

I N T H E A R T S

Easy answers

**Quiz Show
is a product
of the same
mindset that
created the
'50s scandal
it examines.**

By Pat Dowell

There's a moment in *Quiz Show* that must have had an interesting echo for director Robert Redford. The character of Charles Van Doren, pressed on whether he participated in a rigged television quiz show, sighs and mutters something about how everything in life has come too easily to him. Twenty-one years ago, Redford said almost the same thing in one of his most popular movies, *The Way We Were*. Redford was playing a golden-boy writer, whose first autobiographical short story started just that way: "Everything came too easily to him."

Charles Van Doren is a role that Redford might have played two decades ago; maybe that accounts for the easy ride Van Doren gets in Redford's new movie about the scandal that rocked television in the late '50s. The live quiz show *Twenty-One*, a huge ratings

hit pitting intellectuals against one another, was revealed to be as rehearsed as a professional wrestling match.

Van Doren had been one of the show's biggest winners, beating out a Jewish grad student named Herbie Stempel who sweated too much and had bad teeth. Stempel had been considered a ratings loser by the producers, who ordered him to throw his match with Van Doren. He did, but was so enraged that he blew the whistle, turning Van Doren into the show's big loser when the scandal broke.

That's the story, but Redford and screenwriter Paul Attanasio see in it a parable of lost American innocence. Of course, this idea of the '50s as an age of naiveté is just so much hogwash—what's so pure about the age of McCarthy?—but the quiz show scandals do illuminate an interesting moment in America's budding postwar cynicism about the public discourse. It was part of our education in the art of lying, and Redford's movie tries and largely succeeds in raising many piercing questions about the conduct of

business in America. *Quiz Show* is a satisfyingly complex tale of complicity from top to bottom, although it's only the guys on the lower end of the food chain—the producer but not the corporate sponsor giving him orders—who will ultimately take the fall in the movie's bittersweet and unsentimental conclusion.

At the center of the story is Richard Goodwin, a congressional investigator. Paul Attanasio's shrewd screenplay places Goodwin (played by Rob Morrow with a distracting accent) in an uncomfortable position. He's a Jew who's been to Harvard and so he knows the soft-spoken anti-Semitism of the upper classes. Just the same, he's snowed by the Van Dorens, folks who call man of letters Edmund Wilson by his nickname, "Bunny." (A movie that hopes American filmgoers know who Wilson is—much less his nickname—is poignantly ambitious.) Goodwin can't believe Charlie would lie. Nonetheless, he checks Stempel's claim that the show always followed a Jewish champion with a Gentile who won bigger—and it's true. Goodwin is torn between the sweaty Jew and the gentle Gentile.

The casting is perfect. Fresh from his Aryan monster in *Schindler's List*, Ralph Fiennes turns the other cheek



Quiz Show
Directed by Robert Redford

as Charles Van Doren, a charming if weak man who really seems to be slumming when the producers scoop him up as *Twenty-One*'s "great white hope." Even they can't understand why he'd want to be on a quiz show.

John Turturro's Herbie Stempel is some kind of cockeyed masterpiece, a virtuoso example of this actor's ingenious overacting. Flailing through life a bundle of tics and nervous gestures, spinning like a top with bitterness, Turturro gets at the essential truth of Herbie's victimization, but never loses sight of the fact that Herbie carries it to Homeric extremes. He is an epic paranoid, and a kind of grotesque that's not far from the most unflattering stereotype of the New York Jew.

Ultimately, *Quiz Show* indulges in compromises derived from the search for a bigger audience—the same ambitions that drove *Twenty-One*. A recent article in the *New York Times* objected to the film's changes in chronology and its elevation of Goodwin into the man who uncovered the scandal, but these amount to no more than minor license of the sort to be found in most dramatized history.

Where the movie reproduces the corruption of *Twenty-One* is in its showcasing of Van Doren as a more attractive competitor than Stempel. *Quiz Show* manages to make a hero of the fair-haired WASP, who is fatally stung by the ethnic Stempel. Herbie's motives are obvious—he's poor and a nobody and bitter about it—and his situation is portrayed with a modicum of sympathy, which still does nothing to make him more palatable. Van Doren, on the other hand, is depicted with enormous fellow-feeling, as having been dragged into the scheme against his better judgment.

He initially rejects the offer of coaching by the producer and accedes to deception only when he's given—on the air, live, in front of millions—a question the producers previously discussed with him. Van Doren's fall is that of a tragic hero, a noble man with a flaw; Stempel's destruction is self-inflicted, too, but it's the toppling of a spoiler and a would-be gate-crasher. And when you think about it, isn't Van Doren, who had all the advantages of class and wealth, a more contemptible figure than the guy who had nothing to start with?

The movie compensates for this obvious paradox by giving Van Doren a highly individual motive: the chill of standing in the imposing shadow of his father, poet and professor Mark Van Doren (played by Paul Scofield with a delicate sense of unchallengeable authority). This was the son's way of shining on his own, and tweaking his father's magisterial



manner a bit, too. The old man is full of lofty sneers about television, but the whole family is impressed with the amount of money Charlie wins.

Goodwin tries to keep Van Doren out of the scandal, according to the movie, but fails when the networks urge the contestant to make a statement supporting the show. Charlie and his dad appear before Congress, and, of course, the upscale *mea culpa* is greeted with utmost respect—a nice touch of irony. What makes the '50s different from the '90s is that Van Doren *was* ruined by the scandal, instead of snagging a seven-figure book and mini-series contract.

Redford, not your flashiest director, is well suited to this basically earnest material, and to his credit, he directs with an unhurried, deliberate pace that brings out all the shades of gray in the story. Redford continues to be a fine handler of actors, too, as Fiennes and Turturro's performances amply demonstrate. But what may be most significant about *Quiz Show* is the way it proudly waves its virtue while choosing its hero the old-fashioned way, by his pedigree. It's an exceedingly well-wrought motion picture, and something of a cultural fraud.

TELEVISION

teenagesomething

*TV actually
looks
seriously at
the lives
of American
adolescents.*

By Scott McLemee

To be a teenager is a complex fate—not just because of sex, either. Adrift in that weird social space called high school, with its tribalism of clique and fashion, teenagers are subject constantly to the gaze of others. Some of us, of course, are spared the discipline of being cool. But marginality can exert other kinds of pressure, including levels of self-involvement that, in their intensity and thoroughness, can only be called existentialist. When Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “Hell is other people,” he was an old fart in his 40s. Yet the sentiment is quintessential teenage—especially if the people in question are your parents. Little wonder that the chip on a teenager’s shoulder is seldom borne lightly.

On its surface, at least, the new ABC program *My So-Called Life* is all about that chip. Each episode

opens with a voice-over by Angela Chase, a 15-year-old character deep in the throes of an adolescent identity crisis—if that phrase isn’t too redundant. Her upper-middle-class family is so utterly non-dysfunctional as to be a little suffocating. And, in fact, Angela does feel suffocated. In the first episode, she mused: “Lately I can’t even look at my mother without wanting to stab her, repeatedly.”

Perhaps to keep from being bored to death, Angela takes up with a couple of new friends—Rayanne, a latchkey kid who drinks a bit; and Ricky, a black/Latino bisexual who joins them in the girls’ room to apply make-up. Her parents are less than thrilled by this development. Yet Angela herself is anything but wild, at least by post-*Ozzie and Harriet* standards: her rebellion largely takes the form of being sullen.

And Claire Danes, the 15-year-old actress who plays Angela, does a wonderfully expressive job portraying the various tones of sullen. She also brings a certain nuance to the several kinds of awkwardness and embarrassment the part requires. It is remarkable to see young, talented performers playing adolescents, something not often tried on television. (On a recent episode of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, someone asked Luke Perry’s character if he were old enough to buy liquor; evidence, I guess, that some scriptwriter has a cruel sense of humor.)

Life is produced by the people who created *thirtysomething*. It’s a show, therefore, with both high production values and a lot of cultural baggage. In contemporary American cultural politics, the expression “from the creators of *thirtysomething*” will inevitably prejudice much of the TV audience. It was a program some people loved, and many hated passionately. Indeed, you didn’t even have to watch the show to feel contempt for it: the term “thirtysomething” formed one end of a chain of signifiers, the other links of which included *The Big Chill*, the Reagan era, “the ’80s” and yuppies.

To be fair, *thirtysomething* itself didn’t endorse the whole Reagan *Weltanschauung*; in a way, the show was a reaction to the era. Its characters were not predatory or cynical. But if they resisted the mores of the day, it was by turning inward: they were narcissistic without being particularly avaricious. When they talked, the discussions were usually terse and subdued, and concerned deeply meaningfully personal experiences. Never before in the history of broadcasting have so many well-dressed people sighed so often, or so deeply, nor stared off into the distance with quite so much emotional intensity.

It would hardly be just to call *My So-Called Life* a replay of *thirtysomething* with teenagers. For one thing, people talk a lot more. And the distance between parents and kids