

will consider myself kidnapped. "Nobody's trying to kidnap you, sir," the stewardess reassures me. "Look, they are only trying to do their job," says a dynamic executive in the next seat, "Go ahead and sit down." I insist on a written acknowledgment of my letter by the crew. The plane returns to the gate. A hundred businessmen unbuckle.

Next day, with Albion, here called Zoar, ever nearer, I notice two news items. Donald Trump had cautiously praised Gorbachev and got invited to build a hotel complex in Moscow. Malcolm Forbes also praised Gorbachev, but without any reservations, and got nothing, apparently, in return. Where is justice? What will become of you, Sodom?

And when the morning arose, then the angels hastened me saying, Arise, take thy wife, lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city. And the sun was risen upon the earth when I entered Zoar.

Andrei Navrozov is poetry editor for Chronicles.

VITAL SIGNS



TELEVISION

A Week in the Life: A TV Diary

by Janet Scott Barlow

You are what you eat. Up to a point, I tend to believe that maxim. Because I am unwilling to apply it to my own life, I also tend to resent it. The food police are everywhere, and the harder they work, the less there is to eat. For instance, if you should eat an ordinary hot dog, you could be dead by morning. Foodwise, the concept of the aimless pleasure is all but extinct.

The body and the mind are one organism. I tend to believe that too. Which means that you are not only what you eat, you are also (oh, the responsibility) what you read, dance to, and watch on the tube. Garbage in, garbage out, right? The food police are matched in their zeal only by the cultural watchdogs, the folks who sample *People* magazine every week in order to report that yes, it's still full of empty calories. But critics save their loudest warnings and deepest disdain for television, the sludge of American entertainment, cholesterol for the

mind. Beware: Television programming is low-level, inane, witless. Watch enough of it and you will clog your brain forever, never to have another meaningful thought.

What, you might ask, is the big deal? Most people work hard, and if they want to spend two hours in the evening eating potato chips and watching situation comedies, who's to say they should be spooning yogurt and viewing PBS documentaries instead? Until recently I had no personal answer to that question. While I like potato chips, I have not watched prime-time series television in a very long time. This was not a deliberate decision; I did not cut down on TV for health reasons, so to speak. What happened was, I forgot it was there. And time flies, you know? The next thing I knew, I was the only person around who had never seen *Dallas* or *Moonlighting* or *Family Ties*. Completely out of the mainstream, I had spent years enjoying a rather strange television diet of sports, old movies, news, and TV evangelists.

In an attempt to find out why millions of Americans like what so many critics despise, I decided to spend one week watching the prime-time entertainment offerings of the major net-

works. What the heck. I've eaten hot dogs, and I'm still here to talk about it. Since I had almost no current frame of reference, all programs were selected at random and viewed (at least for a while) with an open mind. Herewith a television diary for the week of September 13-19.

SUNDAY—False start. I watch the Cincinnati Bengals play the Colts in the afternoon. This exhausts me, because the Bengals always look like they're about to lose, even when they win (which they do, by a mere two points). No more TV today.

MONDAY—The choice is between *Cagney and Lacey* and the Bears-Giants game on Monday Night Football. What can I say? I was born and raised in Chicago. And the Bears smear the Giants.

TUESDAY—This is like trying to lose weight. *Tomorrow . . . I'll start tomorrow.* My intention is to watch *Moonlighting*, a hit show that's been hyped with adjectives like "clever," "witty," and "fresh." But I am undone by the prospect of seeing on my own television what I have seen on magazine covers for a full year: the smirky face of Bruce Willis and the pseudo-sultry face of Cybill Shepherd. Besides, I've already found a ball game. Cubs

and Mets. Since I love the Cubs and detest the Mets, I feel a strong obligation to watch this game. During a commercial I switch channels and catch five minutes of something called *Growing Pains*. A kid is learning a lesson about life from his father. Or perhaps the father is learning a lesson about life from his kid. Or perhaps both. The show is aptly titled. As I watch it, my pain grows. Back to the ball game. Cubbies lose.

WEDNESDAY—On track now. I watch *Highway to Heaven*. Michael Landon plays an angel who takes orders directly from "the Boss." The episode begins with a surreal, out-of-nowhere discussion between the angel and his sidekick about the need for responsible citizens to "stop worrying about the bomb" and instead focus their attention on the chemical content of their water supplies. "If they don't," warns the angel, "there won't be anyone to drop the bomb on." In the meantime, a little girl has lost her dog, Jake. She prays for the dog's return, but fears God does not hear her. In the midst of her crisis, the child's parents tell her that she soon will have a baby brother via surrogate motherhood, a process her mother explains by saying, "We've taken one of Dad's little fishies and put it with someone else's egg." From there we move to the woods, where angel Landon finds the lost dog and saves it from a pack of wolves by turning himself into a lion. (I'm not making this up.) He deposits the dog with a big-hearted kennel owner named Lil, who regularly takes her pooches to visit old people's homes and orphanages, Lil's philosophy being that "old folks are nothing but kids with wrinkles." What eventually happens to Jake the dog, Lil the dog-lover, and Dad's little fishes I do not know, because at this point I turn off the set. Apparently *Highway to Heaven* is what passes for "wholesome family entertainment" on television. No sex, no violence—just doggies, angels, and lots of talk about "love." Who can object? For myself, I think I'd rather have the kids watching Bugs Bunny cartoons or staring at the wall.

I return for *A Year in the Life*, a one-hour drama described by *TV Guide* as "richly textured." Watching this show, I realize why I so enjoy

sports on television. They offer everything *A Year in the Life* lacks: *real* reality, along with tension, surprise, *effortless* grace, and occasional humor; at the same time, sports completely lack what this show is full of: relevance to "life." The story: A widower in Seattle has several grown children. As the program opens, his married daughter and her husband are in conflict over the choice of a daytime babysitter for their infant daughter. They finally settle uneasily but hopefully on a woman from El Salvador who does not speak English. Another of the widower's daughters is divorcing her second husband. On the day her divorce becomes final, she accepts a date with a co-worker, which her kids think is "cool." As she leaves the house to meet her date, her teenage son advises her with a coy smile that "it's okay to say no." Her date stands her up. She goes to a Marx Brothers movie and cries. Then she goes to the apartment of her now ex-husband, has sex with him, and discovers (this must be the "richly textured" part) that tonight, finally, they can "talk." That's it. The end. Show's over. I think the idea here is to dispense with the vehicle of plot, take an episodic approach, and thus create a more realistic portrait of "modern family life." Having suffered through plot galore in *Highway to Heaven*, I hate to complain. But this program is pretentious, and these characters are boring. I do not want to spend a year in their life.

Next comes *St. Elsewhere*, a medical series set in a hospital. Because I always end up checking myself for symptoms, I do not watch medical programs of any kind, ever.

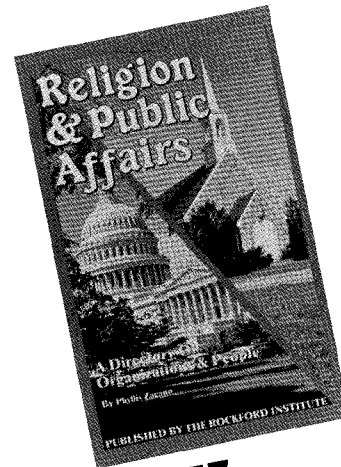
THURSDAY—Comedy night. With the aid of a VCR, I am able to watch four, count 'em, laugh riots. First, *Sledge Hammer!* a sort of comic book for adults. Sledge is a "blood-thirsty but trustworthy" police inspector who says things like, "The cops who can't deal with the violence crack; the ones who can, teach." An ace cop, Sledge is also a goofball. While he is well aware that he's an ace, the goofball part eludes him. Because the program aspires to nothing beyond *intentional* caricature and a few giggles, it is, comparatively speaking, refreshing. I wouldn't skip a showing of *All About Eve* to watch *Sledge Hammer!* but I

don't hate it.

Next, *The Cosby Show*. Bill Cosby says funny things, but I don't enjoy laughing at him because he is too aware of his own comic charm for my taste. As for his series, it raises the question, "Is it me or is it them?" It must be me, because *The Cosby Show* is the hit of the decade, a program all America adores. It's a cute show. It's a nice show. It's also a plastic show that is passing itself off as something better. I don't like it much. So sue me.

In *The Charmings*, a fairy-tale prince and princess have been transported to modern times. The mother of the princess is a spell-casting witch who talks to a black man in a magic mirror. Together they make jokes about premenstrual syndrome.

Last, a Bob Hope comedy special, a



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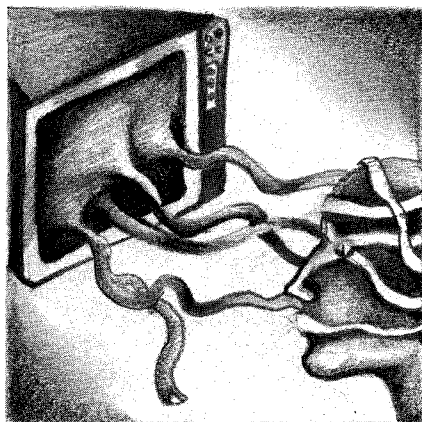
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"spoof" of the Iran-contra hearings. Don't ask.

I now have watched "comedy" for hours and feel starved for laughs. At this point I would convert from white to whole grain bread and give up Coca-Cola if I could just see Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*. They never made jokes about premenstrual syndrome.

FRIDAY—The time: the 50's. The place: Hollywood. The show: *Private Eye*. A strong-jawed private detective is hired by a movie star to tail her mobster lover. "You don't know what it's like to be a woman," the movie star tells the P.I. Looking comatose, the P.I. grunts, "There's never any winners." All women here are



called "doll," and everyone smokes like a chimney. A little slow about these things, I assume the show is a put-on. My mistake. It's being done straight. I give it 20 minutes and I'm gone.

SATURDAY—*The Golden Girls*. This, according to an ad in *TV Guide*, is the "hilarious season premiere" of a hit series about three older women—a ditz, a loudmouth, and a man-crazy vamp—who live together, along with the elderly mother of the loudmouth. Mom, approximately 80 years old, sits on the boardwalk a lot because she likes "to watch the guys rearranging themselves after they come out of the water." On one of her jaunts to the beach she makes a friend, an elderly man, and together they watch for men who "just peed in the ocean." Back at the house, the vamp has mistakenly given away the treasured teddy bear of the ditz. I'm sure there is a way to make funny the idea of a grown woman losing her teddy bear. This, however, is not it. To add to the

hilarity, Mom's gentleman friend has Alzheimer's disease.

Mama's Boy. The widowed mother of a Manhattan columnist moves in with her son. She is obnoxious—pushy, meddlesome, rude—so naturally he loves her. He is a hotshot bachelor, so naturally he is embarrassed to be living with Mom. He resolves his conflict by "redefining what a real man is." He . . . But why go on? I think a hug is coming.

SUNDAY—The bad news is, the Emmy Awards are on tonight. The Emmys, TV's highest honor, are given for excellence in television programming. I see in my trusty *TV Guide* that all three of the *Golden Girls*, along with their series, are nominated for awards. (And I will see in tomorrow's newspaper that *The Golden Girls* wins for best comedy series, and the vamp wins for best actress in a comedy series. What? No prize for *Highway to Heaven*?) The good news is, I don't have to watch the Emmy Awards, or anything else except the Bengals game, because this is Sunday, and my week is up. I'm off duty.

There. One week, more or less, of prime-time television—and I still haven't seen *Dallas* or *Moonlighting* or *Family Ties*. But based on what I did see, I can say this: The TV haters are wrong. Television *does* make you think. It makes you think things like, "This is the dumbest stuff I have ever seen; I can't believe I'm watching it; I can't believe *anyone* is watching it." My sampling was limited and haphazard, and it is possible I missed some absolute gems. I hope so. Otherwise, the evidence suggests that standard television fare is simply awful.

Television as a form, with its fixed time frames and regular commercial interruptions, does not lend itself easily to effective storytelling. And obviously it is difficult to produce "quality" creative products on a weekly schedule. But none of this explains the most striking feature of series television: its overwhelming *bluntness*—as if viewers could never be trusted to get the point, the joke, or the message. These shows reek of self-consciousness. They haven't been created as entertainment; they've been created as *television*.

Worst of all are the family-centered comedies. It is acceptable—often it's required—to approach comedy with a

sense of suspended disbelief. But these series, most of them, are meant to be seen as only slightly exaggerated reflections of "real life." Since they must also be what real life frequently is not—funny—they end up a hopeless combination of strained "significance" and cheap laughs. When *The Golden Girls*, a program billed as a comedy, takes as its subject Alzheimer's disease, it is attempting the rankest kind of emotional manipulation, and the result is both self-congratulatory and superficial. When that same program fills its laugh quota by having an old woman talk about "peeing in the ocean," the result is grotesque.

Television reaches its nadir in its portrayal of children and the elderly. Children are depicted on TV as all-knowing creatures or smartmouths meant to be seen as adorable. The elderly are depicted on TV as all-knowing creatures or smartmouths meant to be seen as adorable. After all, "old folks are nothing but kids with wrinkles." Series television embraces this idea with a vengeance, turning children into philosophers (or sex experts) and old people into bathroom humorists.

The constant question about television—about all popular entertainment—is whether it creates public taste or reflects it. I lean toward the latter theory. *The Golden Girls* is now in its third season on television, *Highway to Heaven* its sixth. People get what they want. As for my original question about network programming—why do millions of Americans enjoy what so many critics despise?—I have only half an answer. That is, I now understand why critics despise it, but I have no idea why millions of Americans enjoy it.

The mind and the body are one organism. After a week in front of the television set, I see that idea in a clearer light. I mean, I would never again subject my mind to *Highway to Heaven*, and I'm thinking of sparing my body any more hot dogs. *All life involves some risk.* Hey, I'll buy that. So, let's see how the organism handles a football game and a bag of potato chips.

Janet Scott Barlow covers popular culture from her home in Cincinnati, Ohio.

STAGE

A Distant Passion

by David Kaufman

Lanford Wilson is consistently given the respect reserved for "great" American playwrights, but the distinction is a dubious honor at best. Each Wilson piece is overly scrutinized and judged ultimately as being a notch below what it might have been. Revivals of earlier neglected works become causes for celebration, but here too, there is always a danger that the earlier plays—while they may be perceived as harboring incipient signs of later thematic developments—are also considered naive and not quite up to par with the later work.

If critical success is the surest path to critical failure, the dilemma of "greatness" perpetuates itself as new works are greeted with the kind of enthusiastic anticipation that even a Chekhov would be hard-pressed to live up to. A new Wilson play will almost certainly fail to live up to past successes; it will even more certainly fail to make good on his earlier promise. For such is the fate of "great" American playwrights, predetermined and dictated by the relentless fall-from-grace attitude of American theater criticism.

The belief that Wilson has more to offer suggests he is less than himself. Viewed as better than the "rest," the one playwright Wilson will forever be competing against is the image of Lanford Wilson, that important dramatist, as created by the critics who insist that he fulfill their requirements.

Fueled by critical success and popular attention, Wilson's reputation picked up steam in the 70's, beginning with *The Hot I Baltimore* in 1973, and continuing with *The Mound Builders* (1975), *5th of July* (1978), and *Talley's Folly* (1979). Confirmation of his popularity came when *The Hot I Baltimore* was realized as a TV series. He received his first Pulitzer Prize for *Talley's Folly*—a one-act drama with only two characters and 60 pages of dialogue—one of his more modest pieces.

By all standards, his two subsequent works were less successful. *Angels Fall*, which closed soon after it opened on Broadway in 1983, employed a *Grand*

Hotel or Ship of Fools motif to bring together six disparate characters seeking sanctuary in a New Mexico church during a nuclear plant accident in the vicinity. *A Tale Told* (1981), offered as the third work in the so-called "Talley Trilogy," occurs on the same July 4, 1944, evening as *Talley's Folly*, also on the Talley estate in Lebanon, Missouri (Wilson's hometown). While Sally Talley is working out her betrothal to Matt Friedman at the "old boathouse at the Talley Place" in *Talley's Folly*, three generations of threatened Talleys in the house proper are contending with the possible takeover of the family businesses. Though *A Tale Told* was revised in 1985 as *Talley & Son*, it could not surmount the problems of contrivance shared with Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, of which it seemed more than a little reminiscent. Thirty-three years and one day following the 1944 evening of *A Tale Told* and *Talley's Folly*, some of the Talleys are dealing with the sale of the house itself in *5th of July*, a far more felicitous work written earlier in the oeuvre.

Following Wilson's success in the

70's, the intervening years have seen a number of Wilson revivals. For its format and sensitivity, *Lemon Sky* (1970) has been justifiably compared with Tennessee Williams, and particularly *The Glass Menagerie*. In *Balm in Gilead*, his first full-length play (1965), Wilson achieved an uncanny verisimilitude recreating the low-life activities at a New York, Upper West Side coffee shop. In some "notes" to the published script, Wilson explained, "Within the general large pattern the people who spend their nights at the cafe have separate goals and separate characters but together they constitute a whole, revolving around some common center. They are the riffraff, the bums, the petty thieves, the scum, the lost, the desperate, the dispossessed, the cool; depending on one's attitude there are a hundred names that could describe them." Besides filling the stage with no fewer than 25 characters, Wilson's theatrical innovation in *Balm in Gilead* was to load the script with overlapping dialogue.

In *The Mound Builders* (1975), Wilson chose an archaeological dig in



The cast of Lanford Wilson's latest play, *Burn This*: (l-r) John Malkovich, Joan Allen, Lou Liberatore, and Jonathan Hogan.