

TV's Favorite Prof

BY JOSEPH STOCKER

DR. FRANK BAXTER of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles is the best thing that ever happened to the embattled champions of adult and intelligent television. A veteran and much-beloved professor of English at USC, Baxter has spanned the chasm between classroom and video, to the delight of millions of viewers all over the country.

It started as a dubious experiment in September, 1953. Los Angeles' CBS-TV station, KNXT, put Baxter in front of its cameras to conduct a regular Saturday course in Shakespeare. The station's brass hats figured that, even if the professor didn't outpull Jackie Gleason, at least he would have an appeal for high-brows. And high-brows, they decided grudgingly, have to be considered once in a while.

Baxter was undismayed by the assumption that his course would interest only the intellectual *crème de la crème*. He

threw himself into it with the same verve that had made him the most popular prof on the USC campus. For nearly an hour every week, he literally cavorted through a recitation and discussion of Shakespeare's plays. He performed all the roles himself, set the background for each play and used, as his main prop, a model of the famous old Globe Theater which he had spent 20 years building.

For thousands of viewers, who either had never read Shakespeare or had read him under compulsion, the immortal Bard came alive for the first time. "Shakespeare is my life," Baxter would explain, "and I want everyone to like him as much as I do. I teach Shakespeare on TV just as I do in class. Of course, I've considered myself an actor of sorts — a downright ham, in fact."

The program was an electrifying success — not only among high-brows but also among middle-brows and very possibly a few low-brows as well. Thousands of applauding letters



flooded in from viewers who were thankful, as one of them expressed it, that TV had discovered "we are not all happy little morons." Hundreds of Southern California people signed up for Baxter's "Shakespeare on TV" course, paying \$5 to "audit" it or \$12 to get an hour's college credit. (In order to gain the credit, they had to pass a final examination given on the USC campus at the end of the semester.)

This, as far as the station could determine, was the first time that Shakespeare had been taught via TV, and Baxter's "class" was the largest ever assembled for any television course. KNXT donated the time as a public service, and deliberately scheduled Baxter to conflict with the World Series and college football telecasts, so as to make the experiment more meaningful.

Soon the program was ringing up a spectacular rating of 9.5. Thus, it surpassed such network shows as "See It Now," "Adventure" and "Kukla, Fran and Ollie" in that area. And then the awards began to roll in.

Baxter won the Sylvania award for the best local educational program in the nation, in competition with 111 other shows. He received two Emmy statuettes from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for "best local public affairs program" and "best male performer in local television."

All in all, Baxter garnered just about every television award for

which his program was eligible. And CBS, convinced that his appeal went beyond high-brows, or else there were more high-brows than anybody had thought, moved the professor into the network. Now he appears nationally every Wednesday evening in a program called "Now and Then." It's a wide-open, one-man show, with Baxter lecturing about anything that happens to pop into his far-ranging mind — Shakespeare, Dior, Hemingway or the high cost of living.

THE SUCCESS of his adult approach, in a medium which sometimes seems to have been invented solely for the benefit of preschool children, has proved gratifying to TV's sterner critics. Said radio and TV columnist John Crosby:

"It has always been my theory that great teachers would make wonderful (and popular) TV personalities just like great comedians. Baxter is the only live evidence of the soundness of this theory that I happen to have on hand."

"For a long time," says TV's favorite prof, "I've felt that people were starved for something more nourishing in entertainment. The bill of fare on TV has included too much hamburger. Most people want a little chicken salad — if not pheasant under glass."

Alluding to the fact that many of his Shakespeare viewers not only viewed the program but paid for the privilege, Baxter says drily, "There's

no flattery quite so sincere as \$5."

Actually, USC students have realized for a long time what television fans are just now discovering about Frank Baxter. He's a great teacher who knows his subject matter from "S" to "M," and he still enjoys teaching it after a quarter of a century. He has been ranked as one of a half-dozen of the nation's greatest teachers, in the tradition of "Billy" Phelps of Yale and George Lyman Kittredge of Harvard. In the words of one admirer, he's a professor "who has spanned the field of literature and made good writing something to be understood and enjoyed."

BAXTER gets enormously excited about his TV program and puts in a great deal of work on his lectures. He never talks down to his audience, and he uses any word which seems to him to fit the occasion. If the viewers haven't heard it before, they can doggoned well look it up.

Anyway, Baxter thinks the intelligence of the mass TV audience has been considerably under-rated.

"The great truth," he says, "is that the people who have supported America with its mass entertainment have sold us short. The idea that such things must be beamed to a 12-year-old intelligence may be a good approach to the selling of soap.

But it ignores the fact that the whole hope of our country lies in recognizing and fostering those people who, by native endowment and training, are ready and hungry for something more mature than the fabled 12-year-old mass. To give TV viewers 'what they want' is to keep them as they are."

The professor is 58, bald, round-faced, bespectacled and properly tweedy. At USC he has the reputation of being a perfectionist and a tough man at grading time. But students line up for his classes. Said one of them: "Two courses with Baxter cost me a *cum laude*, but they were worth it." USC students voted him the man "who should teach all classes in the University." And the campus newspaper said, "If you haven't a course from Dr. Baxter, you haven't been to college."

Baxter's success hasn't affected his pixie-like drollery. TV people recall, for instance, the Television Academy banquet at which the professor was awarded an Emmy for his Shakespeare broadcasts. His fellow honorees made pretty speeches in which they gave due credit to their writers. So Baxter did likewise. "Following the precedent set here tonight," he said gravely, "I want to thank my writer, who happens to be William Shakespeare."



KNIVES

That Carve a Friendship

By SAMUEL SILVERSTEIN

and RUBY ZAGOREN



A FEW YEARS AGO a man dressed in obviously foreign clothing came into the office of the Collins Company in Collinsville, Conn., and asked for the president. Granted an interview, the visitor revealed he had come all the way from his native Peru, on the advice of the Collins representative there, to seek medical treatment at the Mayo Clinic.

The company president listened graciously. Then in amazement, he saw his caller reach into the folds of his shirt and bring forth two small bags of gold. The Peruvian placed them on the president's desk.

"Please keep," he said. "In case I die, you pay my bills."

The executive shook his head. "But there are banks that can handle this for you." He reached for the telephone and was about to call, but the Peruvian said, "No, no. I don't know your banks. I know the Collins Company."

The president, noting his sincerity, then agreed to keep the gold in the company safe. The Peruvian went to the Mayo Clinic and as time

went on his health improved. Later he returned to the Collins Company to thank his American friends and to reclaim his gold. Then he returned to Peru.

To the Collins management, this was another manifestation of the reputation for integrity and dependability that this company has built up over the years in its trade relations with Latin-American countries.

The Peruvian learned about Collins and trusted the company because of its product, the machete, which is exported to just about every country in Central and South America from this New England firm. The machete is regarded as one of the most important agricultural implements ever invented. Without it there would be no cultivation of coffee, sugar, bananas, chicle or rubber.

Natives of the tropical countries use the machetes to fight back the jungle, build homes, fashion boats, make shoes, and lop off the raw