



TV Makes a Fool out of Dad

by Bill Gale

THE AMERICAN MAN is a big-hearted, bubble-headed buffoon—or at least that's the way the majority of TV's so-called "domestic comedy" series see him. And that's the way the poor chump—through sheer force of repetition week after week—is beginning to measure up for a lot of home viewers. This is particularly true of the short pants and dirndl set for whom video packs a realistic wallop never before even approached

by any other entertainment medium in man's memory.

Actually TV's situation comedies take aim and let go—custard-pie fashion—at men in general, suggesting that we're all little boys at heart and not very bright little boys at that. But it's the family man who is most often made the target of this low-brow, slapstick humor. The video writers are evidently convinced that nobody is any funnier than "good ole Dad" when he's attempting to play like he's a grown-up. And so Dad's reputation as a rational human being with a normal amount of common sense is constantly strapped to the TV picture tube and roasted on shows that boast low comedy with high Hooper ratings.

To suggest that this situation can seriously set Junior to actually picturing his father as an extension of the bungling oaf on the home screen, and chewing his fingernails at the thought that the family scow is being commanded by such a chump, would be ridiculous. In fact, this is just what the Dad you see on TV would probably do—even to sitting down and writing his Congressman all about it. But to imagine that America's junior-sized TV fans aren't affected by the knuckle-headed antics of TV Dads and don't, as a result, get some lopsided notions about their own fathers in particular and other adult males in general, is just as naive.

After all, the stock situations into which the TV Dad is usually dumped, while grossly exaggerated, nevertheless, do have their roots in situations that actually take place in most homes. So it isn't difficult for the kiddies to see definite similarities between the blustering and ineffectual oaf on the video screen and the head-of-the-house. What is generally an all-too-human frailty in real life can seem downright stupid when served up as TV entertainment and sampled by the grade-school mind.

According to experts in the field of child care, the true importance of Dad in the home is not to be underestimated without severe consequences. Dr. Irene M. Josselyn, for example, has often sounded off in print on the tendency in too many American homes to make Dad appear not as the "competent, intelligent man he is" but as a ridiculous caricature of a woman; the result of which "might be that the child would cease to have a father. He would merely have a real mother and a substitute mother." Scarcely a healthy situation when one considers that Dad, as viewed by B. D. Hendy, the eminent British psychiatrist, has "the power of representing the outside world to those within the home." Dad, he further states, should be *—must be—*a man in the world of men, seeing to it that his youngsters come to know "the meaning of freedom and adventure."

AND AS the importance of masculine influence is increasingly recognized, specialists are more than giving Dad his due as the family leader. Industrial plants are, in some cities, inviting families to watch Dad, the man, at his job, a practice that gives prestige to the children and recognition to the father. All in all, the American Dad is quite a man and the consensus of thoughtful opinion is that from him—and in varying degrees from other males in their lives—children need love, companionship, understanding, protection *and* an example of competence.

But consider what most of our TV scripts do to this picture of Dad's competence. Take, for instance, Dad as the voluntary handyman around the house. This is a particularly favorite situation for TV's scripters and has been "milked" for all its worth—and then some. Here Dad appears equipped with a do-it-yourself tool kit and he's hankering to try it out. There just happens to be a back door that squeaks so Dad rolls up his sleeves and gets to work. From this point on, Dad is devastatingly dismantled before the very eyes of home viewers as he makes one mistake after another until, finally, the door is completely off its hinges and Mother steps in . . . calls a carpenter . . . and Dad, still sputtering helplessly, goes off to his den in disgrace.

There are variations on this

theme of course, but that's the general direction it takes: Dad always starts off cocky and more than a little boastful, only to have his mind start skidding as the plot thickens, while Mother looks on, a living monument to woman's everlasting patience.

ANOTHER sure-fire laugh-getter is the spectacle Dad always makes of himself when the wife and the kiddies go off to the country during the summer. Here Dad is portrayed as a poor, bewildered chump so incompetent that he can't fry an egg. He's too inept to do housework short of sweeping dust under the carpet and, added to that, he drools at the sight of the first dame who undulates across his path. All in all, Dad is pictured as a helpless, hopeless, overgrown boy who, left to his own devices, couldn't possibly last the year out. How this same dullard manages to make enough money to support the inevitably attractive home—and the inevitable comedy-relief maid—nobody ever bothers to explain.

However, the TV scriptwriter doesn't really hit his stride until we are presented with the American male's reaction to the news that he's about to become a father. Here all the stops are pulled out and Dad's antics are so juvenile as to suggest imbecility.

"Take it easy—you must rest!" our man cries, leaping to his feet

and half carrying his wife to the nearest armchair, although the good woman does her level best to get across the point that the long-legged bird is simply circling their garden apartment and isn't scheduled to land for several more months. But if we consider this a grotesque burlesque of the American male animal, just wait until Sir Stork actually comes down for a three-point landing.

Now we see Dad, vest buttons popping, a cigar stuck in his face, a catcher's mitt in one hand and a baseball bat under his arm. "Look at the size of those hands . . . just look at those *fists!*" he exclaims, his nose pressed against the nursery window.

Through it all, the video Mom manages to remain calm if not downright charmed by all this buffoonery, although I wager that if her man actually behaved like such a knuckle-head in real life, she'd probably curl her lip and let loose a few pungent remarks.

Exactly how far removed from actuality these TV Dads really are can best be measured by the ever increasing numbers of expectant fathers who enroll for child care courses and who remain with their wives through the early stages of labor or sometimes go into the delivery room to witness the actual birth. Furthermore, the past few years we Americans have undergone a drastic change in our attitude toward teaching our children

the so-called facts of life. So imagine how goofy the TV Dad and his adolescent shenanigans must seem to the 10-year-old boy or girl who has been intelligently schooled in the matter of birth and therefore, accepts it as a natural and very beautiful adult experience.

Still another facet of Dad's old shoe-in-the-mouth personality is demonstrated on TV whenever our boy comes face-to-face with a feminine face that's younger and prettier than his spouse's.

One favorite method for demonstrating this is to have the TV Mom spring the news that an old school chum of hers is about to pay the family a visit. We learn early in the script that our visitor is unmarried and has a reputation for being on the brainy side, a combination of clues that has Dad assuming she's definitely a dried-up old maid. But, when he opens the door, who's standing there beaming across the threshold at him but a tall, cool beauty—and does Dad's jaw drop a foot! The visitor walks in oozing womanly charm and well-bred sex appeal, and out the window flies Dad's aplomb. He straightens his necktie so often he all but chokes himself. His voice cracks repeatedly and he all but breaks a leg rushing across the room to light the lady's cigarette. And on it goes, until Dad has made a complete fool of himself to the amusement of the lady and the slow burn of his wife.

That is one favorite way of demonstrating the coltishness of our TV Dad. Another is to have him pay a visit to Junior's school. It seems Junior got a D in arithmetic and inasmuch as Dad always helps the little shaver with his sums, he's naturally chagrined. Anyway, as Dad sees the situation, it's Junior's old-maid schoolteacher who's all wet and he's off like a firecracker to tell her so. Dad's hot under the collar and ready to explode, when, suddenly, he comes face-to-face with the old battleax who turns out to be a sunny, little ingénue complete with devastating dimples.

AFTER THIS initial shock our Dad finally manages to introduce himself between gulps and blushes, and then proceeds to give a fairly accurate imitation of a jackass. He eventually returns home to read the riot act to Junior, much to the kid's confusion.

It is true that motion pictures in years past also presented the American family man in pretty much the same dismal light. However, no single movie ever held the same impact for the small fry as a weekly video series viewed in their own homes. Here on the video screen we've got a bungler de luxe with whom the kiddies are so familiar that he has become a flesh-and-blood personality.

So, whether we approve or disapprove, the TV Dad who departs

himself so convulsively on the 21" screen week after week isn't to be underestimated. He's a very important fellow. Our only hope is that since TV is still wearing short pants itself, Dad might just possibly be allowed to grow up with it.

And happily, there are some facts to indicate that this might not be too far off.

Recent reports emanating from the major TV networks suggest that situation comedy is on the skids. Last year these homey little comedies were TV's most popular fare, but now its decline is so evident that one network in particular has already blue-penciled sixteen half-hour shows revolving around the "at home" adventures of the "typical" American family.

In fact, only recently, one of video's most respected producers had a few blistering remarks to make himself about the way in which

this medium is distorting its picture of the American man.

"Look at television drama for a week," he said, "and your whole concept of the American male will become distorted. It's like the declining days of Greece."

A SITUATION comedy writer however has probably, best pinpointed the problem, stating that "we've allowed our shows to become unbearably predictable, wild and sloppy. Fellas," he's reported to have gone on to say, "we've just about dug our own graves."

So, it's possible—just possible, mind you—that one day in the not-too-distant future, "good ole Dad" is going to be portrayed as a full-fledged human being on video. It will take some doing, I should imagine, but there's nothing like a sharp dip in a Hooper rating to make Dad stop acting like an All-American drip.

Hal Moore, the silver-tongued racing announcer at Hollywood Park in Inglewood, California, is probably the only race track announcer in the country to ever spread a smile across nearly 45,000 faces of the wagering public during a pulse-tingling stretch duel.

During the calling of a race at the famous 'track of the lakes and flowers', a thoroughbred tagged "Tweedie Twom" was plugging along gamely in last place as the nine others thundered into the homestretch. As the veteran Moore nimbly rolled off the names and positions of the first six horses in a crystal-clear voice, a snow-balling chuckle suddenly rippled through the vast throng as he added after a slight pause, "AND TWEEDIE TWOM IS TWAILING."

—WAYNE CAPPS



DISASTER

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