



The Businessman as Critic

THOLLYWOOD. THE NBC-MGM weekly television film series *Mr. Novak* presents the academic and personal ordeals of a dedicated young teacher of English in a typical American high school. E. Jack Neuman, the executive producer, received a letter recently from John R. Miles, manager of the Education Department of the United States Chamber of Commerce, congratulating Neuman for producing a "refreshing and significant dramatic show" that portrays critical problems facing not only educators but the business and industrial community as well.

Mr. Miles protested, however, that one *Mr. Novak* program dealing with the dropout problem was "a tragic failure." The story involved a student who regretted that he had left high school. He could not be restored to the learning process because he was overage for high school, and he did not like attending evening adult courses. Mr. Miles asserted that the dropout show was

"distorted . . . pessimistic . . . incorrect." He claimed that schools are devising methods for meeting the problem and that the program should have emphasized these rather than the "despair and frustration" depicted. "Even if our schools were so inept in handling the dropout problem," he continued, "it would not have been good television to reveal it."

Mr. Neuman disagreed. He told Mr. Miles that he had personally researched and written the show and that it was based not only on an actual case but also on information given him by hundreds of high school principals. The program caused a stir among educators, and many have requested it for showing in school assemblies. The producer's intention, as he put it, was "to scare the hell out of a hundred thousand potential high school dropouts. . . . If just one of them remained in school . . . the film achieved the ultimate goal."

The merits of Mr. Miles's protest are not under discussion here, but rather

his opinion that, even if Mr. Neuman's picture were true, "it would not have been good television to reveal it." The management of news has become a public issue, but here we have a statement from an influential organization of business leaders that appears to be based on a philosophy of "managing" television drama.

Neuman, like a few other television producers who are attempting to deal with current social issues in their programs, has conflicts with network officials. NBC shares ownership of the series with MGM and has the last word in story approval. The producer admits that he "generally has carte blanche," but there have been occasions when he and network representatives have clashed over happy endings. He did one story on *Mr. Novak* in which a boy who cheated in class was given a second chance, cheated again, and was tossed out of school. The network wanted the boy redeemed, but it ultimately gave Neuman's hard ending the green light. In another show, when the producer wanted a student to persist to the bitter end in downbeat behavior, the network overruled him and compelled a happy ending.

When I talked with him recently on the MGM lot, Neuman said he was currently involved in another discussion with the network involving a future show. NBC wants him to stick to the "idealized" image of the teacher and refrain from showing that his Lone Ranger on the campus can take a drink and woo a woman. It's a matter of give and take. The network has to hold the line for upbeat endings that harmonize with the sponsor's message (and perhaps with the wishes of the audience), yet network officials also see the wisdom of not overfrustrating their creative talent. The dilemma is a normal condition of our sponsored, mass-circulation broadcasting system.

The Chamber of Commerce has no direct relationship with creators of television entertainment. Its officials can—publicly and behind the scenes—speak for and against what is produced. But for such an organization to maintain that it is better not to expose on television weaknesses in education is disturbing. It is not consistent with democratic theory that the medium should always present a cheery view of reality. Mr. Miles's position strengthens criticisms affirming that there is an affinity between the commercial aims of the business community and the purveyors of mass entertainment on the air. Such an identity of interests serves to hold the line for the profitable status quo and to diminish social criticism. It is worth wondering how the Chamber of Commerce defines "education."

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.

IT'S A BAD DAY for a critic when he offends any of his readers by reporting facts inaccurately or failing to communicate the meaning he intends. There's nothing for it at such times but to beg the indulgence of his readers generally, make the necessary amends to individuals, and try again to clarify a point. Two recent shortcomings on my part require attention. The first concerns William P. McGivern, who collaborated on the script of *Leviathan Five*, a program in the NBC-TV *Kraft Suspense Theater* series. In commenting favorably on the show in the February 29 issue I said that Roy Huggins, the producer, contributed to the script under the "McGivern pseudonym." This was the result of a misunderstanding during a conversation with the producer. "There is no such thing as a McGivern pseudonym," the author has told me. "I have written under that name for the last twenty-odd years. No one else has." He went on to list titles from a prolific body of work and added: "With one careless sentence you have swept that body of work into an area where it may be regarded as the work of Roy Huggins."

My second sin is failing to make a point clear to Mrs. Barbara J. Johnson, of Lansing, Michigan. "You are brainwashed," Mrs. Johnson has let me know. "Your reasons why the *Richard Boone Show* should be discontinued . . . are unbelievable. Here was a chance to take a stand for good creative TV and you fell on your face . . . , ran with the mob for mediocrity." I did not mean to imply that the *Richard Boone Show* should be discontinued, but attempted to explain why it had failed to attract the gargantuan audiences the networks require in order to keep a program in prime time. My theory was that television programs that meet mass-circulation criteria make their appeal essentially to alienated viewers who have a need for vicarious identification with cozily familiar and predictable characters and situations. Pseudo-anthology series like *Kraft* and *Hitchcock* succeed because they offer the same emotional experience week after week, with only minor variations. *Richard Boone* bravely attempted a true anthology offering unpredictable experiences, but apparently not enough viewers (by mass standards) appreciate or understand repertory acting to make that the incentive for revisiting the series every week. I would be as delighted as anyone to have quality repertory succeed on television. —R.L.S.



Theater in Cleveland

CLEVELAND.

IS THE pattern of community theater changing from what it was not so many years ago when its function was to present a menu of light comedies and glamorous dramas that had received the stamp of approval from Broadway critics a few seasons earlier? A look at the current fare being offered by the Cleveland Play House reveals a better balance between plays like *Take Her She's Mine* and *Calculated Risk* and plays like *The Night of the Iguana*, *Drums Under the Window*, and Jean Anouilh's *Becket*. The latter has been staged by guest director William Woodman on the semi-open stage of one of its three theaters.

Unusual casting offers the tall and boyishly gauche James Oliver Cromwell as King Henry II and a more mature actor, Richard Halverson, as Becket. This strengthens the notion that Henry would have been as stupid as his barons had he not been taught wisdom by Becket. The production is handsomely costumed and played on an elegant structure of steps and platforms that are more effective in the formal scenes than in the informal ones.

At another of the Play House theaters, Kirk Willis has directed an inventive production of Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*. In it Margaret Victor plays the teen-age seductress with great skill and captures the feeling of tinselly cheapness that ultimately horrifies the hot-house-bred Jonathan.

The Cleveland Play House, which offers as many as twenty-two plays a season, is the largest and oldest resident professional company in the United States. It seems to be serving its delighted community well. But now that other cities are setting up permanent resident companies with more specifically stated policies about acting approaches and the kinds of plays they will or will not do, the Cleveland Play House is faced with the prospect of either continuing a highly successful formula and being categorized as a community theater, or finding some way to continue its community service but at the same time markedly excel in one kind of theatrical production.

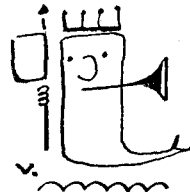
Equally famous in American Theater history is the Karamu Theater, which, since its founding by Russell and Rowena Jelliffe in 1915, has served a predominantly Negro section of

Cleveland both by entertaining its residents and by giving them an opportunity to perform—always with interracial casting. Under professional directors Reuben Silver and Benno Frank it operates a small proscenium theater and a theater-in-the-round. Its next production will be the world premiere of John Murray's *The Prince of Mandalore*, a realistic farce in which three New York Negro actors traveling through the South are mistaken for East Indian royalty by segregationists who roll out the red carpet for them.

In addition to these important theatrical institutions, Clevelanders at this moment have been offered the unusual opportunity of being able to see Morris Carnovsky perform his famous Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. At Oberlin College some thirty miles away, Mr. Carnovsky, supported by a student cast, is now portraying Shylock in a production closer to his own concept

of the play than was the 1960 American Shakespeare Festival Theater original at Stratford, Connecticut.

The secret of Mr. Carnovsky's Shylock, which is far and away the greatest of our time, lies both in its beautifully perfected creation of the look, sound, and feel of the obsessed usurer and in its vigorous impulsiveness. This is not a calculating scoundrel, but rather a man whose deep anger leaves him understandably susceptible to the temptations of revenge. Here at Oberlin, Mr. Carnovsky and Jerome Landfield have staged the play extracurricularly with a student cast. And while



the usual flaws of inexperience are frequently in evidence, the performers are refreshingly youthful and manage to move the play along at a lively pace, getting particular fun out of the sequences in which the Princes of Morocco and Arragon choose the caskets.

—HENRY HEWES.

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