmitter 4 miles away, then transmitted through the air back to the studio. Experimental telecasts had been transmitted for several years (there were reports of "ham" operators with homemade receiving sets picking up the broad-

cast), but the flickering images could only be held for a short period of time. The reception at the main studio was not much better: "The pictures are about the size of a postal card and are sometimes blurred and confused. They are not always in the center of the receiving screen. Sometimes they are hard on the eyes because they flicker" (Dunlap, 1932, p. 88). The play was "premiered" at 1:30 in the afternoon and repeated at 11:30 that night, an ironic foreshadowing of television's later penchant for reruns.

After this relatively inauspicious debut, the amount of live TV drama increased throughout the 1930's and 1940's. Station W2XAB, New York, instituted the first regularly scheduled programming on August 24, 1931, and while there were no plays among the shows, viewers were treated to such entertainment as "Dancing in the Dark, featuring Natalie Towers in a series of television waltzes" and "Dramatic Readings with modernistic background featuring Alice Raff." Even at this early date the television emphasis on personalities is evident (Dunlap, 1932, p. 89).

Television drama in the 1930's and 1940's gained its widest exposure on British television. Throughout these years the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) presented the viewers of London with a large number of live dramas, many telecast directly from the stages of professional theatres. The generally acknowledged father of British television, John L. Baird, broadcast in 1930 Luigi Pirandello's "The Man with a Flower in his Mouth," a special performance for London's drama critics (Dunlap,1932, p. 520. All were impressed with the medium's potential and the advances that had been made in several years, but the critic of the London Times noted the lack of quality: "Let it be ad-

mitted at once that plays for television are as yet a subject for men of science and not for critics of the finer points of acting" (Dunlap, 1942, p. 107). The BBC began regular telecasts in 1936; by early 1937 newspapers in the United States were alive with news of the London broadcasts. Millions of Americans were now excited with thoughts of television and convinced that Buck Rogers was alive and well in the technology of RCA. In Britain, the preoccupation with live drama showed no signs of subsiding. In November 1938, J. B. Priestley's "When We Are Married" was broadcast live from the stage of the St. Martin's Theatre, a performance the press called "A striking success" (Dunlap, 1942, p. 111).

The broadcast pointed out some of the inherent problems, both physical and theoretical, in live dramatic broadcasting. Televising a play live from a theater may excite the telecast audience, who may feel privileged by being allowed to glimpse a professional production, but the result is a bastardization of television and a total surrender to the form and function of another medium. The drama critic of the London Daily Mail, who estimated that 25,000 saw the broadcast of "When We Are Married," conjectured that it was neither the power of the play, nor the novelty of television, but the mystique of the theater that excited the home audience: "Oddly enough, it was not the play or the players (first-rate though they are) that provided television viewers with their biggest thrill. It was the sudden swish of the curtain, with its background of rumbling applause as each act came to an end, that brought the authentic feel of the theatre into so many homes last night" (Dunlap, 1942, p. 112).

When the BBC moved into His Majesty's Theatre in March 1939 for

its seventh stage telecast (a forgettable musical comedy, "Magyar Melody"), the problems of broadcasting from a theatre were once again illuminated. Another critic, Grace Wyndham Goldie, was one of the first to recognize the specific demands of television drama:

> But now we must face the shattering truth, which is that the whole way in which these shows are done in the theatre makes them unsuited for television. They are meant for huge audiences having a night out. In television, they are received by tiny audiences having a night at home. The difference in result is astonishing. For to us, watching at home, every effect was too broad, every gesture too large, every tone too emphatic. . .the effect was like somebody bringing down a sledge hammer on the wrong button. (Dunlap, 1942, p. 100)

In the United States, live broadcast of drama, though not tackled with quite the same relish as the British, was an important experimental staple in the late 1930's and early 1940's. More important, perhaps, the American technicians and programmers realized that broadcast from a studio instead of a theatrical stage was the most efficient and aesthetically pleasing manner of production. Not only would the broadcasters not have to worry about extra lighting on stage settings and usually limited and awkward camera angles, but performers could now give their undivided attention to acting for one medium instead of two.

Two years before the National Broadcasting Company (NBC, a subsidiary of the Radio Corporation of America, RCA) began regular broadcasts, the network produced four shows a week, two each on Tuesdays and Thursdays seen on its experimental station, W2XBS. Erik Barnouw describes the activity in the modified radio studio in NBC studio 3H in Radio City in 1936:

> In the corridor, actors began to be seen with green make-up and purple lipstick. It became known that such things were necessary in the new medium; perhaps it would always be that way. Before long a green face no longer caused comment in

> Radio City cafeterias. It was, rather, a mark of status (Barnouw, 1967, p. 42).

A comparison can be made with the British style of on-location broadcasting, by looking at the 1940 NBC production of the Broadway version of "When We Are Married," the first American telecast of a current Broadway play. Unlike the BBC, NBC staged the play in the friendly confines of Radio City, a better location to control such variables as lighting and sound. NBC was thrilled with the results of the broadcast and the choice of forms. Alfred H. Morton, who was vice-president in charge of NBC telecasts, reported on the show's popularity; "Dramatic productions consistently stand at the top of the rated programs, with the presentation of a Broadway play, "When We Are Married", by the theatrical cast, receiving the highest mark of 2.85 out of a possible 3.00. Productions of past Broadway hit plays frequently approach this rating" (New York Times, April 28, 1940).

American television had also been linked with the legitimate Broadway stage in 1938, when scenes from the hit "Susan and God," starring Gertrude Lawrence, were broadcast on the afternoon of June 7. Flop or hit, the broadcast was an historic breakthrough, for the controlling forces of Broadway had long been worried over the impact television might have on the theatre. However, the forecasts weren't quite as bleak as those voiced by Hollywood in the early 1950's, and Broadway impresarios often saw in television a useful ally. Max Gordon, a Broadway producer and early dramatic adviser to NBC, outlined the role of television for the theatre:

> By furthering and developing television right from the start, I hope to prove to theatrical people that television is the greatest supplementary medium for their abilities. It can't hurt the theater. Telecasting approaches the theater more than any other form of entertainment. As compared

> to broadcasting (radio), television demands greater acting ability. Vocal expression alone is not sufficient and, like the theatre, the personality of the actor counts (Dunlap, 1942, p. 93).

The play was useful not only in testing the medium, but in pointing out necessary changes that would have to be made with respect to the performers. A first-hand report noted the human problems of television: "Near the finale it was noticed that Miss Lawrence looked tired; the intense heat beating down unmercifully from the powerful lamps was to blame. To see her was to realize that television would have to find a way to make its stage less of a hades and more of a heaven for performers" (Dunlap, 1942, p. 94).

Throughout the 1930's, the call for a viable television service was answered by several organizations. DuMont Laboratories, the General Electric Corporation, Philco and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) all conducted experiments, but their efforts were dwarfed by the largest amount of capital, the best laboratory facilities, and the top scientists, of RCA and its broadcasting arm the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), who worked diligently through the decade to perfect sound and sight broadcasting. Many experimental telecasts were beamed throughout the New York area in the early and mid 1930's, and in the middle of April, 1938, NBC began a regular schedule of five hours a week on W2XBS. This included three afternoon hours, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, 3 p.m. to 4 p.m., devoted to "still pictures and charts not designed for entertainment value" (New York Times, April 10, 1938), and evening programs of live talent and films, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 8 p.m. to 9 p.m.

This limited schedule lasted intermittently (NBC took several months off during the summer to work on the equipment) for the next year, at

which time the service was ready for presentation to the public. Formal opening of the country's first regularly established public television service came at the 1939 New York World's Fair and coincided with the marketing of television receivers. Four different sets were placed on sale by RCA, ranging in price from $199.00 to $600.00, with the following enticement to potential buyers serving as part of the magazine advertising campaign: "Now the great day has arrived. The television era begins. Through RCA Victor Television Receivers you can take part in one of the greatest adventures in all scientific history. It is an adventure you will never forget" (Communications, April, 1939). RCA's receivers were the Model TRK-12, the "finest television instrument offered by RCA Victor" (Communications, April, 1938, p. 29), which contained a 12 inch white screen Kinescope that provided an image 7 3/8 inches by 9 3/4 inches (viewed indirectly by means of a mirror attached to the cabinet top), the TRK-9, identical to the TRK-12 except that it used a 9 inch Kinescope, and two direct view models, the TRK-5 and the TT-5. Both used a 5 inch Kinescope, with a 3 3/8 inches by 4 3/8 inches image, but the TT-5, RCA's cheapest model, contained only the equipment to generate video and had to be connected to a 1938 or 1939 model RCA AM radio.

RCA was not alone in marketing receivers at this time. DuMont had a direct vision model with a screen size of 8 inches by 10 inches. General Electric marketed four sets: two with 9 inch direct view tubes, one with a 5 inch direct view round tube, and a 12 inch indirect view reflecting model. Stewart-Warner sold an indirect view model that sported a 12 inch picture tube that produced an image 9 5/8 inches by 7 1/4 inches. All the sets were geared to the 441-line scanning ar-

rangement that was broadcast by the NBC station, W2XBS.

After the formal opening at the World's Fair, NBC began regular broadcasting on May 3, utilizing a variety format that would be repeated for virtually every show for the next 15 months of experimental broadcasting. These early NBC shows, broadcast Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m., featured an emcee, a "dramatic sketch with from two to 10 actors" (Billboard, April 8, 1939), and an amazingly varied number of features. Representative segments on these NBC variety shows included newsreels, Richard Rodgers and Mary Prescott from "The Boys From Syracuse," Walt Disney cartoons, tap dancer Ann Miller, Bill Burns' Canary Circus ("Burns' trick of running the birds through a flaming hoop was slowed up a lot by the birds jumping off the car they were riding, and the trick lost its novel effect" (Billboard, May 27, 1939), puppet shows, jugglers, pantomimists, Donald Bain's bird imitations, a discussion by explorers of recent photographs from Tibet, turkey carving, and Mrs. Goodyear talking about the inventors in her family. As with the rest of the nation, NBC actually had no idea what was going to work as television program fare and tried anything that might possibly succeed. One doesn't see too many canary circuses on television today, but if NBC hadn't tried showing at least one, they may never have known they don't work very well.

NBC continued its variety shows two nights per week until August of 1939 when it shut down its operations to overhaul facilities, give people vacations, and evaluate the effectiveness of its program fare. A skeleton schedule of three hours of film a week was maintained, but no live studio productions were shown. When telecasts resumed in early September, they were structurally somewhat different. Variety shows

were still broadcast, but now they were not NBC's sole entertainment staple. The televised play had come into its own.

Almost every variety hour had contained a play, but these had usually been short, one act productions that rarely lasted more than 30 minutes. NBC now began experimenting with longer, full-length plays, hoping to find a formula that would appeal initially to the New York audience and, eventually, to set owners across the country. Indeed, perhaps one reason that NBC decided to upgrade its programming at this time was its disappointment over the number of sets that had been sold. RCA officials had expected initial sales of 5,000 but by the first of June only 500 had been sold. When television service resumed in September there were only 750 sets serving an estimated audience of 3,375 (Billboard, August 26, 1939). The ratio of 4 1/2 viewers to each television set was derived from estimations of the number of people who watched television sets that were exhibited in public places, such as bars, department stores, etc.

Full length productions that were aired during the next year included "Brother Rat" (September 7, 1939, 70 minutes), "Art and Mrs. Bottle" (September 14, 1939, 80 minutes), "Jane Eyre" (October 12, 1939, 95 minutes), "The Milky Way" (October 20, 1939, 95 minutes), "The Dover Road" (October 24, 1939, 105 minutes), "When We Are Married" (March 3, 1940, 97 minutes), and "Ode to Liberty" (April 10, 1940, 70 minutes). These full length plays, televised from NBC's tiny Radio City studio (30 feet by 40 feet), cost RCA approximately $1,000 per hour (Variety, September 6, 1939). Top pay for the actors was a meager $50 per play and Variety reported that the "RCA staff freely concedes that telecasting of drama is feasible because of the cooperation of actors and

authors" (Variety, September 6, 1939). Had the theatrical unions insisted on union scale wages for writers and performers, NBC could not have afforded the expense and would have been forced to cancel its dramatic plans. Rehearsals for the plays averaged seven days each, including two tryouts under the lights, and the productions were broadcast with three cameras, two for close-ups and one for long shots (Variety, April 17, 1940).

Even though fully backed at this time by RCA, NBC was under pressure to develop programs that would attract sponsors when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) allowed commercial broadcasting. NBC's first year on the air, which was totally sustaining (paid for by the company and RCA), cost $750,000, of which $90,000 went to pay for talent. For the year, NBC employed 85 people full time, filled 750 dramatic roles, and paid for 180 singing and 70 dancing acts. In filling an average of 12 hours a week with programming, NBC broadcast 620 hours of programs: 1/3 live from the studio, 1/3 filmed, and 1/3 via outside pickups utilizing the company's two exterior mobile units. For these outside pickups, NBC concentrated on sporting events, but also broadcast semi-regularly from the World's Fair throughout 1939. The farthest recorded distance of a mobile unit broadcast that year was 27 miles during a telecast from Westchester County, New York (Billboard, May 18, 1940).

Also during this first year, RCA-NBC had its first confrontation with the FCC over the questions of commercialization and the adoption of television standards. The FCC would not give the go-ahead for commercial operations until its technicians had decided on the best technical standards for the medium. Since there was no way of knowing

that World War II would interrupt development of the American television service, it appeared that whatever decision the FCC made at that time could not be changed later. RCA-NBC backed the technical recommendations proposed at the time by the Radio Manufacturers Association (RMA), which called for a service utilizing a 441 line picture at 30 frames per second, using 6 megacycle channels. RCA had the most fully developed system and thus had the most to gain by quick adoption of the RMA standards, but the other receiver manufacturers (CBS, DuMont, Zenith and Philco) were in no great hurry to endorse these standards. Since the FCC was hesitant to endorse standards the industry could not agree on, it agreed to allow limited commercialization beginning in the fall of 1940 and thus spur the stations to invest in program development. This decision would have allowed three different systems (RMA, Philco, and DuMont) to operate. All three were incompatible. Sydney Head explains what happened:

> RCA immediately began an all-out sales campaign to market television receivers. This was precisely what the FCC had tried to avoid in limiting commercial operation. The Commission had hoped that the manufacturers would proceed slowly, without attempting to develop the mass market for receivers before universal standards could be agreed on. Television had been so long delayed and so heavily publicized that vigorous sales campaigns at this time could have eventually resulted in strong pressure to adopt the system used by the company that succeeded in selling the most sets (Head, p. 192).

Faced with this situation, the FCC promptly changed its mind on the limited commercialization issue, called a new hearing, and went into a holding pattern until the question of television standards could be answered once and for all. Despite shock and anger at the FCC's action, the industry cooperated with the decision, aiding in the formation of an industry-wide committee that would study the problem fully and

make recommendations to the FCC. This National Television System Committee (NTSC) worked throughout 1940, testing the different systems and by March of 1941 was ready to present its proposals, which the FCC quickly accepted. Sydney Head relates:

> In May, 1941, the FCC authorized full commercial operation on these standards on 18 VHF channels, located between 50 and 294 mc. (Reduced to 13 channels in 1946 and 12 in 1947). The NTSC had changed the line standard from 441 to 525, adopted FM rather than AM for the audio component of the signal, and left three different synchronizing methods to compete (RCA's finally won out (Head, p. 193).

NBC's program plans could not wait for the FCC to make up its mind on technical standards, however, and even though denied the luxury of income at this time, continued with its regular broadcasts. Telecasts of dramas still continued, though not with the same regularity as before. NBC finally ended its 15 month series of experimental broadcasts, finishing with another variety show containing a 20 minute playlet, "The Drums of Oude." This final program, telecast in late July, 1940, was similar to the variety hours that had begun the service and also featured Eugene Jelenik's band, the Southernaires, and the usual singing and dancing acts.

No live studio programs were broadcast until the following year (when the FCC authorized commercial broadcasting), but NBC did continue with approximately 36 hours of telecasting a week, including 30 hours of field tests and patterns and seven hours of program material. This was limited to film presentations and outside pickups, with televising of wrestling, boxing, basketball, and hockey proving popular. By December of 1940 there were approximately 4,000 receivers in the New York area and NBC obviously felt compelled to offer the viewers something to watch. A sizeable audience was being established that NBC

could not afford to lose when commercial broadcasting became a reality. The CBS station, WCBW, was also operating at this time, but was only telecasting test patterns and an occasional experimental entertainment program.

NBC's commercial debut came on July 5, 1941, and once again the premiere offering was a variety show. Segments included Lowell Thomas with the news, "Uncle Jim's Spelling Bee", "Truth or Consequences" (with Ralph Edwards), and a soldier revue, "Bottlenecks of 1941" "thrown together by the draftees at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey" (Billboard, July 12, 1941). Sponsors for the show were Sunoco, Lever Brothers, Proctor and Gamble, and the Bulova watch company. Regular programs began appearing after this with both "Truth or Consequences" and "Uncle Jim's Spelling Bee" becoming standard features on the network.

Unfortunately for NBC and for television, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the United States quickly entered World War II, and the infant video industry immediately took a back seat to war-oriented research and development. Television service did not totally shut down during the war years (beginning in 1944, activity increased tremendously) but for the first two years of American involvement, television programming was extremely limited. Gilbert Seldes, then of the Columbia Broadcasting System and later an influential television writer and critic, wrote in Variety of July 14, 1943:

> Television programs haven't been exactly abundant in the year just passed. DuMont began an experimental series, after NBC and CBS were obliged to conserve equipment and get along without personnel and went to four hours or so of film a week. DuMont's experiments are in program techniques and include useful material for entertainment as well as hints on the future of commercials.

DuMont's experimental station (W2XWV) began studio productions in September of 1943 with the now standard variety format, and in October asked the FCC for permission to change from experimental to commercial operation. This change was allowed in May of 1944.

The war did not stop all of NBC's broadcasts. In October of 1943 station WNBT (NBC's commercial call letters) began televising sporting events for the benefit of wouded soldiers in hospitals around New York, beginning with a broadcast of a rodeo from Madison Square Garden on October 25. This was the first live show from NBC in six months and was followed by other events from around the city. Live studio broadcasting resumed the following year. Indeed, by the first of January, 1944, New York television set owners could look forward to programs seven nights a week. WNBT showed news films and film feature programs Mondays and Saturdays from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., the DuMont station broadcast on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, primarily with its "Television Canteen" variety series, and the CBS station, WCBW, was on the air Thursdays and Fridays, also with filmed presentations (Variety, December 29, 1943). In addition to these metropolitan New York stations, other television transmitters were active in Schenectady, New York (WRGB, the General Electric station) and in Chicago (WBKB, owned by Balaban and Katz advertising agency). This Chicago station had been on the air since March of 1941 and presently programmed 1 1/2 hours on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Friday nights and an hour on Wednesday afternoons. Both WBKB and WRGB were later to produce dramatic shows also, as did DuMont, NBC, and CBS. In Hollywood, Don Lee owned W6XAO and also produced live drama telecasts.

Throughout 1944 the New York television service continued to de-

velop, as numerous plays, variety shows and other programs were produced. WNBT reopened its studio facilities on April 12, after a 2 1/2 year layoff, with a variety program that included a film short introduced by FCC Chairman James Fly. CBS' first live studio show since 1942, broadcast on May 5, was also a variety show. Billboard from April 15, 1944 reported that CBS' "tentative schedule is to proceed with war, music, and news videocasts and let dramatics wait until later." DuMont, which produced many plays during the year, finally received authorization from the FCC to switch to commercial broadcasting status and on May 9, 1944 changed its call letters from W2XWV to WABD.

The year 1945 saw not only the end of the war, but the entry of another company into the growing television competition. NBC had operated two separate radio networks, the "Red" and the "Blue" since 1927, but adoption of the "Chain Broadcasting Regulations" by the FCC in 1941 and the subsequent threat of legal action spurred NBC to sell the Blue network in 1943 to candy magnate Edward Noble. Caught in the shuffle of corporate politics, the Blue was not able to enter television broadcasting on an even par with NBC, CBS, or DuMont, but did continue experiments in program development. On February 25, 1945 the Blue entered television with a broadcast of an adapted radio quiz show, "Ladies Be Seated," with Johnny Olsen. The Blue was at a disadvantage in that it did not own a New York television station and was forced to use the facilities of others. This premiere show was on WRGB in Schenectady and the Blue later used the facilities of DuMont's WABD and Chicago's WBKB. In April of 1945 the Blue officially changed its name to the American Broadcasting Company. Even with the change

of name, ABC remained television's extremely poor sister until a merger with Paramount theatres in 1954 provided more stable financial backing. Even then the network usually remained a distant third behind NBC and CBS (DuMont ceased operations in the 1950's) until shrewd programming finally vaulted the network to the number one position in the late 1970's.

Until the beginning of the television networks inthe later 1940's (via the coaxial cable that was able to carry television simultaneously to affiliate stations), the established stations continued refining their facilities and programs, looking for the combination that would best appeal to sponsors. Commercial programs varied by station, but then as today, quiz shows, soap operas, sports telecasts and audience participation shows were popular. WBKB of Chicago began a "dramatic" show, "What's Cooking with the Scotts," in the fall of 1944 that presented domestic stories of an average American family coupled with a nod toward to the wonders of electricity. Not surprisingly, the program was developed and prepared by the advertising department of Commonwealth Edison. The show lasted for several years with the same format even though in 1945 the title was changed to "Welcome to the Walkers."

Once the war ended, television producers were not able to immediately take advantage of the hoped for post-war television resurgence. Not only did it take more than a year for mass produced receivers to be marketed, but continual development of transmission facilities required the stations to periodically interrupt service to overhaul equipment. DuMont left the air in September 1945 to transfer to new studios in the Wanamaker building in downtown New York city, orig-

inally announcing that its absence from the airwaves would only last until December 15. Unfortunately, construction delays forced postponement of the move until April 16, when the drama, "The Devil on Stilts" became the studio's first production. Even then, this production was prepared under the auspices of ABC. The move, along with other experiments in television production, cut sharply into DuMont's profits: In 1944 DuMont had profits of $256,00 but in 1945 this shrunk to $46,280 (Variety, April 17, 1946).

DuMont was not the only station forced to leave the air periodically. WNBT and WCBW were reassigned Channels 4 and 2 by the FCC in 1946 and in late February of that year shut down to realign equipment. NBC returned to the air on April 5 and CBS in mid May. Both stations also revised their schedules upon returning: CBS went to a five nights a week schedule, while NBC returned with shows on six nights of the week, even though in late June this addition was balanced by the pulling of the entire daytime schedule (Variety, June 26, 1946).

All the stations were continually developing their programs throughout the mid-1940's, but excellent programs would do no good in the long run if people -- lots of people -- couldn't see them. After what must have seemed an interminable wait, RCA placed its first post-war receivers on sale November 4, 1946. In the first eight months of the year a total of 225 sets had been manufactured, while 3,242 were made in September, 827 in October, and 1,800 in November. Added to those made by other manufacturers, the number of sets in New York promptly began to rise. In early 1946 there were between 7,500 and 10,000 sets; by November there were 17,000 (Variety, March 5, 1947). The number of sets manufactured continued to rise dramatically throughout 1947: 5,437

in January alone and a total of 46,000 built in the first half of the year (Variety, July 23, 1947). CBS reported that by September 1 there were 50,000 sets and an audience of 300,000 and by October 1 there were 65,000 sets. Total television receiver production was 6,476 in 1946. In 1947 it was 178,571.

Television producers were now not only concerned with the metropolitan New York audience. By October 15, 1947, NBC had a nominal network, as the coaxial cable connected New York with Washington, Philadelphia and Schenectady. NBC was thus able to send shows simultaneously to WNBW, WPTZ, and WRGB. NBC also had working agreements with WWJ in Detroit and KSD in St. Louis, but there was as yet no cable link with these cities. Stations not connected by the cable may have received network shows, but this would have been physical transportation of kinescopes or regular film features. DuMont sent shows to WTTG in Washington and WCBS (new call letters for WCBW) received a feed from WMAL in the nation's capital. As 1948 started the national networks and subsequent television boom were just around the corner and the television producers were ready. Television's official "Golden Age" was about to begin.

# CHAPTER IV

## A CLOSER LOOK AT THE LIVE TELEVISION DRAMAS: 1939-1948

Television is. In the days before the networks, in the days before the "Golden Age," television was. Dramas, sports, video vaudeville, music, inanities, frog races, and Bill Burns with his trained canaries, they were all there in television from 1939 through 1947. Of course, to see the shows you probably had to live in New York (although there were the productions form Hollywood, Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Schenectady), you probably had to find a set (either to buy or just to watch), and then you had to watch a medium that, although increasingly fascinating programatically, still was horribly crude technically. But still, this was television. It may have been far removed from the sophisticated shows beamed into 97% of American homes in the 1970's, but it was still a legitimate blood relative. If the networks had existed in 1945, the material was there to entertain the nation. And in no field was there more available than in drama.

Imagine for a moment that you live in New York City. Imagine it's September 28, 1944. Imagine you own a television set. After a hard day at the office you stagger home. Even though it's only a quick subway ride to the St. James theatre on Broadway, where you could still catch Rogers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!", you complain to the wife how much your feet hurt, kick off your shoes, get a beer, plunk yourself in front of your trusty DuMont set, and watch two hours of "The Boys From Boise", television's first original musical comedy. What would you be exchanging the best in musical theater for? What musical gems

would you be getting in trade for "Oh, what a beautiful morning" and "Surrey with the fringe on top?"

You would hear (courtesy of Sam Medoff, composer and lyricist) "Girls of the Eight to the Bar X Ranch," "I'll Take the Trail to You," "Sunset Trail," "That Certain Light in Your Eyes," "Chiki Chiquita," "Thousand Mile Shirt," "It's a Mystery to Me," "Broken Hearted Blues," "Come Up and See Me Sometine," "You Put Your Brand on my Heart," "Rodeo," "Western Omelet," "I'm Just A Homebody," and "Star Spangled Serenade." Hopefully, you would be suitably impressed. Billboard reminded its readers to:

> Mark well this evening of September 28, 1944. This is the night television cane of age. For the first time someone had guts enough and confidence enough to dig deep into the grouchbag for a lot of lucre and put on a full-fledged show for the television cameras and audience (Billboard, October 7, 1944).

What kind of plot would you sample by staying home on this evening? A typical musical comedy wonder, revolving around the problems of a group of showgirls who are stranded in Boise, Idaho and take jobs on a ranch as "cowgals" to earn their fare back east. Lou Frankel, author of the Billboard review explains further complications: "The hero, who runs the ranch, is fronting for the FBI, who are after the villainess, and so he can't put a 6 gun period to the rustling. Then his gal comes home from the cultured Eastern singing school to take over when he gets drafted." If not equal to the travails of Curly, Laura, Jud and the impending statehood of Oklahoma, at least it appears to have been somewhat inventive.

"The Boys From Boise," alas did not survive in the history books as the cultural watershed that Mr. Frankel so gamely suggested it

would. In fact, little of television before the so-called "Golden Age" is remembered today, primarily because of the small number of sets at the time and the lack of a national or even regional network. When beginning this study, it was assumed that information on live television drama would only be found beginning several years after World War II. However, a check of nine years of Bilboard and Variety, the trade publications of the entertainment field, revealed a vast number of shows produced prior to 1948. This section will outline the dramatic productions televised from 1939 through 1947, mentioning specific shows as well as outlining the dramas in terms of chronology, station, length, genre, directors, writers, producers, casts, etc.

It is the intent of this Chapter to faithfully describe the representative dramas scanned from 1939 through 1947. The plays will be described both individually, and in terms of the entire group of 160 play. They will be described in terms of number of plays by year, number of plays by television station, the lengths of the dramas, and the number and type of plays according to genre. In this group, the dramas will be classified into comedies, musicals, and serious dramas, as well as plays that dealt with a World War II oriented theme. Finally, the directors of the plays will be described.

Number of Plays by Year

The issue by issue check of the two weekly publications (Variety, published in New York, Billboard, in Cincinnati) revealed reviews or information on 160 live dramas broadcast from April 1939 through December 1947. Several more dramas were mentioned but no information about them was provided. Therefore, there were obviously more than 160 plays

broadcast, but the information available is more than large enough to provide a valid sample. This number includes only separate, individual plays and does not include dramatic shows that were part of a regular series utilizing recurring characters, such as WBKB's "What's Cooking with the Scotts." The dramas were telecast either as a separate program or were contained in a v riety show. Most of NBC's dramas before the war were presented as part of these grab bag variety shows.

All the dramas broadcast before World War II were from the NBC station. Of these 35 plays, 26 were telecast in 1939, seven in 1940 and two in 1941. During the first years of the war, when stations were limited to primarily filmed telecasts, drama broadcasting was virtually nonexistent. There was no mention of plays in 1942 and the only 1943 production, "Blind Alley", came sometime in December. It is impossible to determine the exact date of this and many other productions because both publications were inconsistent in supplying such detailed information.

Beginning in 1944, however, dramatic shows provided a standard bill of fare on the New York, Schenectady, Chicago and Hollywood stations. From 1944 through 1947 there were at least 125 dramas broadcast, fairly evenly distributed by year with 33 in 1944, 33 in 1945, 32 in 1946 and 27 in 1947. The slight decline is somewhat deceiving, however, as it should be noted that by 1947 other forms of live dramatic materials were being produced, such as serials and soap operas.

Number of Plays by Stations

By an extremely wide margin, NBC, through its New York owned and operated station W2XBS/WNBT, outclassed all other stations in the

number of productions of live television drama. Of the 160 recorded dramas, 84 were NBC productions. This included 35 before the war and 48 from 1945 through 1947. After the experimental period NBC settled on Sunday night as the best time for airing its plays and of the 48 dramas, 43 were part of this Sunday night series. A total of eight plays were telecast from March 3 through July 1, 1945, 15 from September 2 through February 24, 1946, 10 from May 12 through November 31, 1946, eight from January 19 through May 28, 1947 and two in the fall of that year, on September 28 and November 9.

Next with the greatest number of dramas produced was the station operated by DuMont, W2XWV/WABD. This station broadcast 27 plays through 1947, beginning in late December 1943. At least five were telecast while the station was operating under its experimental license and 22 were presented after it went commercial. Not all of these were DuMont programs, though, as radio station WOR produced "David Garrick" on March 27, 1945 and the ABC firm presented several in 1946 and 1947. WBKB, Chicago, came next with 22 plays, followed by the New York CBS station WCBW/WCBS with nine, WRGB in Schenectady with seven, W6XAO in Hollywood with six and WPTZ (Philadelphia), WNBW (Washington), KSD (St. Louis) and KTLA (Los Angeles) with one apiece. The Hollywood station seems to have been somewhat more prolific than this, but information from the West Coast about television was spotty in both publications. It is interesting to note the relatively small number of CBS shows, especially when compared with NBC. CBS ranked in the forefront of "Golden Age" drama with its "Studio One" series, but at this time appeared to be in no rush to enter the field strongly.

Length of the Dramas

The two hour production of "The Boys From Boise" already mentioned was not an isolated case of a special production being given a longer running time. There may have been only one other two hour production, a presentation on WRGB of Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado", given by the Operatic Society of the State Teacher's College at Albany, but there were 30 shows that ran from one to two hours. A total of ten shows were an hour in length, 17 ran from one-half to one hours, 25 were 30 minutes long, and 16 were less than 30 minutes. Unfortunately, 61 of the 160 are impossible to chart as to their running times, simply because this information was not given in the publications. Of these 61, however, 15 were included in the variety shows that NBC ran in 1939 and 1940, leading to the conclusion that they were probably not longer than 30 minutes in length. The only times given for these early plays were for "The Valiant" (June 7, 1939, 30 minutes) and "The Honeymoon" (June 22, 1939, 13 minutes). Also, many of these plays were specifically called "playlets" or "sketches" and thus were probably not long.

The running times for the plays varied greatly, with the 99 plays for which information was given having 29 different running times. Most popular were 30 minutes (25 plays), 60 minutes (10), 20 minutes (7), 90 minutes (6), 70 and 25 minutes (5), 75 and 45 minutes (4), 95, 80, 55, and 50 minutes (3), and 65,35, and 15 minutes (2). Other running times were 115, 105, 100, 97, 85, 81, 59, 51, 49, 40, 31, 13, and 10 minutes. Even though there is no way to determine, it is probable that many of these uneven lengths were caused by the actors either speeding up or slowing down delivery of their lines. Since

all the productions were live, there was actually no way to control the speed of a performance once it had begun. The only reference to such a mishap was the Variety review of April 10, 1946 of WBKB's "The Far Off Hills" by the Northwestern University Players, which noted that the final 81 minute performance was originally scheduled at 55 minutes and ran an embarrassing 26 minutes over.

The length of plays was of course a somewhat arbitrary figure, depending not only on the pacing of the actors, but also on the whims of the director, producer, writer or adaptor. Thus one finds such obvious butcher jobs as a 30 minute "Romeo and Juliet" by Shakespeare (W2XWV, April 23, 1944), a 50 minute "H.M.S. Pinafore" by Gilbert and Sullivan (WABD, August, 1944), a 60 minute "The Bourgeois Gentleman" by Moliere (WNBT, June 17, 1945), and a 50 minute "Hedda Gabler" by Ibsen (W6XAO, May 1946). These adaptations were so short because producers recognized the strain involved in watching 1945 television for more than a short period of time. The television sets were still quite small, and the images were not of the best quality, even when the improved image orthicon cameras were put into service after the war. One ingenious solution that NBC tried (it obviously didn't meet with an overwhelming response, since the experiment was never repeated) was to show a full length play over several nights. Sunday April 15, 1945 saw the first act of "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" running 45 minutes while the second act was not on until May 20, when it ran 49 minutes. Variety's review of the second act, on May 23, enumerated the problems associated with such an approach to the televising of the plays:

> A series of questions rises immediately. Act I took 45 minutes. Act II lasted 49 minutes. A month elapsed between

> the two acts and another month, presumably, will pass before the telefan can find out how this play ends. Could the entire play be given in one session? Will television programming be so flexible that it will be able to put on an entire play regardless of irregularity of length? Will the telefan sit through an entire three act drama in one session? (Stal., p. 15)

Unfortunately, neither Variety nor Billboard gave any indication whether the third act was ever presented. Perhaps there are some people in New York who never did find out what finally happened to Lincoln. NBC later did present full length plays in its Sunday night series, even though the scripts probably were cut to an extent. Representative plays included "The Front Page" (WNBT, November 11, 1945, 75 minutes), "You Can't Take It With You" (November 21, 1945, 85 minutes), and "Petticoat Fever" (November 25, 1945, 90 minutes).

Number, Type and Examples of Plays by Genre

Not surprisingly, most of the live television dramas from 1939 through 1947 were plays with a serious, or straight dramatic theme. Of the 160 recorded dramas, 81 can be identified as serious plays, 23 can be classified as comedies, seven were definitely musicals, and 39 plays are impossible to classify as to type. Straight drama is the type of play best suited for live television, since it does not require an audience to supply laughs, as do comedies, and it does not require the added expense and burden of musicians and extra personnel, as do musicals. Also, since such a large proportion of the classifiable plays were serious dramas, it is reasonable to assume that a majority of the unknowns were also of that group. They were simply less trouble for all involved, and the fledgling production teams certainly had to look for all the help they could get.

Musicals. Apart from the already mentioned "Boys From Boise" and "The Mikado," musical productions included "Sing Out the News" (excerpts, Thursday, July 6, 1939, W2XBS), Gilbert and Sullivan's "Cox and Box" (W2XBS, July, 1939), the soldier revue "Bottlenecks of 1941" (July 5, 1941, W2XBS), Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore" (WABD, August, 1944, 50 minutes), and "Children of Ol' Man River" (WNBT, Wednesday, January 30, 1946). This last production was an element in another of NBC's post war schemes, a plan to revive vaudeville by and for television. The play told the story of Billy Bryant, a riverboat impresario of the 19th century and included old time vaudeville acts. NBC finally had to modify its plan for a full scale vaude revival (though even today it is still alive to an extent on television), primarily because of the high talent costs. However, NBC was also using other formulas that would work amazingly well for the next 30 years: "You should have heard the wolves as the camera caught a shot of Josephine with a low-cut dress, and, and and. . ." (Variety, February, 17. 1946).

Comedies. Television did not wholly shy away from the production of comedies, however, even though those produced were often older, well established plays. These included "The Milky Way" (W2XBS, October 20, 1939, 95 minutes), a Broadway hit from the 20's about a prizefighter; George Kaufmann's "If Men Played Cards As Women Do" (W2XWV, March, 1944), in which product plugs were inserted into the script of the play by Proctor Electric Company, the sponsor; Moliere's "The Bourgeois Gentleman," "The Front Page," "You Can't Take It With You," and "Petticoat Fever" (already mentioned), Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" (WNBT, May 12, 1946, 90 minutes), "Mr. Mergenthwerker's Lob-

blies" (WNBT, September 22, 1946, 75 minutes), a story of pixies in a newspaper office; "Merton of the Movies" (WNBT, May 14, 1947, 60 minutes), which was the first production in the regular "Kraft Television Theatre" series, and "The Importance of Being Earnest" by Oscar Wilde (WPTZ, Philadelphia, September 30, 1947, 115 minutes).

There were some productions in which the clear cut classifications of comedy and tragedy were blurred. Foremost among these was the November 10, 1946 WNBT production of "The Last War" by Neil Grant. This 45 minute production, which starred Vaughn Taylor, John McQuade, and Fay Marlowe, as well as having Eva Marie Saint and Arthur Hunnicut in its supporting cast, was a story of civilization after a nuclear war. Animals have taken over the world and are about to kill the only man left on earth when an angel arrives just in time to save him and take him to heaven. Larry Stahl, writing in the November 30, 1946 Variety commented:

> Despite the imagination and new techniques involved, "The Last War" just didn't come off. It emerged as a confused jumble of comedy and fantasy, idealism and ideology. It was difficult to determine whether the show was meant to be taken seriously and to point a moral, or whether it was just comedy. McQuade as the ruling Monkey has consistently given top performances, but he went overboard in this one to act like a monkey. Result was just a lot of noise and swishing of his tail. Fay Marlowe. . .stood out as the Angel and Vaughn Taylor also scored as the dog. . .The view of a bunch of grown men and women running around the set garbed in such masks and animal costumes, however, was a little naive to be convincing. (p. 11)

There were no rating services for television usage in 1946, so NBC was not risking the ire of its audience by having men around the set as monkeys, dogs, and other assorted animals.

Serious Dramas. Many of the plays telecast during this period were new or obscure works that may not have scored impressively on

the stage or in radio or films, but there were several that were quite famous and/or were by well-known authors. These included: "Brother Rat" (W2XBS, September 7, 1939, 70 minutes) which had been a Broadway success as well as a motion picture; "Julius Caesar" by William Shakespeare (W2XBS, March, 1940, 60 minutes), "Romeo and Juliet" by William Shakespeare (W2XWV, April 23, 1944, 30 minutes), the already mentioned Pulitzer-prize winning "Abe Lincoln in Illinois," Maxwell Anderson's "Winterset" (WNBT, October, 1945, 95 minutes), "Hedda Gabler" by Henrik Ibsen (W6XAO, May 1946, 50 minutes), Karl Capek's science fiction classic "R.U.R." ("Rossom's Universal Robots," KSD, February 15, 1947, 60 minutes), Chekhov's "The Marriage Proposal" (WBKB, August, 1945), Tennessee Williams' "The Last of My Solid Gold Watches" (WNBT, December 4, 1947, 30 minutes, written specifically for television), and Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" (WNBT, April 27, 1947, 70 minutes).

Some of these plays were subjected to bizarre stagings and directorial interpretations. John Franken, writing in the March 23, 1940 issue of Billboard, was quite aghast at what was done to Shakespeare in the production of "Julius Caesar":

> Only the desire to experiment can justify NBC's television production of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" in modern dress. To see a group of actors parade around in military garb that makes them resemble a gang of Kremlin or Berlin fanatics and then to hear them deliver the Bard's classic lines is farcical. . .If there's to be modern dress let there be the modern idiom. If there's to be modern dress and modern idiom then it's not Shakespeare which is as it should be. After all, he was a pretty good playwright. Caesar's death, by bullets is supposed to be exciting, but it came over with the thrill of a bowl of oatmeal, which may be said of the entire production. . .Now, now, Bill, stop spinning around like that.

DuMont's later production of "Romeo and Juliet," which had sword fighting scenes that "resembled duels in a closet or the Marx Brothers troupe in a phone booth" (Variety, April 26, 1944), also did the Bard a disservice and it was not until the 1947 production of "Twelfth Night" on NBC that Shakespeare was given his just due with "a fresh approach to the classics via a young cast sans traces of hamminess" (Variety, April 30, 1947).

These plays were the most famous, but were clearly in the minority. As with modern day television, the staple items were not the classic, brilliant plays, but instead the serviceable, standard concoctions that would appeal to a mass audience. NBC's first series of plays, in 1939 and 1940, contained such instantly forgettable titles as "The Unexpected," "The Faker," "The Red Hat," "The Smart Thing," "The Valiant," "Any Family," "Likes and Dislikes," "A Game of Chess," "Afterwards," "The Honeymoon," "Services of an Expert," "Art and Mrs. Bottle," "Criminal at Large," "The Gorilla," "Ode to Liberty," "House of Glass," and "The Drums of Oude." Typical of these plays were two written by Edwin Burke, "The Faker" (May 10, 1939) and "Likes and Dislikes" (May 24, 1939). John Richman, reviewing the play in the June 3, 1939 issue of Billboard identified "Likes and Dislikes" as the type of program fare that television would turn to again and again:

> A typical one-act playlet with the typical expected twist at the end. This is the sort of thing it is too harmless to quibble about. A few humorous lines and a human situation, plus some fair enough acting by a pleasant cast made the whole seem much better than it actually was. (p. 11)

Television may not have been breaking any new ground with this type of program fare, but it offended no one and hopefully kept the audience

satisfied. The argument for this type of program was later to be identified as the "Least Objectionable Program" theory of programming which assumes the audience will watch the least objectionable program at any given time.

One of the most popular dramatic staples of radio was the mystery and detective series, and it was perhaps inevitable that television would turn to this genre for plays. Plays of this theme produced from 1944 through 1947 included "The Perfect Crime" (WBKB, April 27, 1944), "Bill Vance's psychological thriller" (WBKB, April, 1944), "The Woman who was Acquitted" (WABD, June 29, 1944, 30 minutes), "Footsteps of Hate" (WABD, June, 1944), "The Tomb of Alexander Jordan" (WRGB, September, 1944, a video version of a Blue radio network "Creeps by Night" program), "The Perfect Alibi" by A. A. Milne (WNBT, February, 1945, 60 minutes), "X Marks the Spot" by Bill Vance (WBKB, July, 1945, 25 minutes), "Casey, Press Photographer," (WCBW, September, 1945), "Dark Hammock," (WNBT, January, 1946), "Angel Street," (WNBT, January 1946), "Sorry, Wrong Number" (WCBW, January, 30, 1946, 30 minutes, which was a successful radio show and later a motion picture), "The Dark Cellar" (WBKB, May, 1946), "First Person Singular" (WNBT, June 30, 1946, first in a series of video adaptations of the famous radio series, "Lights Out"), "Something in the Wind" (WNBT, August, 1946, the second play in the series), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (two versions of the chilling Edgar Allan Poe story were done: WABD, August, 1946 and WBKB, February 27, 1947, adapted by Bill Vance, 30 minutes)," The Monkey's Paw"(WABD, January 8, 1947, 20 minutes, and "The Bells" (WABD, December 26, 1947, 60 minutes).

Radio murder and mystery shows were popular because they were so effective in scaring their audiences: nothing is more vivid than the human imagination. Faced with the need to visualize such gruesome occurrences as invariably happen in murder stories, the producers left little to the imagination, either in plots or visuals. "The Woman who was Acquitted" was "a psychological exploration into the guilt of an acquitted murderess" who had performed "such a cold-hearted deed as the strangling of a baby" (Variety, July 5, 1944). "Footsteps of Hate"created an "atmosphere of hate and ugliness brought on by the gnawing fear of starvation" (Billboard, July 8, 1944). "The Tomb of Alexander Jordan" concerned an elderly "epileptic with a consuming fear of being buried alive" (Billboard, September 23, 1944) who constructed an elaborate mausoleum, complete with a gong over the coffin which he could ring if his fears were realized. His evil disinherited nephew short circuited the system and killed his wife (who was going to inherit Jordan's fortune), but then found himself locked in the tomb. According to the review, "the iconoscope camera caught and projected all the visual horror, suspense, and play of characters, complete with coffin and corpse."

Other particularly vivid scannings included "First Person Singular," where director Fred Coe used a subjective camera technique to allow the audience to "become" the murderer, and WBKB's production of "The Tell-Tale Heart" which "depicted actual killing and such powerful and frightening dramatics as full-screen shots of a horrible looking eye, the sound and sight of a beating heart, screams and groans, and other weird sound effects" (Billboard, March 8, 1947, Cy Wagner).

Plays with Military Oriented Content

Television has always mirrored the times. The image may be warped, out of focus, and hopelessly fantasized, but glimmers of truth will invariably shine through. Television dramas of the war years dealt with the themes and repercussions of the war and even though TV did not squarely face the realities of the conflict at all times, it at least did not ignore them. Productions included an original play by the radio and television workshop of Stephen's College of Columbia, Missouri about young women facing wartime problems (WBKB, March 1944); "Penny Keeps Her Head," a "dramatized Women's Army Corps recruiting poster" (WABD, June, 1944); "The Favor," about a girl who chooses to spend $275 on war bonds instead of a fur coat (WCBW, June 30, 1944, 30 minutes); "Miracle at Blaise," a fantasy about the French underground and a mysterious lady who later is revealed to be an angel (WABD, August 22, 1944, 20 minutes); "Wildcat Willie Buys a Bond," another war bond story that "Set television programming back 10 years" and that "had a foul odor" (Billboard, October 7, 1944, WBKB); "Now and Then," in which a small town schoolteacher tries to sell a plan to the War Department on how to win the war (WBKB, October, 1944); "Bright Star Shining," about the temptations that beset the wives of servicemen (WBKB, January, 1945, 30 minutes); "Birthday," about a small girl in war-torn France (WNBT, March 1945); "Winter Wheat" by Maxine Wood, about a veteran who settles in Montana with his Russian wife (WNBT, May 6, 1945, 60 minutes); "Untitled," in which a dead GI rises from the battlefield to tell how he got there (WCBW, May 25, 1945, 30 minutes); "Experiment in the Desert" (WCBW, August 16, 1945,

30 minutes); and "Beachhead at Louie's" (WNBT, September 16, 1945, 37 minutes). These last two dramas were written especially for television and even though, according to the opinions of the reviewers, critical failures, they nevertheless show a certain maturity in their attempt to deal with contemporary incidents and problems.

"Experiment in the Desert," written by Paul Belanger and Ed Stasheff, produced by Gilbert Seldes and directed by Lucille Hudsberg and Belanger, was an attempt to recreate the incidents leading to the first atomic bomb test in New Mexico. The action was primarily set it the scientists' observation post, and Variety (August 29, 1945) praised the casting saying many of the actors actually resembled the real people involved in the test. Even though Variety goes on to say that the drama did "a pretty good job of recreating the feelings and moods" before the test blast, it also chastizes the producers for relying on some simple melodramatic techniques for sustaining interest: "The writers did nothing more than play on the time element but the program was laden with suspense. Largely due, of course, to the stunning reality of the bomb itself." Billboard (September 1) called it a "run-of-the-mind production, interesting but hardly gripping" and felt that "the whole thing would have been better if there had been no attempt to show the explosion. It should have ended one tenth of a second before its H-hour." Despite these shortcomings the production certainly does seem quite interesting.

Even less of a critical success was "Beachhead at Louie's" which purported to deal with the very real and often frightening psychological problems that returning soldiers experienced when trying to make

the transition to civilian life. Produced, directed and co-authored (with Mort Greene) by Herb Graf, the play instead offered the story of a vet with problems who works them out by angry confrontation with another veteran. Billboard characterized it (September 19, 1945) as "high sounding words without meaning. Trying vainly to impress the audience that the war wasn't fought to get back home and eat apple pie, the show just about succeeded in proving that it was." The publication also labels the show a fraud for not saying something about the real problems of rehabilitation: "Beach was just cashing in on a popular theme, and had nothing constructive to say." Of course, the question to be considered concerning this allegation is whether it is better to attempt to prick the public's awareness of problems such as this, even if in a "fraudulent" and deceiving manner, or, if the subject is not to be treated in a constructive manner whether it is best to say nothing at all. Perhaps it is being harsh on the reviewers in hindsight, but 30 years of television have taught the American public to accept anything of substance.

Directors of the Live Television Dramas

For the 160 dramas, only 69 were specifically identified as to director, with 32 different people given credit. NBC and DuMont both had 10 directors, even though NBC had a larger number of productions. Fred Coe led NBC with 16 efforts, followed by Ed Sobol with 10, Ernest Colling with six, Warren Wade with two, and Donald Davie, Anton Bundsmann, Thomas Riley, Roy Oxford, Stan Quinn, and Herb Graf with one each. DuMont's directors were Harvey Marlowe with six, Ray

Nelson with two, and George Lowther, Jay Strong, Irwin Shane, Bob Emery, Milton Kay, Tony Farrar, Jonathan Edwards, and Kay Emery with one each. CBS used five directors: Worthington Miner with two, and Gilbert Seldes, Ben Feiner, Hudsberg/Belanger, and John Houseman/ Nick Ray/Frances Buss with one each. For "Sorry, Wrong Number" Houseman and Ray rehearsed the actors and Buss did the actual staging. WBKB in Chicago reigned as the bastion of women's liberation in the early years of television, as all eight shows identified as to director were directed by women. These included Helen Carson with four, and Lorraine Larson, Beulah Zachary, Pauline Bobrov, and Fran Harris with one each. In addition, Larson also directed the production of "R.U.R." at KSD in St. Louis.

# CHAPTER V

## CRITICAL REACTIONS TO THE DRAMAS

The reviews of the live dramas were almost as varied as the shows themselves. Not only were the 160 reviews found in Billboard and Variety for the nine year period written by a large number of reviewers, but the length and quality differed tremendously. Many of the reviews were merely notices that the plays had been broadcast, often giving only the play's title without providing statistics on the author, director, cast, etc., and making no mention of the technical aspects of the show. Others went into greater detail on one or more details of the production, perhaps charting the development of the still new medium, critiquing the quality of performance, or comparing the play to earlier manifestations in one or other media. Some reviews were extremely thorough in recounting the technical side of the broadcasts, the reviewers obviously aware that a new and provocative medium could be seen unfolding week by week. These mentioned the quality of the camera pickup, the problems with focus and clarity (very early cameras produced a gray spot in the center of the screen), the inability of the iconoscope cameras to truthfully capture flesh tones or even to show more than a few people at one time, the problems with sound pickup (even though this seemed to be the most accomplished facet of the new medium), blurring on pan shots, etc.

The majority of the reviews would actually be classified as "reviews" instead of examples of "criticism," primarily because of their short length and lack of detailed dissection of the inherent qualities

and eventual ramifications of the medium. Many merely said that the acting was "good" or "bad" without delving into specific reasons why a variance in performance quality may have been due to this new and extremely different forum for actors. Commenting on the technical side of productions, the reviewers often took the trouble to recount whole scenes, complete with camera placements, in order to tell why something worked or was good television, or failed because of static visuals. The overwhelming impression one receives from the mass of reviews is not that the reviewers were merely people roped into reviewing "radio with pictures" but that they took quite seriously the role of being the world's first television critics. If no outstanding personality comes through in the writings (apart from an occasional "cute" phrase or humorous remark), it is primarily because the trade publications were not meant to be a serious forum for intellectual discussion of the infant medium, but instead a place where investors, actors, and producers could read the most complete information available on the television business and television programs. Once commercial braodcasting began in 1941, this role of the tradepublications became increasingly important, for sponsors could gauge the development of the medium and obtain relatively unbiased reactions to the shows. They published for the edification of the persons with a vested interest in a specific section of the entertainment industry. It is this type of person who wants information straight and out front and does not care for discussions on the theories of television.

In line with this, one finds a large number of references to

similar productions in other media. These include references to plays that began life as legitimate stage plays or as radio scripts, and in reference to television techniques that harked to radio, stage, or films. Productions were lambasted for being too static and for being camera reportings of stage successes. Acting techniques that may have succeeded splendidly on radio or on the stage were criticized for eschewing the new-found intimacy of television.

In looking at the reviews of the live television dramas from 1939 through 1947, several major themes and important characteristics of these reviews will be recounted in detail, along with a large number of sizeable quotations from the writings themselves. The physical size of the body of criticism will be discussed according to the primary publications in which they appeared as well as themes appearing regularly throughout the reviews. These include a concern over the content of the medium; an interest in production aspects: acting, directing, staging, etc.; the already mentioned comparisons with other media; and an interest in the technical side of the medium. This last section includes the development of the actual physical hardware of television broadcasting (the iconoscope cameras, the kinescope receivers, etc.) as well as the technical elements involved in any standard dramatic production: lighting, visual balance, costumes, sets, make-up, etc.

## Publications

With the limited status of television broadcasting between the years of 1939 and 1948, it is not surprising that publications carrying detailed descriptions of the new shows in the new medium were not

numerous. Regular newspaper coverage was spotty at best and, even if isolated shows were mentioned or even reviewed, there was no continuity in the coverage from one week to the next. Regular television columns did not begin appearing in magazines and newspapers until the later 1940's or early 1950's. Of the New York city newspapers only the New York Times provided any regular coverage of television, and this was primarily in the form of weekly listings of what was scheduled to be shown (which often changed without notice). In 1938, the year television broadcasting actually began to show promise, only 14 citations concerning television drama are found in the New York Times index, and seven of these relate to the state of British broadcasting of dramatic works. The British Broadcasting Corporation had begun regular broadcasts in 1936 and developments were regularly reported in the New York Times.

The New York Times did print information when RCA and NBC began their first series of regular telecasts in mid-April of 1938 and thereafter carried frequent listings on the haphazard RCA-NBC schedule. The New York Times' first review of a drama, written by O. E. D., Jr., came on May 22 with a short synopsis of the experimental production of "The Mysterious Mummy Case," followed the next month by a review of the "Susan and God" excerpts. After this promising beginning, the New York Times television review virtually disappeared. Of the large number of dramas televised by NBC during the 15 month period of experimental broadcasting beginning in 1939, only "The Butter and Egg Man" and "Brother Rat" were reviewed. Reviews were even scarcer after this initial period with the only one an account of the first original television musical comedy, "The

Boys From Boise."

The New York Times did chronicle the development of the television service to an extent however, and gave editorial space to such television drama activities in the later 1940's as the NBC-Theatre Guild pact in 1947 and NBC's relation with the American Theatre Wing. Space in the New York Times was limited, though, and the editors obviously felt it was a waste of space to review shows that were (1) presented once and then doomed to memory and (2) available to only several thousand people. Even in Chicago, where station WBKB had been on the air since 1941 and broadcast many plays, the coverage was weak. The Chicago Tribune employed a media writer, Larry Wolters, beginning in 1947, but there was little information on television in general, and nothing on television broadcasting of plays until the Chicago Tribune station, WGN-TV, began broadcasting in 1948. Many newspapers in the 1940's shared the same fear of television that Hollywood held and simply refused to print television news.

Whereas the New York Times did not review a large number of the live television dramas, the slack in week by week television drama reporting was picked up by the two trade journals, Billboard and Variety. Since these publications were devoted solely to the entertainment business, more space could be allotted to television. Television did not gain its own page in the publications until the later 1940's, but the radio pages, beginning in the 1930's, contained much news about the new medium. Of the two, Billboard actually provided more coverage than Variety, especially in the period before World War II. This may seem somewhat surprising today, for Billboard in its present form is a weekly publication devoted solely

to the news of the music industry, whereas Variety has retained its 1940's flavor, providing news about television, films, music, and the stage. Billboard of the 1930's and 1940's was virtually indentical to Variety in both content and format, and both publications had regular sections devoted to radio news and reviews.

Billboard obviously took seriously its role as the historian of early television. The issue of June 24, 1939 carried the following blurb: "Since the inception of the RCA-NBC television service, Billboard has carried news on television and television program reviews every week. Every single RCA-NBC television studio program has been reviewed! For the latest television news, for honest unbiased television reviews, read the Billboard." For the nine year period of this study, Billboard carried information on 105 of the 160 plays and Variety covered 82.

Although not as complete in its charting of the development of the early television service, Variety also devoted much space to reviews of the dramas. Of the 35 dramas broadcast before World War II, Variety reviewed 19, and Billboard covered 25. Nine of the dramas were reviewed by both publications and for the nine year period, 27 shows were reviewed by both papers. It is impossible to determine whether this relatively small amount of overlapping was planned, but since several of the major productions were reviewed by both, it is doubtful. The nine overlapping reviews in the pre-war period appeared in the issues of the respective journals for the same week, making it also appear doubtful that either magazine was following the lead of the other. Of the 33 shows in 1944 Variety covered 10 while Bill-

board reviewed 26. In 1945, however, Variety reviewed 20 of the 33 while Billboard only covered 16. In 1946 Variety covered 18 of the 32, Billboard 20, and in 1947 Variety covered 14 of the 27 dramas while Billboard reviewed 17.

The amount of space devoted to the reviews varied widely in both publications. Most reviews devoted to a single play were between 5 and 8 column inches, but some were as short as 2 inches and others stretched to 12 column inches and more. Also, since many of the dramas were broadcast not as separate entities, but as part of variety hours, information on the shows was often limited to a few sentences in a review of the entire broadcast. Since the length of these reviews also varied, so did the space given to the dramas. The amount of space given to the dramas sometimes corresponded directly with the quality of the presentation: if a good drama redeemed an otherwise disastrous hour, more space might be given the play. Contrariwise, if a bad variety hour contained an equally atrocious playlet, it might be written off in a few terse sentences.

In conclusion, it can be said that there was actually no regularity to the appearance of reviews or to their length. If a writer had more to say, even if this was a personal lengthy tirade against NBC's patting themselves on the back, or the fact that the televised credits weren't sufficient to identify the actors, the writers simply sat down and said it, even if this meant short changing the rest of the review. Billboard showed more regularity with the appearance of reviews, but both publications were by no means consistent with the amount of space given to reviews of live television dramas. It must be remembered that at the same time there were reviews of other television

productions and the appearance of drama reviews hinged on the number and quality of other shows broadcast that specific week.

The Reviewers

Another drawback to a discussion of shared characteristics of the reviews is the large number of reviewers. Whereas later developments may have favored the institution of one primary television critic for a publication (such as Jack Gould with the New York Times, John Crosby with the New York Herald Tribune, or Robert Lewis Shayon with the Saturday Review), the trade publications' policy of reviewing a large number of shows made it necessary to use many reviewers that would critique not only dramas but all other types of programs.

In the nine years of Billboard, 69 reviews were written by 18 different authors, while 36 reviews were published without any indication whatsoever of who the author might be. For Variety, 62 reviews were written by 17 authors, while 20 of the reviews were unsigned. All 43 reviews published prior to World War II were signed and in 1944, the next full year of television broadcasting only 2 out of 20 Variety reviews and 5 out of 26 Billboard reviews were not signed. In 1945 the number of unsigned reviews mushroomed to 11 out of 20 for Variety and 8 out of 16 for Billboard. In 1946, 6 out of 18 Variety reviews were unsigned, all before May 19; all 10 after that were signed. In contrast, out of the 20 reviews printed in Billboard that year, the only signed one was printed on January 13. Signed reviews experienced a rebirth the following year as the first two Billboard reviews were not signed, but the remaining 15 were. Only three out of Variety's 14 for the year weren't signed. During the period when so many of the reviews

weren't signed, the quality of the reviews appeared to decline. Not only were the reviews not as long, but authors were not as thorough in their discussion of the plays.

Of the signed reviews, Billboard's primary critic was Paul Ackerman with 15, followed by Cy Wagner with 11, Marty Schrader and Joe Koehler with 8 apiece, Wanda Marvin with 5, John Franken with four; Bob Weiss, Joe Csida and Alan Fischler with three; and Lou Frankel, Irving Richman, and Sam Zatt with two each. L. Abbot, E. Rachel, R.G., Chase, Orodenker, and Lee Zhito had one signed review each. Larry Stahl, whose first signed review was not until March, 1946, led Variety critics with 18 entries, and thus came the closest to being a regular television critic in this period. Among the publications' other reviewers Tom Ibee had seven, all before April 1940; Donn. and Tomm. had five each, Carson,Mike Wear and Ben Bodec had three apiece; and Sten., Bron., Turo., Jose., and Morgan had one each. Variety only printed the abbreviation of the reviewer's name in many instances and it was impossible to obtain further information about these authors.

None of the critics went on to assume any of the fame that was later achieved by Gould, Crosby, or Shayon. It is interesting to note that one of Billboard's primary reviewers, Marty Schrader, later tried to develop a career as a television producer and personality, appearing in 1947 as the writer, producer and star of a local WABD show entitled "Write You Are" in which he talked about a famous person while the show's resident handwriting analysis expert attempted to analyze that person's handwriting. These critics of Variety and Billboard were not "superstar" critics, but instead workmen who did a workmanlike job. There were no great thrusts into the heady fields of intellectualism and theory, but

instead a series of relatively unbiased opinions about the quality of a particular show.

The Reviewers Respond to Acting

As with many a stage production, it appears that the acting in the live television dramas in the years between 1939 and 1948 in part redeemed shortcomings caused by technical problems. Reviewers for both publications made more specific mentions of the acting in the dramas than of any other aspect of production. Reviews in Billboard contained 60 specific references to the quality of the acting in the 105 plays it reviewed, while Variety contained references totaling 64 in the 82 dramas it covered. Both publications seemed to be generally impressed with the quality of the dramas as nine reviews in Billboard and 16 in Variety were judged to be Excellent recommendations. Nine Billboard and 14 Variety references were Very Good, 22 in Billboard and 19 in Variety were Good, nine in Billboard and 11 in Variety were Average, four in Billboard were Mediocre, and seven in Billboard and four in Variety were Poor. All citations throughout the remainder of the study will be as follows: (station broadcasting the play, date of the broadcast, name of the reviewer, date of the review, page number).

1939 Productions, Billboard. (Note: All 1939 shows were on W2XB W2XBS). Two of Edwin Burke's plays were early NBC program fare. Billboard found Walter Greaza in "The Faker" (May 10, Ackerman, May 20, p. 11) "nothing short of superb," while the primary strength of "Likes and Dislikes" (May 24, Richman, June 3, p. 10) was "some fair enough acting by a pleasant cast." The first production in this series, "The Unexpected" (May 3, Franken, p. 10) was found by Billboard to include per-

formances of which "none were especially noteworthy" while "The Smart Thing" (May 17, Zatt, May 27, p. 11) was hampered by acting that was "very spotty and hammy" while Miss Sleeper "emoted much too quickly to catch the action." Phil Loeb was blacklisted in the early 1950's for imagined Communist tendencies, but Billboard found that in "Sing Out The News" (July 6, Weiss, July 22, p. 12) he "has the tele techniques mastered to a point almost beyond comparison. This reviewer has previously rated his acting and singing over the medium and can only repeat he is swell." The 95 minute version of Bronte's "Jane Eyre" (October 12, Franken, October 21, p. 13) was damaged by the two leads. Franken found that Flora Campbell "spoke too fast and didn't keep her eyes on the character she was speaking to, a fault television makes much of" and Dennis Hoey "suffered from slovenly sound direction or doesn't know how to use his voice. He boomed and bellowed to a bad level." The year ended with a production of "Criminal at Large" (November 17, Ackerman, November 25, p. 10), finding the "cast strictly socko."

1939 Productions, Variety. The two stars of "The Valiant" (June 7, Bodec, June 14, p. 14) were highly praised. Ben Bodec felt Bert Lytell presented a "clean-cut and self assured job with no tendency to overstress lines or to overmug" and Flora Campbell performed better than she would later in "Jane Eyre" as she "wove a distinctive sense of ingenue charm and appeal." When Ethel Waters starred in excerpts from "Mamba's Daughters" (June 14, Weiss, June 21, p. 13) her performance was "glowingly simple and sincere and raised the sketch to an affecting emotional pitch" and Weiss felt that "to put over that kind of inner-felt underplaying is a demonstration of visio's

possibilities as well as a thrilling performance." Of the actors in "Art and Mrs. Bottle" (September 14, Ackerman, September 20, p. 15) it was found that "when visible their performances were excellent, but most times it was best to shut the eyes and simply visualize the action rather follow the blur."

1940 Performances, Variety and Billboard. "Shakespeare brings out the ham in actors and even a pig would have blushed" had he seen "Julius Caesar"(W2XBS, March, Franken, March 23, p. 11).

1941 Productions, Variety. The performances of "Blind Alley" (WNBT, November 21, Bodec, November 26, p. 13) were "of a high order," led by Maurice Wells who was "a wealth of nuance and understanding."

1944 Productions, Billboard. The actors in "Mercy in the Wilderness" (WBKB, March, Wagner, March 25, p. 16) "did a job that proved they have a future in tele-acting," while Arlene Huntington in "The Tomb of Alexander Jordan" (WRGB, September, Rachel, September 23, p. 20) was "sure but too evenly paced, even in her emotional scenes. One didn't feel particular horror for her dying trapped in the mausoleum."

1944 Productions, Variety. There was "strained acting" in the excerpts from "I Have Been Here Before" (W2WXV, February, Jose, March 8, p. 11) but in "Miracle at Blaise" (WABD, August 22, Bron, August 30, p. 9) the "acting was of excellent quality, particularly Claire Luce and Dorothy Smith."

1945 Productions, Billboard. The cast of "Ring on her Finger" (WNBT, September, Koehler, October 6, p. 12) was "big and bad" but no wonder, with a character who "took her accent on and off like a

pair of ill-fitting gloves." Variety: Stephen Courtleigh was "a sensitive, convincing Lincoln" who "grew in power as the play proceeded" in the first act of "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" (WNBT, April 15, Carson, April 8, p. 14). The following week's production of "Nettie"(WNBT, April 22, Donn, April 25, p. 11) was characterized by "bang-up thesping," and "fine acting overcame the limitations of the video medium in the presentation of dramatic shows" in the "Town Crier of Chungking" (WABD, May 6, Sten., May 9, p. 13). Bernard Carson "bordered on overacting, but saved it with his well-controlled voice" in "Another Language" (WNBT, September 2, No author cited, September 5, p. 16) while "with the exception of garbled lines the cast was super-fine" in "The Front Page" (WNBT, November 11, No author cited, November 14, p. 21), especially Vinton Hayworth who "provided just the right touches to the leading role of Hildy Johnson."

1946 Productions, Billboard. Some performers were discreetly being informed they weren't succeeding as television actors. "It's no reflection on Mildred Natwick that she isn't as good as Agnes Moorehead, she was adequate, but adequate isn't good enough" was the barb delivered after "Sorry, Wrong Number" (WCBW, January 30, No reviewer cited, February 6, p. 13) and Estelle Winwood in "Blithe Spirit" (WNBT, May 12, No reviewer cited, p. 11) was "better than Mildred Natwick on Broadway." There were no other references to Mildred Natwick in the nine years of Variety and Billboard. This wasn't quite as bad as the acting in "Laughter in Paris" (WNBT, February, 17, No reviewer cited, February 20, p. 16) where "the big screen (RCA's 1945 projection model) has the brutal habit of calling

a ham a ham. This scanning was reviewed on a big screen. The ham was bad."

1946 Productions, Variety. In "The First Year" (WNBT, January 13, No reviewer cited, January 16, p. 17) John McQuade "proved a master of comedy" but it was Michael Road who "walked off with every scene he was in." Disagreeing with Billboard, Variety (February 6, No reviewer cited, p. 11) found "Mildred Natwick was a sock selection for the star role of the neurotic dame" in "Sorry Wrong Number." "Elliot Nugent was good" but the rest of the cast of "Knockout" (WNBT, February, No reviewer cited, February 27, p. 9) "acted like something out of a high school play." Meanwhile, the true amateurs in "The Far-Off Hills" (WBKB, April 4, Tomm, April 10, p. 15) were impreseive, as the "thesping by the simon-pures was surprisingly good." The cast of "Mr. and Mrs. North" (WNBT, May 12, Stal., May 22, p. 18) was "undoubtedly one of the best ever assembled before the television cameras." Grace Carney was "too whining" in "Angels Don't Marry" (WABD, May 24, Stal, May 29, p. 31), Carl Frank "injected just the right touches with his restrained reading" in "First Person Singular" (WNBT, June 30, Stal., July 3, p. 17), Vinton Hayworth, "already one of the few established stars in the video firmament did a nice job" in "Seven Keys to Baldplate" (WNBT, July 7, Stal., July 10, p. 11), and "The Home Life of a Buffalo" (WNBT, July 7, Stal. July 24, p. 16) was distinguished by overall "excellent acting."

1947 Productions, Billboard. The review of "The Monkey's Paw" (WABD, January 8, No reviewer cited, January 18, p. 18) held television actors as being in one of two camps: "For some reason ac-

tors in television today seem either to hold back and not give out with their best, or they go completely hammy. The actors lacked spontaneity and as a result there was a heavy drag." Only the "finished playing of Bramwell Fletcher and to a lesser degree Carol Goodner lifted "Thinking Aloud" (WNBT, Manuary 19, Csida, February 1, p. 19) a notch above mediocrity," John Forsythe was "okay as the lad, but sometimes seemed weak" in "Miracle in the Rain" (WNBT, February 23, Csida, March 8, p. 17), and the cast of "Dora, Beautiful Dairymaid" (WBKB, June 24, Wagner, July 5, p. 11) was "more than competent and showed evidence of sufficient preparation." John Stuart Dudley in the lead "lacked clear diction but was fine in all other aspects of the role" in "The Last of My Solid Gold Watches" (WNBT, December 4, Ackerman, December 13, p. 22) and "The Bells" (WABD, December 26, Chase, January 3, 1948, p. 111) featured a cast that "varied from sufficient to amateurish."

1947 Production, Variety. Carol Goodner "was best with an excellent portrayal of the wealthy sister and Mary Patton over played the role of the spinster" in "Where There's a Will" (WNBT, March 2, Stal., March 5, p. 17). "Welcome Jeremiah" (WNBT, May 25, Stal., May 28, p. 21) was satisfactory but "the idea of starring Hayworth, Taylor and McQuade in roles so similar to those they played in the recent "Mr. Mergenthwerker's Lobblies" gave some evidence that teleactors may some day be faced with the same typing problem as are film stars currently." In "The Importance of Being Earnest" (WPTZ, September 30, Stal., October 15, p. 10) the "actors went through their paces, ostensibly unmindful of the fact that they were on the air." Thomas Mitchell "was superb in the title role" of "John

Ferguson" (WNBT, November 9, Stal., November 12, p. 53), Joyce Redman was "equally good as the ruined daughter" and the other actors were also praised. Among these was Vaughn Taylor who also was excellent in "Little Brown Jug" (WNBT, March 23, Stal., May 28, p. 17) a performance that "reflected credit on television through which he's received all his thesping experience."

The Reviewers Respond to Directors

Also often mentioned by the reviewers from both publications were the contributions of the director. In present day television, the director of a live show is usually little more than a traffic cop, calling camera shots according to a plan that has been devised and rehearsed by the producer, who is generally held responsible for bringing together all the different facets of the production. However, in these early years of television, the terms "director" and "producer" were often interchangeable and the position, no matter what it was called, entailed approximately the same duties as that of stage director: rehearsing the actors, aiding characterizations, outlining blocking, pacing the tempo of the production, and giving the final okay on all the technical aspects. Often, Variety would mention Fred Coe as the director of a play and Billboard would call him the producer. Whatever he was called, if one man (or woman) performed both functions, the reviewers knew that he was responsible for the production and praised or chastised accordingly.

Indeed, both publications did find much to praise in the directing corps of early television, although not as often or as highly as with the acting. Billboard made 37 specific references to the contributions

of the director: 4 Excellent, nine Very Good, 13 Good, four Average, three Mediocre, and nine Poor. For the nine year period Variety made 40 references: Nine Excellent, nine Very Good, eight Good, seven Average, five Mediocre and two Poor.

1939 Productions, Variety. For "Brother Rat" (W2XBS, September 7, Ibee, September 13, p. 16) the "direction by Ed Sobol called for an unusual percentage of close-ups and in that he was probably right." Billboard: The first play, "The Unexpected" (W2XBS, May 3, Franken, May 13, p. 10) was "badly staged," "The Red Hat" (W2XBS, May 12, Ackerman, May 20, p. 16) was "carefully and interestingly worked out," and the production of "Any Family" (W2XBS, May 19, Zatt., May 27, p. 16) led to the thought that "with all of NBC's resources it seems they should be able to acquire someone who knows how to direct and produce vaude talent. From appearances, one wouldn't think so." "Jane Eyre" (W2XBS, October 12, Franken, October 21, p. 9) had "several sock bits of direction--the first sight of the maniac; Jane talking to herself in the mirror, a close-up of the housekeeper knitting," and "Anton Bundsmann, director, made the most of his material, presenting a play with sustained interest" in the production of "Criminal at Large" (W2XBS, November, Ackerman, November 25, p. 17).

1944 Productions, Billboard. The director of "If Men Played Cards as Women Do" (W2SWV, April, Marvin, April 8, p. 11) "permitted the cast to burlesque the lines instead of playing them straight," the revival of "The Favor" (WCBW, July, Schrader, July 22, p. 20) had "more spirited direction" than on its first presentation, "most of the success" of "Write Me a Love Scene" (WABD, November, No reviewer cited, November 25, p. 18) was "directly traceable to the use of in-

genuity," and "The Fourth Mrs. Phillips" (WRGB, December, Schrader, December 23, p. 11) was "poorly produced." Harvey Marlowe was one of the most highly praised of the early directors. His production of "Miracle at Blaise" (WABD, August 22, Schrader, August 30, p. 11) was "scanned intelligently" and to Marlowe and producer Bob Emery went "a mild accolade." Marlowe's "skillful direction coupled with a careful concise interweaving of cameras and lights" made "The Ring of General Macias" (WABD, September, Marvin, September 30, p. 10) "a dramatic video tapestry of color and movement." The Marlowe adaptation, production and direction of the play "proves that tele programgramming is not difficult in the hands of those willing to sweat over every detail--those unwilling to go before the cameras with a slip shod show." Variety: "The Woman who was Acquitted" (WABD, June 29, Turo., July 5, p. 13) showed signs of "skillful direction," and the original production of "The Favor" (WCBW, June 30, Schrader, July 12, p. 14) "showed evidence of trim direction."

1945 Productions. Billboard: "Birthday" (WNBT, March, Koehler, March 24, p. 10) had "camera work and production beyond criticism," "Winterset" (WNBT, October, Koehler, November 3, p. 9) was good enough to rise above uninspired production," and "Ring on Her Finger" (WNBT, September, Koehler, October 6, p. 11) was saddled with "a script stinker to start with and Fred Coe's direction didn't help an iota." Variety: The already mentioned production of "Beachhead at Louie's" (WNBT, September 16, no reviewer cited, September 19, p. 17), which was treated unkindly by reviewers from both publications, was further hampered by "lots of talk but no action" which effectively doomed it since "television cries

for it but there's no excuse for its absence." One of NBC's regular directors, Ernest Colling, was judged to be improving with every production. His production of "Victory" (WNBT, September 9, No reviewer cited, September 12, p. 10) was "slow moving and when it did pick up it became very bad horse opera full of sound and fury" but by the end of the year Colling was "rapidly emerging as one of the most competent directors in television" as it was though such plays as "Little Women" (WNBT, December 29, No reviewer cited, January 2, 1946, p. 13) he "elicited the most entertainment possible out of video at its present state of development." Finally, in 1947 with a production of "Little Brown Jug" (WNBT, March 23, Stal., March 26, p. 18) Colling "came into his own as one of the top men in the business."

1946 Productions. Billboard: The last play that listed Harvey Marlowe as director (he later left DuMont and ABC for independent production) was "Write Me A Love Scene" (WABD, June, No reviewer cited, June 29, p. 10) which unfortunately "wasn't as smooth as director Marlowe's usually are." Frances Buss directed the final production of "Sorry, Wrong Number" (WCBW, January 30, No reviewer cited, February 9, p. 14) after John Houseman and Nick Ray had rehearsed the actors. She "fluffed the possibilities in the script" and even though it was "better by far than the average show CBS is scanning" the lack of visual intelligence shown proved there was a "paucity of creative intelligence at the Columbia station." Variety: The annonymous critic for Variety (February 6, p. 11) disagreed totally, however, finding "Sorry, Wrong Number" a "most successful instance of the blending of top-drawer film artistry with a live

video performance" in addition to noting that "the video end of the show enjoyed the kind of cutting and, as a result, pacing and speed, that showed an amount of film skill not ordinarily seen on the television screen."

1947 Productions. Billboard: NBC contracted with the Theatre Guild, a famous New York theatrical company, to produce a series of plays over WNBT. First was a production of "John Ferguson" (WNBT, November 9, Csida, November 22, p. 10) that proved "given top-notch production, direction and acting, television can even sustain interest through more than 60 minutes of a badly dated melodrama." Variety Stal., November 12, p. 53) concurred with this opinion, finding the "production, direction and acting as near perfect as anything yet seen in the still new medium."

NBC's Primary Directors: Ed Sobol and Fred Coe

One manner in which the reviews can be useful is in the charting of the careers of NBC's two primary directors. Sobol directed nine productions from 1945 through 1947 and Coe directed 16. Both directors stayed with NBC for several years, working as writers, producers and directors. Coe's greatest accolades came as the producer of "Kraft Television Theatre" in the early 1950's.

Ed Sobol. Billboard: The only specific reference to Sobol's directorial prowess was not complimentary, finding "Blithe Spirit" (WNBT, May 12, 1946, No reviewer cited, May 19, p. 15) a case where he merely "took a Broadway hit and camera reported it." Variety: The 1945 production of "The Front Page" (WNBT, November 11, No reviewer cited, November 14, p. 11) proved that "no matter how off-color an

original legit show is, it can be entertaining and still acceptable to a family audience gathered around the home television set, provided it is handled intelligently," while in "Knockout" (WNBT, February, No reviewer cited, February 27, p. 10) Sobol "limited his usual versatile work to a series of unrelated close-ups and long shots with the all important middle shots hardly ever used."

Fred Coe. Billboard: Also, despite the brilliance of Coe's later career, his early work didn't meet with quite the same reception. He only "camera reported" the stage production of "Petticoat Fever" (WNBT, November 25, 1945, No reviewer cited, November 28 p. 21) and the same problems arose with "Laughter in Paris" (WNBT, February 17, 1946, No reviewer cited, February 20, p. 10) when he "forgot he was directing a play and just called camera shots." However, he improved steadily and with "Enter Madame" (WNBT, June 9, No reviewer cited, June 15, 1946, p. 15) he "did his best show to date" as well as putting on "his video long pants." With "First Person Singular" (WNBT, June 30, 1946, No reviewer cited, July 3, p. 14) he "did a terrific job, the best he's done to date, and frankly, as good as anything that NBC's cameras have scanned in quite a while," and "Home Life of a Buffalo" (WNBT, July 21, 1946, No reviewer cited, August 3, p. 11) provided "perfect proof that Coe has put on his directorial long pants to stay." Coe wrote, produced and directed "Something in the Wind" (WNBT, August, 1946, No reviewer cited, August 24, p. 12) and his "camera work was better than his word slinging." The critic went on to recommend that "no man should direct his own original--it's too big of a job" but did admit that "Fred Coe almost

licked it." In two 1947 productions the publication provided nothing but praise. The pace of "Thinking Aloud" (WNBT, January 19, Csida, February 1, p. 17) was "beautifully maintained" while the direction of "The Last of my Solid Gold Watches" (WNBT, December 4, Ackerman, December 13, p. 11) was "measured and leisurely. It could have been faster but as the characterizations took on depth, the lack of movement and the leisurely direction seemed quite in order."

Fred Coe. Variety: This publication did not report on Coe's early marginal quality work, but with "First Person Singular" (Stal., July 6, p. 15) felt he had "come into his own" and "should rank right at the top of the heap." His work with "Home Life of a Buffalo" (Stal., July 24, p. 10) was "tops all the way," and even if "The Last War" (WNBT, November 10, Stal., November 31, p. 12) suffered from "faltering direction," Coe would bounce right back with the 1947 production of "The FLorist Shop" (WNBT, March 16, Stal., March 19. p. 11) in which he "lived up to his reputation as one of the top directors in the business." "Twelfth Night" (WNBT, April 27, 1947, No reviewer cited, April 30, p. 13) provided "another notch of triumph in the belt of Fred Coe," while another self-authored production, "This Time Next Year" (WNBT, September 28, 1947, Stal., October 1, p. 16) allowed Coe to put "another feather" in his cap.

The television director not only had to function as a stage director by working intimately with the actors, but he also had to concern himself with the cinematic and visual aspects of the pro-

duction. The television director must establish the solidity of a performance by staging a relatively static play in the confines of a television studio, and then turn around and attempt to fragment that solidity and staginess through the use of camera-to-camera editing, pans, tracking shots, and special effects. Your average stage or film audience may squirm in their seats, yawn continually, or absentmindedly leaf through the program if bored, but the chances are slim that many people will actually walk out. Not so with television, where the distracting options are numerous Not only can you opt for silence, another channel, another cold beer, or that book you've been meaning to read for three years, but for any sort of replacement within your fingertips. Even if the directors weren't aware of this, the reviewers certainly were.

## The Reviewers Respond to Technical Aspects

Reviewers of the live television dramas were saddled with a two-fold chore. Not only were they to comment on the actual production, with its inherent values and problems, but they were also viewing it through a new and very different set of eyes. If the eye had been born with perfect vision, it would have been easier to gloss over its mechanics and concentrate on what was being presented, but the myriad imperfections of the new medium at all times called attention to itself. A performer may have emoted with the greatest of sincerity, but if his eyes appeared black because of the lighting, or if his nostrils were grotesquely distorted because of imperfections in the television camera, it was quite hard for the viewer to concentrate on the performance.

Reviewers of early film would have experienced similar problems, but since (1) the films were silent, and (2) straight narrative films did not develop until later, there was actually little to compare between film and the only other medium for expression that seemed akin in form and function, the stage. Sarah Bernhardt made a series of "Film D'Art" productions of her stage successes, but to have seriously compared one of these with the stage version would have been patently ludicrous. In contrast, to the neophyte television viewers of the late 1930's and early 1940's television could be seen as an amazingly accurate, if slightly distorted, version of other media. Television could be "radio with pictures," "little movies," or "theatre in a box," but it was possible to make valid comparisons between television and any of these other forms. In effect, the only thing that really seemed different was the mechanical means by which a performance was being experienced.

The television reviewers of Variety and Billboard gave their attention not only to the acting and directing, but also to the mechanical means by which they were seeing them. Reviewers in both publications mentioned the technical means by which the production was being transmitted, and the means by which it was being received. Since a television receiver was a totally new piece of equipment, reviewers were probably as mystified as any other neophyte viewer. Reviewers thus were reviewing the refinement of the medium at the same time they were critiquing the dramatic productions. Problems encountered included focus, distortion, the problem with spots on the screen, interference, and lighting problems. Reviewers also

mentioned the technical side of the productions. These included lighting of the set, sound control, visual composition of the picture, effectiveness of make-up, sets, and the use of special effects. By looking at the reviewers' remarks on the technical side of the productions, both in the telecasting and in the production, it is possible to see the medium developing in complexity and sophistication. Also, by looking at the technical end of the productions, it is possible to obtain some idea of what the productions actually were like. Since there was no videotape available in the 1940's and kinescopes of these early shows do not exist, there is no record of the quality and the means of production of these dramas. Bob Landry, writing in Billboard (May 17, 1939, p. 16) commented:

> Fortunately, these television trial balloons will die with the electrical pulsations that carry them. They will not live to embarrass anybody. The future fans will not know just how bad some of the early programs were.

It is certainly not the purpose of this study to embarrass anybody, merely to partially reconstruct a lost era of television.

## Development of the Television Medium

The majority of the reviewers' comments about the actual technical development of the medium came in the early period before the break for the war. Once broadcasting resumed strongly in 1944 there were fewer comments about the inherent technical troubles facing television. Once the relatively unsensitive iconoscope cameras (or "ikes") were replaced after the war by the vastly improved image orthicon models, there were few complaints about the quality of the pictures.

As the cameras improved, so did the receiving sets, especially with the development of the indirect view, larger screen models from RCA and DuMont. These too were a vast improvement over the sets that had came earlier, both in quality and in screen size. Reviewers were now able to turn their attention more to the qualities of the productions instead of worrying about the consequences of sitting in a darkened room for two hours. The day of watching a 4 3/8 inch by 3 3/8 inch screen gradually disappeared until Sony made the tummy television popular in the 1970's.

1939 Productions, Billboard. (NOTE: all 1939 shows were from W2XBS). NBC's first show in the 1939 series, "The Unexpected (May 3, Frankel, May 12, p. 10) was a "complete technical success" even though there were problems in showing several people at once. By "The Smart Thing" (May 17, Zatt., May 27, p. 11). the hearing was "as perfect as one could expect over any radio receiver, but the screening processes are still in the throes of being just a bottle baby." These were cleared up somewhat by "Any Family" (May 19, Zatt., May 27, p. 15) when they were "far superior," with visuals "still spotty, but clearer," and with "Topsy and Eva" (July, Ackerman, August 5, p. 10), NBC was "well on its way toward attaining a fine fluidity in certain phases of production, especially camera work. Facial definition was good, with little distortion." "The Butter and Egg Man" (October, Ackerman, October 14, p. 20) was praised for focusing in on as few people as possible "a necessity at the present stage of development, even if it hampers the production." "Although drama is now considered the best of present enter-

tainment forms for television, " "Jane Eyre" (October 12, Franken, October 21, p. 53) indicated that "the time should be kept to an hour and not 90 minutes. Not only is it a definite eye strain but raises the question; Will people sit in a darkened room for an hour and a half to watch such shows?"

1939 Productions, Variety. Judging television's advancements since the telecasting of the "Susan and God" excerpts in 1938, "The Unexpected" (May 3, Bodec, May 10. p. 10) showed that "technically the medium has made great strides," and "at no time were there any distortions of blemishes in the imagery" in the production, but "a rain of horizontal streaks would occur when a car passed by the house or a plane flew overhead." "The Valiant" (June 7, Bodec, June 14. p. 14) had a fade technique that "indicated much room for improvement," the visuals "seemed to be cleared than usual" in "Brother Rat" (September 7, Ibee., September 13, p. 10) even though "no change in technical procedure was evident," and "The Milky Way" (October 20, Ibee, October 25, p. 17) "drew many laughs, but again television itself was overtime and a strain on the eyes."

1940 Productions, Billboard. By the broadcast of "The Gorilla" (W2XBS, January, Ackerman, January 27, p. 23) it was possible to get "six people on camera with good facial quality," but even though the production featured "very good legit names" it was "marred by a flickering screen and poor sound."

1944 Productions, Billboard. The revival of "The Favor" (WCBW, June 30, Schrader, July 8, p. 46) had "very sensitive dolly handling" that produced " a camera that was in motion without blurring." The

already mentioned "Boys From Boise" (WABD, September 28, Frankel, October 7, p. 17) raised a series of thoughts:

> Video can't use lyric sopranos, at least not yet. Video shouldn't run more than 60 minutes. Video musicals should be intimate until technical improvements are made. Even with a line of four dancers surrounded by show gals and other fems it was all too noticeable that even simple dance routines were handicapped by a lack of fanny space on the turns.

The cameras telecasting "Uninvited Guest" (WABD, December, Schrader, December 30, p. 18) were "in focus 99% of the time." Variety: "Miracle at Blaise" (WABD, August 22, Bron., August 30, p. 14) "came off very well visually, characters being distinct, vision being clear and the show being refreshingly free of fadeouts."

1945 Productions, Billboard. "Pin the Blame" (WRGN, February, No reviewer cited, February 24, p. 11) offered "a new high in technical effectiveness with an almost flawless offering" and was "technically the best WRGB has presented." Joe Koehler reviewed "Birthday" (WNBT, March, Koehler, March 24, p. 18) on one of the large screen receivers and found that"production for the new screen raised new problems. With the small screen the viewer sits across the footlights from the performer, with the projection job there is an uncomfortable feeling that the show is right in the room." Koehler further cautioned that "there is going to have to be a great deal of underplaying if the big screen is kept in mind by directors." Variety: "Little Women" (WNBT, December 20, No reviewer cited, January 2, 1946, p. 10) "measured up in technical detail to almost anything yet televised." Finally, the higher quality cameras were developed after the war and the 1946 production of "Blessed Are They"

(W6XAO, December 23, No reviewer cited, January 4, 1947, p. 21) proved that the "new image orthicon tube in the wide angle camera greatly improves pix quality."

Technical Aspects of the Productions

The average television viewer of the 1940's probably was so intrigued by the very existence of television that he didn't actually consider just how good the shows were, or how they may have been constructed. One assumes the television reviewers were paid to be somewhat more discriminating than this, and the reviews show that facets of production that even today would gloss over the heads of most viewers were watched carefully by reviewers from both publications. Television is not the same as cinema, but similar rules of shot construction and visual development apply in both media, and reviewers were quick to chastise if a production suffered from static visuals or poor lighting. As with stage productions, the grouping of sets, people and objects were important, but now was added the important element of the camera's relationship to these groupings.

As with films, television productions could be affected by the height of the camera, the amount of space which it scanned, the amount that the camera moved (left/right, up/down, or forward/backward) and the relationship between shots from different cameras. Most of the reviewers were quite knowledgeable with regard to the visual aspects of the productions, and were certainly not loth to offer suggestions as to how a scene could have been better scanned. However, reviewers did not naively treat the new medium as a small, boxed movie screen, and often pointed out limitations that pro-

ducers of the shows worked under. These included inexperience, the small size of the studio, an inability to pan quickly without blurring the image, limitations on the number of cameras that could be used to scan a production, an inability to control lighting closely (the iconoscope cameras, especially, had to have a large amount of light in order to reproduce a decent picture, thus limiting what could be done with lighting), and other limitations.

Despite this admission that it was difficult to produce a good production because of the technical problems, the reviewers were quite harsh with regard to the visual quality of the imagery and panned productions that didn't attempt to fulfill the needs of the medium. As the technical side of the medium developed and the limitations to camera movement and visual complexity diminished, the reviewers performed more and more of a watchdog function in looking for intelligent camera placements, distribution of actors, proper utilization of sets and editing between cameras.

In contrast to the remarks on the technical development of television, the comments on the productions increased tremendously when service resumed in 1944. As the productions became less and less bound by the technical limitations of the medium, more and more was expected in terms of stagings, lights, sets, and costumes.

1939 Productions, Billboard. (NOTE: All 1939 productions were from W2XBS). "The Red Hat" (May 12, Ackerman, May 17, p. 10) had "varied visuals," "The Valiant" (June 7, Abbot, June 14, p. 17) had a switch of scene to the governor's home" that was "as smoothly done as in the movies," even though the same production had a march

to the gallows that "should have been taken from the front rather tan the side." "The Butter and Egg Man" (October, Ackerman, October 14, p. 17) "used pans along small groups instead of trying to show large groups at once" that allowed the production to "attain a fluidity in imagery as well as a continuity in plot development." "Jane Eyre" (October 12, Franken, October 18, p. 18) was spoiled by the minor flaws including obvious telegraphing of action, Miss Campbell wearing the same dress throughout, and some camera and mike mistakes. The cameramen for "The Dover Road" (October, Ackerman, October 28, p. 18) "who had been improving, suffered a relapse--cutting off people, and losing visual sharpness."

1939 Productions, Variety. "The definition in both the long shots and close-ups was consistently okay" in "The Unexpected" (May 3, Bodec, May 10, p. 10), but there was a "huge job to be done with makeup, as there is a problem with exaggeration, such as wide nostrils" Bob Landry, in reviewing "The Red Hat" (May 12, Landry, May 17, p. 11) noted that "NBC asks for six months of tolerance and everytime the show goes on it's still in the near miracle class." Even though the production of "The Smart Thing" (May 17, Wear, May 24, p. 9) showed that "television programs continue to show that television is here, but not television showmanship," the production of "Family Honor" (June 16, Hope, June 21, p. 23) allowed one to see that "day by day and week by week the unfoldment of production skill can be half-seen and half-sensed in these transmisions." "Brother Rat" (September 7, Ibee., September 13, p. 41) used a procedure that was to "slip in a long shot of the set and bring the characters promptly before the cameras, a

routine that was used whenever other characters came on stage, or some exited." The double-bill of "When the Nightingales Sang" and "Dr. Abernathy" (September 28, Ibee., October 11, p. 15) required "very little in a scenic or production way" since "most of the shots were close-ups." Variety also berated "Jane Eyre" (Ibee., October 18, p. 12) for wearing "the same frock throughout, although there is an extended period of time covered by the story." Ibee might possible have excused her slip, but "even Scotch women have wardrobes."

1940 and 1941 Productions, Variety. The cast iron camera work of many of the early shows slowly gained more fluidity. Technically, the broadcast of "Ode to Liberty" (W2XBS, April 1941, Herb, April 17, p. 20) "revealed more pan shots than formerly and they are now much smoother, although still self conscious and slow," while "cross-set shots are also considerably freer, giving added feeling that visio is no longer cooped up between two chalk lines on the floor." The production of "Blind Alley" (WNBT, November 21, 1941, Bodec, November 26, p. 14) confirmed that "as far as the technique of dramatic production is concerned, this version of the James Warwick play served to affirm further television's sharply defined progress into the direction of an entertainment medium."

1943 Production, Billboard. The production of "A Christmas Carol" (W2XWV, December, Marvin, January 1, 1944, p. 11) had a Scrooge confronted by "various ghosts that were properly eerie and earth-detached thanks to lighting that created a faintly fluorescent effect and camera work that drained them of any hint of solidity."

1944 Productions, Billboard, "Mercy in the Wilderness" (WBKB, March, Wagner, Marcy 25, p. 16) contained "excellent settings and background" as "even the outdoor scenes were presented with an appearance of reality." An original college production (WBKB, April, Wagner, April 8, p. 18) was generally praised but " one of the minor points on which someone slipped up was that the girls were not telegenic" and Cy Wagner went on to remind producers to "keep'em good looking and you keep your audience." Harvey Marlowe's acting troupe produced "The Valiant" (WABD, May, Marvin June 3, p. 11) and the success of the group "points up the fact that all of tele's elements must be understood and exploited if its potentialities are to be developed." This production had "clever camera work, variations of shots and good lighting" leading Wanda Marvin to find that " a show such as this is encouraging." The variation in camera shots was obviously a technique that some producers had not mastered with the same aplomb as Marlowe. "Penny Keeps Her Head" (WABD, June, No reviewer cited, June 17, p. 15) was "fairly decent except that the camera was stationary through the entire show," while CBS' first live drama, "The Favor" (WCBW, June 30, Schrader, July 8, p. 11) was "an almost completely static production" that was full of "poor dialog, uninspired camera work and a general feeling of lethargy." The visual plan of the play called for "a simple succession of longshot, close-up, longshot and back again," and "the only good touch was a view of an empty telephone booth." The set of "The Favor" also detracted from the performance. It was "okay" but "a bit too much like a Swiss chalet to have been located in Brooklyn."

1944 productions still were having problems with lighting. When the "Favor" was revived (WCBW, July, Schrader, July 22, p. 14) the "lighting was much more evenly distributed." "A superimposed angel did not give the desired etherial effect" in "Miracle at Blaise" (WABD, August 22, Schrader, September 30, p. 20) and "Gander Sauce" (WABD, September, Schrader, September 16, p. 14) was plagued by a multitude of foulups: "credit slides scanned overlong, light glare, a need for longer shots, out of focus, volume spotty, and off-screen noises."

In "The Tomb of Alexander Jordan" (WRGB, September, Rachel, September 23, p. 32) lack of light was a problem, as only one of the three cameras used picked up enough light and "the distracting difference in light levels resulted in a jumpy effect." "Alexander Jordan" featured a baroque ending:

> The climax came in the tomb scene which showed the stone walls of the crypt, the casket and the heavy door. The camera got every detail, particularly when the nephew raised the lid to expose the uncle's corpse lying in the coffin with folded hands over the push button. To make certain that the uncle was dead, the nephew was about to plunge a knife into the uncle's heart when he was stopped by Martha coming into the crypt. The cameras then showed the nephew turning on her, first closing the door. When he wanted to get out he found himself trapped; the door locked from the outside, the push-button of no use (short circuited). The final camera shot showed his clawing hands on the coffin, against the calm face of the corpse.

Also exhibiting sophisticated visual techniques was "The Ring of General Macias" (WABD, September, Marvin September 30, p. 17). It opened with a shot that "showed a bottle of poison then pulled back to show feminine hands pouring it" followed by "a voice heard off-stage before the other girl came into sight." In addition, director Harvey

Marlowe used visuals to support the actors' roles:

> During conversation, the cameras, sensitive to the script's dialog and action, caught the younger girl in two shots, while the stronger Miss Barrie was dramatized by close-ups and full one shots. Marlowe also used every inch of the set to create the illusion of space and entirely overcame the one set limitations.

If one had watched "Two Soldiers" (WCBW, October, Schrader, October 21, p. 10) one would have received an "impression of jumpiness" since "there was not one single continuous sequence." Not only was it "a static product where action was at a minimum," but a "group of scenic photos accompanying the narration were boring." "That They May Live" (WBKB, December, Wagner, December 23, p. 15) was praised for its opening: "a girl walks into a theatre, picks up a program on which the credits are printed; then, the camera cuts to a stage curtain which raised to reveal the first scene."

1944 Productions, Variety. "Romeo and Juliet" (W2XWV, April 23, Donn, April 26, p. 30) was a fairly decent production "but the same old DuMont bugaboo-lack of space--contrived to make visual portions of the drama detract rather than add to the enjoyment" and the "sets were too claustrophobic." "Close-ups were dollied with finesse" in "The Woman who was Acquitted" (WABD, June 29, Turo, July 5, p. 11), and the "lights were too bright sometimes" in "Miracle at Blaise" (WABD, August, Bron, August 30, p. 14). CBS, having struck out, according to Billboard, with the production of "Two Soldiers," completely restaged the show two weeks after the original performance. This production (WCBW, November 2, Donn, November 8, p. 18) was more successful:

> Repeat performance two weeks after it was originally run

> was praiseworthy if for no other reason than because Seldes, his light crews, cameramen and other production personnel were willing to experiment. Instead of the usual one-set teleshow, bathed in floodlights, this CBS venture boldly strode in the oposite direction. Half lights shadows, striking silhouettes and fast camera switches gave the show production values comparable to current film fare and while not always successful, made for attention getting techniques that television will need to hold the post-war audience.

1945 Productions, Billboard. The set in "Pin the Blame" (WRGB, February, No reviewer cited, February 24, p. 12) gave the feeling of "exceptional illusion of breadth," and the set in "Birthday" (WNBT, March Koehler, March 24, p. 30) was "solid, real and believable." The amazing facet of the production was "the ease with which the cameras moved" which was "nothing short of a miracle with today's equipment and NBC's thumbnail studio." With this show "NBC did prove that there's nothing that can't be done in its tight little television studio." "X Marks the Spot" (WBKB, July, No reviewer cited, July 28, p. 15) had night scenes that were "darkened by use of the moderating panel." The already mentioned "Beachhead at Louie's" (WNBT, September 16, Koehler, September 22, p. 11) used "recorded spoken thought, a kaleidoscopic semi-dissolve to effectively picture a man's whirling thoughts" but "every pic was an animated still-shot and that was all." Nevertheless, "how the production was ever produced in NBC's tiny television studio is another of those modern miracles. Six sets, including a living room and a foxhole were used." Maxwell Anderson's "Winterset" (WNBT, October, Koehler, November 3, p. 20) had "many poorly composed scenes" as "almost 60% of the scenes were played profile, the toughest way for any actor to play an emotional scene."

1945 Productions, Variety. "Sham" (WABD, January, Donn, January, 31, p. 22) was an all-around decent production. The "camera work was okay, with longshot and close-up switches being worked effectively. There was no lighting problem, the set being bathed brilliantly throughout. Make-up, too, was satisfactory," "Judy's Prayer" (WBKB, April, No reviewer cited, April 7, p. 11) was" a slow-moving production," a fault definitely not shared by "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" (ACT I) (WNBT, April 15, Carson, April 18, p. 41) where "at times the action was fast and the camera and light crews had to work fast and skillfully." "David Garrick" (WABD, March 27, No reviewer cited, April 4, p. 15) had sets that proved "video is not quite mature entertainment in spirt of an excellent performance and really fine lighting," since they "were so artificial they bordered on the amateurish." Inadequate sets also ruined the performance of "Winter Wheat" (WNBT, May 6, Sten., May 9, p. 11):

> The limitations of television in the presentation of dramatic programs were never more pointed up than on this show: studio facilities couldn't possibly be large enough to cope with the variety of settings and space needed. Until such time as technical facilities warrant full-sized experimentation with enactment of dramatic endeavors, it would better to present other type shows on this medium.

The sets of "The Bourgeois Gentleman" (WNBT, June 17, Donn., June 20, p. 13) were "ornate and well lighted, and such details as costumes were far above the average encountered in most present-day video shows." Since the actors in "Town Crier of Chungking" (WABD, May 6, Sten., May 9, p. 11) "all looked Chinese," it was judged that the make-up was "excellent." The presentation of the second act of "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" (WNBT, May 20, Carson, May 23, p. 25) showed that "televi-

sion is a growing art seeking solutions to its many problems. But the answers have not yet been found." The GI rising from the field in "Untitled" (WCBW, May 24, Bron, May 30. p. 12) had an "unreal, stagey effect. The switches from graveyard to hospital were abrupt and unreal, in the Hollywood sense. They made the play a little static and preachy." In "Victory" (WNBT, September 9, No reviewer cited, September 12, p. 13) the "scene changes were too abrupt," "The Strange Christmas Dinner" (WNBT, December 9, No reviewer cited, December 12. p. 15) was helped by Bob Wade's set that "was an almost perfect facsimile of a second rate Broadway chop house," and the production of "Little Women" (WNBT, December 29, No reviewer cited, January 2, 1946, p.40) had "camera work that was especially good" and used long shots "but came in for close-ups to catch the actors' facial expressions."

1946 Productions, Billboard. "Some of the cross and back lighting" in "Children of Ol' Man River" (WNBT, January 30, No reviewer cited, February 6, p. 30) "did such a terrific job that at time there was a feeling of depth on the screen that's seldom hoped for at the present development of the art," and the "camera handling was tight and the lighting was nothing short of a miracle when it's realized what the boys had to work with."

"Sorry, Wrong Number" (WCBW, January 30, No reviewer cited, February 9, p. 14) is the story of hypochondriacal, bedridden woman who learns of her husband's secret assignations through several mysterious phone calls. The climax of the play calls for the murderer to kill the woman, answer the phone when her husband calls,

say "Sorry, wrong number," and hang up. Director Frances Buss, according to Billboard, mishandled this scene:

> The final shot was muffed as it was a full-length shot of the murderer putting down the receiver. This shot just cried for some video intelligence, for instance a close-up which scanned only the gloved hand picking up the phone, and an unseen voice giving the "Sorry, wrong number" sock.

The play was filmed in 1949, starring Barbara Stanwyck as the woman. The final scene was photographed exactly as described above. In contrast to this, Variety (No reviewer cited, February 6, p. 21) felt that "artistically, the results were very satisfactory," since "the video end of the show enjoyed the kind of cutting and, as a result, pacing and speed, that not only suited the drama on hand, but also showed an amount of film skill not ordinarily seen on the television screen."

In "First Person Singular" (WNBT, June 30, No reviewer cited, July 6, p. 14) Fred Coe "handled the camera so that they were you--the murderer of your wife, a slut. When you were hung the screen went blank but as you were dying you saw the coolness of the waves breaking on the beach". In comparison, Variety (Stal., July 3, p. 20) found that in "utilizing a new device in which the camera itself is the murderer, the program was tops from start to finish and one of the best dramatic shows yet seen on a television screen." The publication also felt that "use of a spiral montage effect bridged the gap between scenes very well and the integration of film to point up the killer's dream of a cool, placid existence and to heighten the shock effect as the hangman ended his life was excellent." In this play, it was inferred that the murderer probably killed his

wife because her irritating voice and personal mannerisms, such as whining and picking her teeth with her finger, "all heightened by ultra-realistic make-up brought forth a woman that even a sane husband might have wanted to kill."

1946 Productions, Variety. "Adding to the quality" of "Children of Ol' Man River" (WNBT, January 30, No reviewer cited, February 6, p. 11) "were Bob Wade's four sets, superior to even his usual top-drawer par." "Knockout" (WNBT, February 24, No reviewer cited, February 27, p. 40) was "one of the most amateurish jobs yet televised by the NBC station, with acting, direction, script and camera work all placing it in the elementary class," but the performance wasn't a total loss, especially for male chauvinists, as one could watch "the decorative figures of several of the actresses that the cameras seemed to pick up without too much trouble." Despite "sterotyped lens work of the WRGB staffers, who seemed afraid to dolly in for a close-up," "The Devil on Stilts" (WRGB, March 20, Stal., March 27, p. 17) enjoyed "good production mounting, including an eye-pleasing set and some of the best title cards seen on television." The use of "three separate sets in the tiny studio had the actors pratically rubbing elbows, but the crowding wasn't apparent on the screen, while "smart lighting held the illusion of a street scene at night." The technical director of "Blithe Spirit" (WNBT, May 23, No reviewer cited, May 15, p. 16) "manipulated the cameras flawlessly, keeping the main line of the play in the center of the frame throughout and at the same time getting an easy rhythm for the lens shifting axis." "Angels Don't Marry" (WABD, May 24, Stal., May 29) had camera work

that was "very static" and the director, Tony Farrar, "tried close-ups but none had any real function, such as a close-up taken through a mirror." For "Seven Keys to Baldplate" (WNBT, July 7, Stal., July 10, p. 11), Bob Wade designed a "difficult set for the show, consisting of a two-level room" that was "well designed," while Fred Coe got the most out of the set in "September in the Wind" (WNBT, August, No reviewer cited, August 24, p. 14) by "panning his camera continually around the room, increasing the illusion of space."

1947 Productions, Billboard. There were "plenty of special video effects, dramatic light and powerful camera shots" in "R.U.R." (KSD, February 15, Wagner, March 1, p. 34). In addition, the production was helped by "plenty of forceful shadow lighting and close-ups that added to the impact." The "skillful and artful camera placements" in "The Importance of Being Earnest" (WPTZ, September 30, Orodenker, October 18, p. 11) "made it entirely enjoyable to stay close to the cathode ray tube for almost two hours." "The Bells" (WABD, December 26, Chase, January 3, 1948, p. 15) may have been a passable production but "unhappily, technical misadventures of a major nature were spotted throughout," the major one being that "an open key permitted viewers to hear the technical director's voice under the dialog for the entire show, calling instructions to cameramen."

1947 Productions, Variety. "Thinking Aloud: (WNBT, January 19, Stal., January 22, p. 14) "hardly offered good tele fare, with the action confined to glances between two people facing each other across the narrow confines of an English railroad coach," but Fred

Coe "at times achieved a three dimensional effect in close-up shots of the actors." "Twelfth Night" (WNBT, April 27, No reviewer cited, April 30, p. 10) was distinguished by "camera manipulation in what must have been a vastly overcrowded studio" that was "tops throughout." Bod Wade deserved "special credit for building four full sized sets in the limited confines of the NBC studios" for "Welcome, Jeremiah" (WNBT, May 24, Stal., May 28, p. 9), and Fred Coe took advantage of having four sets in such close proximity as he "used a flashback technique by having his actors sprint from one set to another." "This Time Next Year" (WNBT, September 28, Stal., October 1, p. 12) was "one of the most intricate, and entertaining comedy-dramas yet staged in the NBC studios," a story about an aristocratic Southern gentleman who wants to build a monument to the Confederacy greater than Grant's Tomb. When an angel comes to him on his death bed, the old gentleman gets him to accept a compromise to do away with Grant's Tomb one year from his death. For the climax, Coe cut to an actual live remote broadcast from Grant's Tomb. There was no indication if the angel (who was a confederate officer was there, but the Tomb was still standing.

## The Reviewers Compare Television with Radio, Stage, and Motion Pictures

As the reviewers followed the new medium and reported on its development as well as that of the dramatic presentations, it was only natural that comparisons be made with the other, already existent media available for dramas. Since it was not yet possible to discuss television wholly within its own boundaries (few shows, short

periods of time on the air), it was perhaps inevitable that reviewers would attempt to develop standards for television criticism by the process of elimination: by identifying elements of the television dramas that were essentially transcribed from other media, or closely copied techniques of the other's form, it was possible to begin arriving at a consensus as to what television productions should include.

Film. Visually closest to film, since both have the ability to distort reality through manipulation of shots and reference points, while presenting full visual comprehension, television was compared with film and certain filmic techniques. This early period of television was sometimes compared with early films.

1939 Productions, Billboard. "The Smart Thing" (May 17, Zatt, May 20, p. 11) was "reminiscent of early experimentation with sound films." Variety: The director of "Art and Mrs. Bottle," Donald Davis, "has something to learn about motion picture technique in photographic contrasts." (Scho., September 20, p. 14). "Family Honor" (June 16, Jobe, June 12, p. 11) was a comedy where pictures fell off the wall if anybody in the family told a lie. The smaller ones fell off all the time, but one large one waited until the end of the show to fall on somebody, an ancient comic bit that was "going back to Ford Sterling and Mabel Normand in the Keystone Kops."

1944 Productions, Billboard. The most grievous error in the review was in "The Boys From Boise" (WABD, September 28, Frankel, October 7, p. 41) when Lou Frankel stated, obviously with good inten-

tions: "Boise" is to video what the late Thomas Edison's Train Robbery film was to movies, and a decade from now the industry will regard it as such." The film referred to is "The Great Train Robbery," of 1903, that is regarded as the first American film with a narrative storyline. However, despite the many contributions that Thomas Edison made to the development of film, this was not one of them, as "The Great Train Robbery" was directed by Edwin S. Porter.

Variety: "The Pearls" (W2XWV, April, Jose, March 8, p. 10) was hampered by an "unskilled use of the camera" and was "reminiscent of the early days of the talking film when Hollywood hadn't found the proper metier for the added dimension of sound." "The Favor" (WCBW, June 30, Wear, July 12, p. 37) attempted to depict an illusion. This failed, since "treatment of illusion is tough enough in films, and it doesn't seem well suited for television just yet."

1945 Productions, Billboard. "The Perfect Alibi" (WNBT, April, Koehler, March 3, p. 9) "didn't have to bow to any motion picture," but "with such a great literary work" as "Untitled" (WCBW, May 24, Frankel, June 2, p. 31) "the production cried for the scenic and dramatic ability of a Frank Capra or a Sergei Eisenstein." Frankel admits that on this point "television can answer 'We did the best we could' to which the obvious answer is 'then don't tackle anything as good as this unless television can add something.' Score 100 for effort, 0 for results." (NOTE: Frank Capra is the Academy-award winning director of such Hollywood classics as "It Happened One Night" (1934), "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" (1935), "Lost Horizon" (1937), and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1940). Sergei Eisenstein is the

famous Russian film theoretician and director of such influential works as "Potemkin" (1925), "Alexander Nevsky" (1938), and "Ivan the Terrible" (Parts one and two, 1940-1944). Variety: "The Front Page" (WNBT, November 11, No reviewer cited, November p. 14) "demonstrated an important principle that video programmers in the future will have to consider carefully. Unlike films, there can be no retakes in television and when an actor fluffs a line, it stays fluffed." Even in the 1940's, with television in such an undeveloped state, it was possible to see the possible effects the medium might have on movie attendance. The review of "Petticoat Fever" (WNBT, November 25, No reviewer cited, November 28, p. 10) voiced one side of this soon to be sticky issue:

> Despite staements from both motion picture and television reps that television will never compete with the movies, there's full-length plays that WNBT is producing might well put a crimp on theatre grosses someday when there are more receiving sets in circulation. As one novice put it, who saw his first television Sunday, "What better way of spending a cold, wintry, Sunday nite than to be stretched out in a comfortable chair before a warm fireplace in your own home and with such good entertainment on your television screen?"

1946 Productions, Billboard. "NBC labored to produce a full-length original play for the medium, labored hard and labored long," and the result was "Laughter in Paris" (WNBT, February 17, No reviewer cited, February 23, p. 20). Unfortunately, even though "producing it with technical excellence, they brough forth a Grade C pic." However, the production did have one good point as it "proved that the air picture medium will have something that motion pictures will never have--you can turn the darned thing off." Variety: "Video's challenge to the rest of show biz was unmistakably contained"

in "Blithe Spirit" (WNBT, May 12, No reviewer cited, May 15, p. 11) as "video has demonstrated that it can equal the best of stage and screen entertainment " The following week "Mr. and Mrs. North" (WNBT, May 19, Stal., May 22, p. 19) also "could be compared favorably in every phase of production, acting and directing to the best in commercial films."

1947 Productions, Billboard. "Miracle in the Rain" (WNBT, February 23, Csida, March 8, p. 15) was "better than average Hollywood film fare and as good or better than many radio dramatic offerings. For tele that's not good, it's great." The last play of 1947, "The Bells" (WABD, December 26, Chase, January 3, 1948, p. 123) was a definite throwback, however, as "some of the treatment seemed as rudimentary as early films."

Radio. The reviewers in both publications did not make as many references to radio as to film or stage, negating somewhat the theory that they may have thought of television as "radio with pictures." Television's link with radio was on several levels, as radio performers often switched over to the new medium, radio production teams worked on television productions, and scripts were often adapted to television, often without fulfilling the inherent needs of the new medium. Reviewers noted that at times television did come closer to utilizing audio's possibilities than video's.

Billboard. Most of Billboard's direct references to radio touted television as the better medium for dramatic offerings. "The Faker" (W2XBS, May 10. 1939, Ackerman, May 20, p. 17) proved that "televi-

sion even in its present undeveloped stage showed a definite superiority over radio in the field of dramatics," as the "finished performance was capable of holding audience attention" and was "superior to the great mass of radio playlets cluttering up the airwaves." "The Highway" (W6XAO, February 3, 1947, Fischler, February 15, p. 11) "compared favorably with 99% of similar radio shows," and "Miracle in the Rain" (WNBT, February 23, 1947, Csida, March 8, p. 9) was "as good or better than many radio dramatic offerings." "Untitled" (WCBW, May 24, 1945, Frankel, June 2, p. 17) was "one of radio's classics, the words lived and breathed; the speaking, playing and production were as irrelevant as the vapor exuded on a frosty morning," but "alas, the production did not match the emotional peaks of the radio play." The already mentioned "Sorry, Wrong Number" (WCBW, January 30, 1946, No reviewer cited, February 9, p. 14) was "many times as good a radio show as it was a video production" and the actors in "The Monkey's Paw" (WABD, January 8, 1947, No reviewer cited, January 18, p. 15) were "all seasoned radio actors and would have been more comfortable with a script in their hand."

Variety. The reviewers in Variety were harsher in their comparison of television drama with that of radio. "Some of the television experts claim radio soap operas will fit into television," but if "The Favor" (WCBW, June 30, 1944, Wear, July 12, p. 19) "is a sample, it appears dubious." "Winter Wheat" (WNBT, May 6, 1945, Sten., May 9, p. 11) "could have been just as effective as a radio drama," "Thinking Aloud" (WNBT, January 19, 1947, Stal., January 22, p. 17) was "probably the most intricate and ambitious television show yet staged,"

but it was "originally written for radio--and it shows." "Another one-acter best suited for radio and not easily adaptable," was "Florist Shop" (WNBT, March 16, 1947, Stal., March 19, p. 9). Some productions were praised in comparison with radio. The production of "House of Glass" (W2XBS, March 1940, Wear, March 15, p. 17) "indicated what might be accomplished with radio serials when sight-sound broadcasting becomes general." "I Have Been Here Before" (W2XWV, February, 1944, Jose, March 8, p. 19) "demonstrated a praiseworthy maturity of approach that radio might well copy," and "Children of Ol' Man River" (WNBT, January 30, 1946, No reviewer cited, February 6, p. 38) was "excellently adapted from the radio script." Good radio techniques weren't abandoned with the switch to the new medium. In "The Copperhead" (WNBT, July 1, 1945, Carson, July 4, p. 10) "a sound montage rose to symphonic beauty, blending with the narration to create lifelike images of action just beyond the camera. Maybe it was just good radio, rather than video--but it was sock nevertheless."

Stage. Since many of the television dramatic offerings began life as stage productions, it is not surprising that comparisons were made with the original stage presentations, even though this may have meant retaining the static qualities of a stage production. If this were the case, the reviewers were quick to point out that merely camera reporting a stage production was not the best way to utilize television's inherent qualities of intimacy and interest via visual fragmentation. The reviewers were quickly learning that a televised play entailed an entirely new set of critical guidelines.

1939 Productions, Billboard. When "Mamba's Daughters" (W2XBS, June 14, Weiss, June 21, p. 13) was excerpted for television it was "well adapted," so well in fact, that leading lady Ethel Waters voiced her concern over the new medium's relationship to the legitimate stage: "I hope it won't keep people from the theatre." "Art and Mrs. Bottle" (W2XBS, September 14, Ackerman, September 23, p. 50) was "well loaded with legit names," and the production "was of such interest as to leave no doubt of television's superiority for drama." However, there were pitfalls to the transplantation of stage material to the television screen. "The Dover Road" (W2XBS, October, Ackerman, October 28, p. 10) at 105 minutes showed that "the longer the show the more obvious the shortcomings when compared to legit theatre," and "The Gorilla" (W2XBS, January, Ackerman, January 27) failed in part because "NBC drew an old hoke meller out of the closet." Variety: The double-bill of "When Nightingales Sang," and "Dr. Abernathy" (W2XBS, September 28, Ibee, October 11, p. 13) gave the "impression that known stage material is better as shown so far, even with the limitations of television." Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre" is justly famous as a novel, but the stage version, originally dramatized in the 1930's by Helen Jerome for Katherine Hepburn, was a failure because there was "too much of the moaning wind across the moors to make for entertainment and too much of a trouble motif in the story to attract the average playgoer." However, NBC's television production of the play (W2XBS, October 12, Ibee, October 18, p. 38) "was excellent as a television stunt."

1946 Productions, Billboard. "Angel Street" (WNBT, January, Koehler, January 26, p. 11) was "as good as the Broadway production,

extremely effective." Variety: "Hardly apparent was any positive adaptation for television," in "The Far-Off Hills" (WBKB, April 4, Tomm., April 10. p. 51) "as stage technique left much to be desired in the screening," and "Mr. Mergenthwerker's Lobblies" (WNBT, September 22, Stahl., September 25, p. 17) a three-act comedy/whodunit about pixies in a newspaper office was "similar to "The Front Page" and "Harvey" but lacks the punch of both these plays in its present form."

1947 Productions, Billboard. "A television production of a stage production tends to magnify its weaknesses and demands more of the actors," and when KTLA produced "Papa is All" (KTLA, April 21, Zhito, May 3, p. 15) it "had its hands full of new tele problems it never before faced." "Night Without End" (WBKB, April 27, Cy Wagner, May 10, p. 11) provided "a new vista for legit in America" as it "proved that a legit performer no longer need perform only for a few hundred." With a production such as this there was "little reason for anyone to leave their home to see a dramatic performance." "The Importance of Being Earnest" (WPTZ, September 30, Orodenker, October 18, p. 12) showed that "the legitimate stage has much to offer television and will undoubtedly encourage the scanning of more theatrical productions." This performance of Oscar Wilde's comedy was broadcast from the Germantown Guild Theatre in Philadelphia. Variety: "Twelfth Night" (WNBT, April 27, No reviewer cited, April 30. p. 9) was the "match of Shakespeare on Broadway." However, the NBC production of "Merton of the Movies" (WNBT, May 14, No reviewer cited, May 21, p. 160) was "another slow paced drama. The only difference was that Merton was supposed to be a comedy" which was "the way the Old Famous Players treated the George Kaufmann-Marc Connelly

script in 1924."

The Reviewers Express Concern Over Content

Once television was thrust into the vast majority of American homes in the 1950's a national cry was slowly heard rising from concerned parents and educators. What effect would the new medium have on young minds? Would the depiction of violence breed violence across the land? The question was raised by Estes Kefauver in his Senate Crime Hearings in 1952 and not a year has passed without further outcries against violence in television. The call has been made for elimination of violence, for the reduction of violence, for the placing of violent programs after 10 o'clock at night. The research on the subject is frustratingly ambiguous, however, with studies finding that children do emulate violence they see on television contradicting studies that say the viewing of violence is a substitute for the violence itself.

There will probably never be a clear-cut answer to this vexing question, but America will continue to voice it all the same, each generation declaring that the violence on present-day television is the absolute rock bottom in terms of sadism, masochism, and general destruction. However, the study of the reviews from 1939 through 1947 reveals that concern over violence in the medium is almost as old as the medium itself. Of the two publications, Billboard addressed itself more frequently to the question of the content of the early shows, but Variety also acknowledged that this issue would be a problem for many years to come.

Variety. As already outlined in an earlier section, "The Woman Who Was Acquitted" (WABD, June 29, 1944, Turo, July 5, p. 11) was the story of an acquitted murderess who, in a cataleptic trance, admits to "such a cold-blooded deed as the strangling of a baby." Variety, while highly praising the show, found that "tele with its widened opportunity for gruesomeness will probably prove a headache for the blue pencil boys." Variety's only other comment on the content of the medium was in reaction to a slip of the tongue during a performance of "The First Year" (WNBT, January 13, 1946, No reviewer cited, January 16, p. 14). "Michael Road, star of the show and currently playing the lead in Broadway production of "Dear Ruth" forgot he wasn't on a legit stage in two spots and gave out with a few mild cuss words," which will "undoubtedly get some bad repercussions from the family audience."

Billboard. In contrast, Billboard reviewers questioned the taste of the plays on eight different occasions. These included allusions to both violence and sex. "Angels Don't Marry" (WABD, October, 1944, Koehler, October 21, p. 15) was a sophisticated comedy but "it's questionable video taste to have the scene end with the couple in bed and milady's hand seen in a close-up hanging over the side of the bed holding a handkerchief which drops as her hand opens."

Billboard had specific doubts about the quality of some of NBC's Sunday night plays. The question of sexual allusion was found to be distasteful for a family audience in "Ring on Her Finger" (WNBT, September, 1945, Koehler, October 6, p. 19): "It seems as though the wife held her husband at the end by pretending she was going to have

a baby--and then 'fessed up that it wasn't so--upon which hubby took her into the bedroom to do something about the matter." Koehler reminded his readers to "think of the little ones looking in --ouch!" The anonymous reviewer of "Petticoat Fever" (WNBT, November 25, 1945, No reviewer cited, December 1, p. 11) called for the Radio Code to be applied to television productions, asking: "How long is it going to be before NBC realizes that it won't be able to get away with long drinking bouts and couples being married while they're drunk in video?" Joe Koehler, the author of several of the previous reviews, continued his one-man tirade against NBC in a review of "Dark Hammock" (WNBT, January 1946, Koehler, January 12, p. 13):

> NBC this evening presented another in its studies of husband-killing wives. Apparently nobody gives a continental damn that youngsters love video and look in at every opportunity . . . . If someone doesn't teach NBC brass some of the video facts of life, the FCC will find it necessary to step in and devise a code of program decency for the air-pic medium. Don't misunderstand this reviewer, he's not fighting for a namby-pamby scanning. He knows that children--young children--look and look and look and such programs don't belong on the air at 8 p.m.

Koehler's last shot at the taste of NBC carried an ominous warning about the drastic effect such programs could have on children. The review was of "Angel Street" (WNBT, January, 1946, Koehler, January 26, p. 11), a play that was "guaranteed to give the little kiddies nightmares." The play seemed to be quite effective, as Koehler found that "it was all okay," but he ended "with just the reminder to NBC that if it continues to scare the younger generation out of a year's growth on Sunday nights we'll have a nation of dwarfs looking in

shortly."

An anonymous review of "The Tell-Tale Heart" (WABD, August 1946, No reviewer cited, August 31, p. 10) stated that "the actual murder on screen indicates that DuMont is aching for the FCC or someone to lay down a code of what can and cannot go over the air," adding that "the theatre doesn't strangle its victims on stage, but DuMont takes the viewers right to the murder bed." A later production of the same play (WBKB, February 27, 1947, Cy Wagner, March 8, p. 14) was "of topnotch dramatic quality," but again "was too gruesome for transmission at this early evening hour when kids could have seen it" (8:30 p.m. - 8:50 p.m.), since it "depicted an actual killing." The program could "easily rank with WBKB'S best," but:

> Its merits as sound programming for juveniles must be taken into consideration. It will be difficult for video programmers to make a negative decision of shows if they have to consider as they did tonight, the artistic work, but nevertheless, programs that are blood-curdling should be out. . . . In television a more powerful and harmful effect is created.

Finally, the Chicago production of "Night Without End" (WBKB, April 27, 1947, Wagner, May 10) showed that "television will have to clean up its scripts," and Wagner questioned whether the FCC "will continue to allow 'damns' and references to illegitimate children."

Use of the Term "TV"

There was no use of the term "TV."

# CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSIONS

Television did not simply erupt in 1947 with the establishment of the national and regional networks. This study, through an emphasis on the specific genre of live television drama, has shown that television was a continually developing medium that began with experimental telecasts in the 1920's, continued through program experiments in the middle and late 1930's, was established on a regular basis in 1939, was temporarily slowed down (but not halted) by the Second World War, quickly began gaining momentum in 1944, and eventually led to refinement of a program format that would serve to entertain America during television's "Golden Age."

There were several hypotheses that were tested during the study. These include:

1. Television criticism was often an outgrowth of radio criticism. On one level, this is true. Television criticism in the publications did evolve from the radio columns and radio pages, and was written by many of the same reviewers who reviewed radio programs. However, the actual content of the reviews showed little affinity to the radio reviews, other than in their format, as the reviewers showed genuine concern in attempting to come to terms with the new medium on its own terms. There were references to radio, but only by comparison. There was no attempt to denigrate either of the media.

2. There were several established bodies of television criticism.

This was one of the major discoveries of this thesis. It was originally conjectured that there would be some critical writing for this early period, but nowhere near the amount of material available in Variety and Billboard. What this shows is that the management of the two publications were interested in providing in-depth coverage of the new medium, both to satisfy the curiosity of the general public, and as a type of "rating" service for those with an actual stake in television broadcasting. The study has also shown that many writers were employed to write the reviews, even though few became the primary reviewers for either publication.

3. The general reaction to live television drama was not extremely favorable. This is true. It was conjectured that reviewers might possibly be so overwhelmed by the wonder and novelty of television that they would be prone to overlook drastic shortcomings in the productions themselves. This was not the case, and from the institution of the regular NBC service in 1939 the shows were soundly criticized if acting, directing, or production standards detracted from the entertainment value of the shows. Of course, the reviewers were probably more lenient with some productions because of limitations of the medium, and, as several reviewers pointed out, the same standards for judging a Broadway play could not and should not be used to judge productions in the fledgling medium.

4. Criticism of live drama became stiffer as more shows glutted the airwaves in the later 1940's. This hypothesis was difficult to test, since it was not possible to check the total number of shows that were presented. However, as the decade progressed and the tech-

nical side of the productions improved, reviewers spent less time on these limitations and more on the shows' inherent dramatic values. It is evident that as time passed, the reviewers felt higher standards for criticism should be used and more should be expected from 1947 dramas than from those of 1940.

Discussions on the history and development of early television must then revolve to a question of how one is to judge the development of a medium that requires both aesthetic program fare and the technical hardware to disseminate that program fare. It is, of course, correct to date the beginnings of network television in this country from 1947 or 1948, for until this point in time it was impossible to beam shows farther than several miles. With the establishment of the coaxial cable, however, television was freed from its local isolation, and with the whole nation as a potential audience it could now look to sponsors for the huge amounts of income it would need to improve its facilities and develop appealing and varied program fare. The programs could now be expanded and improved, but the study shows that one specific program type, the live television drama, had already enjoyed an interesting history by the time the networks became a reality. It is impossible to compare the plays of the years 1939 through 1947 with the more famous productions of the "Golden Age," but, judging by the accolades given some of the plays in this early period, it is evident they were the equal of many in the early 1950's. Television broadcasting on a large scale did not become a reality until the late 1940's, but television as an abstract entity, as a means of expression and as a means of presenting works of dramatic

art in its own unique fashion, existed in the early years of that decade.

The Live Television Dramas. Televised plays were not an isolated occurrence, but a regular staple of local New York, Schenectady and Chicago television in the 1940's. At least 160 plays were broadcast, with the number divided quite evenly by year. NBC began a regular series of television broadcasts in 1939 and used many plays as program fare. Once World War II started, television was cut back severely, and there was no record of any plays broadcast in 1942 and the only ones in 1943 were at the end of the year. Beginning in 1944 television began to resume with program experiments on the NBC, CBS, and DuMont stations in New York, as well as on the General Electric station in Schenectady and the Balaban and Katz station in Chicago. The NBC station broadcast approximately half of all the dramas shown in the nine year period. Since NBC and its backing corporation, RCA, had put the largest amounts of money into development of the television service, it was only natural they would also invest heavily in program development.

The dramas varied widely by length, with running times of from 10 minutes to two hours, but even with the primitive equipment, plays of an hour or more were regular occurrences. As to types of plays that were shown, the vast majority were serious dramas, but comedies and musicals were also produced. In addition, during and after the war, plays were shown that attempted to deal with contemporary war-related issues, even though they did not totally meet these aims.

Somewhat surprisingly, these early years of television did not provide an unusually fertile training ground for dramatic talent. A few later "big" names appeared (Jean Muir, John Forsythe, Arthur Hunnicut, Thomas Mitchell, Mildred Natwick, Estelle Winwood), but by and large nowhere near the talent that was fostered during the recognizeable "Golden Age" in the 1950's (Charlton Heston, Paul Newman, Jack Palance, Grace Kelly, Cameron Mitchell, Ossie Davis). Likewise, whereas some directors from the "Golden Age" went on to glossy film careers (Arthur Penn, Franklin J. Schaffner, William Friedkin) none of the directors in this early period were able to make the transition. Instead, the directorial corps of this period was distinguished by men who would become the backbone of the "Golden Age," such as Fred Coe and Worthington Miner. With regard to personnel, the lack of "names" can be attributed to the low pay afforded performers and the refusal of the movie industry to have anything to do with the infant industry. For many years it was Hollywood's belief that if television were ignored, it would simply go away. Such was not to be the case, but at this time it appeared the strategy might work.

The Reviews. The most disarming thing about reading the mass of reviews of the live television dramas from 1939 through 1947 was a difficulty in remembering these were reviews of dramas broadcast 30 to 38 years ago. It was assumed that the reviews would be immediately distinctive, either glossing over the content of the dramas in order to gush about the miracle of television, or decrying the immaturity

of the medium. Such was not the case, as the reviews represented a variety of opinions remarkably similar to what is written and printed today. Reviewers did occasionally go overboard with their praise of a certain production (such as Lou Frankel's rave of "The Boys From Boise"), but hyperbole has become an accepted byproduct of the American critical system. If film's Rex Reed can laud a masterpiece of the week, one socko blurb from Lou Frankel is certainly acceptable. Since these reviews were short and were written for a trade publication instead of a journal more oriented toward aesthetic and intellectual theorizing, it was virtually impossible to distinguish one from another. The reviewers might have their personal axes to grind (such as Joe Koehler's one man campaign against sex and violence) but a Paul Ackerman review carried with it no identifying characteristics to distinguish it from that of a Larry Stahl. It was this homogeneity that provided an interesting sidelight to the large number of unsigned reviews. It was impossible to determine who actually wrote these reviews, but it didn't really matter since they were virtually the same as those that were signed.

With regard to the actual content of the reviews, it was found that acting was the one facet of production most mentioned, followed by references to directing, and the technical ends of the plays. Again, as with the reviews in general, these facets of production were looked on favorably in most instances, but a good portion were criticized.

The one primary aspect of the reviews different from television criticism of the 1970's was the amount of space devoted to the techni-

cal development of television, both with regard to the actual television service and to the technical aspects of the performance. Quite a few of the reviews describe the actual staging techniques employed in scanning the plays, which is something that present-day reviewers never describe. This of course can be attributed to the newness of the medium, but at least the reviewers were serious in attempting to define what was inherently different about television from similar productions on the stage, on radio, or in the movies. It is also somewhat difficult to appreciate the reviewers' states of mind, since in the 1970's we have grown accustomed to television merely being a receptacle for endless miles of film and videotape. Even though live productions are presently enjoying a slight renaissance (recent live productions include "Saturday Night" and "Saturday Night Live with Howard Cosell" as well as a live broadcast of Puccini's "La Boheme" from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera), these are oddities and cannot truly inbue us with the sensation of viewing many live productions on a matter fact basis. The distance between ourselves and the reviewers of the 1940's live dramas is more than the 35 or so years separating us, it is the distance between two very different worlds. In the 1940's television held the key to the future; today, for most Americans, it is merely the means by which we can escape reality.

The reviewers also compared television with dramatic productions in the other media of radio, film, and the stage but despite the affinity of television with all of these, the references were not extensive. Nor did the reviewers make an effort to consistently deni-

grate one medium or the other, since comparisons were made on an individual basis. The reviews did seem to infer that television drama broadcasting was a worthwhile endeavor and would be an important staple of the medium for years to come. In the later reviews, there were a few instances of concern over the amount of plays the medium would consume, but certainly no predictions that this would be one of the underlying reasons for the decline in live drama broadcasting in the late 1950's.

The reviewers of these years enjoyed a luxury that would be virtually unheard of today, the ability to review and report on virtually all productions that were being broadcast. It would be invaluable for future historians to be able to study reviews of a large number of individual shows for a specific series, such as the highly touted "Mary Tyler Moore Show," but the large amount of material available on television makes this extremely difficult, if not impossible. Thus, we are left with reviews of an entire season, or even an entire series of shows, that can't take into account the high and low points of individual shows. In this sense, the reviews of the live tlelvision dramas in Variety and Billboard from 1939 through 1947 are more complete in detailing the state of one specific television genre than reviews of modern day television can ever hope to.

Suggestions for further study. This study has barely scratched the surface of what is available from a detailed study of the trade publications from 1939 through 1947. Not only were many other types of shows regularly reviewed, but news articles in the publications

provide a wealth of information about the early history and development of the American television service. So little is known about this early period of television that studies of the extensive amount of sports broadcasts of the development of commercial programming, of women oriented shows (including one based on Mademoiselle magazine), of early quiz shows, and others would help to uncover the roots of modern television. A study of criticism, concentrating on a shorter period of time and encompassing reactions to all types of shows would be valuable in charting the development of television criticism and could better answer questions that have been raised in this study about this field.

With the recent live broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera in New York of Puccini's "La Boheme," interest is once again being focused on television opera. Television's greatest operatic achievement is generally reckoned to be Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors" (even though opera expert Joseph Kerman states that television opera deserves a much more fitting cornerstone than this), which was written especially for NBC, but opera broadcasting was an integral part of early television broadcasting. Dr. Herb Graf headed the NBC Opera Workshop beginning in the late 1940's, and ABC broadcast several opening nights live from the Met in the early 1950's. Little has been written about this and would make a fascinating and informative study.

Other than these subjects, many other areas of early television are ripe for study. The development of the color television service enjoyed a long and complicated history, beginning with CBS' huge in-

vestments in the late 1930's and early 1940's in a system using a mechanical color scanning wheel. From all accounts, the quality of this system was quite good and, if not for the vacillation of the FCC and untold amounts of internal politics, might very well have been adopted at that time. The story of the DuMont Network has never been fully charted, and this study has shown how energetic DuMont was is these early years of television.

The American thirst for nostalgia is now beginning to turn on the early years of television with great force, but many of these early years are being neglected to concentrate on the "Golden Age" years. A "Golden Age" does not stand except on the accomplishments that went before it.

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New York Times
Variety
Washington Post

# VITA

Grayson William Meredith, Jr. was born in Radford, Virginia, on November 12, 1951. He grew up in nearby Pulaski, Virginia, attended elementary schools in that town, and graduated from Pulaski High School in June of 1970. The following September he entered the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, and in May of 1974 received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Distinction. His major was History. While at the University of Virginia he was a Phillip Francis duPont Regional Scholar, a member of Sigma Pi social fraternity, a staff member of the Corks and Curls, and a member of the University Guide Service.

Returning to Pulaski, he worked until the following January as assistant to a local contractor as well as assisting in the formation of a local community theater group, the Valley Players. Following a stimulating summer as an indian extra in the outdoor historical drama "Tecumseh!," in Chillicothe, Ohio, he entered graduate school at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in the fall of 1975 and in June 1977 received a Master of Science degree in Communications, with a major in Broadcasting. While at the University of Tennessee he was chairman of the Central Film Committee; assistant to Dr. Sidney R. Jumper, editor of the Southeastern Geographer; assistant editor of the Stimulus, the quarterly newsletter of the Office of Continuing Social Work Education, University of Tennessee School of Social Work; editor of the Film Advocate, quarterly publication of the UT Central Film Committee; and a member of Kappa Tau Alpha.