

Television

Murder Most Foul

by Karl E. Meyer

THE MORE I see of it, the more I am convinced that the television "docudrama" is as inherently crooked as a camel's back. It is simply not possible to recycle recent real life events into prime time entertainment without the means' contaminating the end. The reshaping of history to suit what the trade calls "production values" constitutes an offense against truth itself, and it should be resisted, no matter how lofty the intention.

A case in point is the CBS docudrama *A Death in Canaan*, which tells the story of Peter Reilly, a Connecticut teen-ager found guilty of killing his mother. Held incommunicado by the police for 26 hours, Reilly signed a "confession" that he later disavowed but that nevertheless led a jury to convict him of first-degree manslaughter. In 1976, three years after the murder, the case was reopened and all charges against the boy were dismissed. (*A Death in Canaan* is due to be shown on Wednesday, March 1, from 9:00 to 11:30 P.M., EST, but network scheduling has been so erratic that a recheck of listings is advised.)

This is a stark and horrible story of manifest importance. It shows us the dark side of the law, which most police action shows either ignore or excuse. In this respect, *A Death in Canaan* performs an undoubted service by effectively illustrating how a weak-willed suspect can be led to confess to anything—including the murder of his mother.

When Peter Reilly returned to his Canaan home on the evening of September 28, 1973, he came upon the slashed and mangled body of his mother. Though there was not a mark of blood on the boy, he was regarded as the prime suspect and taken by the state police to Hartford. He volunteered to take a lie detector test and was informed that the polygraph was infallible (which it isn't).

A Death in Canaan draws on the verbatim transcript of Reilly's interrogation. The fatherless boy was told that he might have blacked out and forgotten the crime that the polygraph seemed to show he had committed. Exhausted both emotionally

and physically, Reilly finally "confessed," though he still said he was not sure what had happened.

The program is a textbook example of what used to be accepted police procedure. In the words of Professor Fred E. Inbau, of Northwestern University Law School, "All confessions are based on trickery and deceit." Inbau was giving advice in 1959 to prosecuting attorneys taking a short course, and he went on to say:

In dealing with emotional crimes—a shooting for instance—don't ask the suspect to admit it. Pat him on the shoulder and say, "Joe, where did you throw the gun?" Or the Why-did-it-happen approach: "Just got the better of you, huh, Joe?"... Give him an opportunity to explain, to justify it in his own words. So he'll say, "All right, I'll tell you," and it'll put him in the penitentiary.

In a series of landmark cases, the Supreme Court has tried to limit the use of trickery and deceit by police in extorting confessions from emotionally vulnerable suspects. But the practice persists, always with the excuse that only the guilty confess. In the case of Peter Reilly, the evidence was solidly against his having committed the crime to which he "confessed." The lessons of this case deserve to be pondered by a national audience.

Regrettably, *A Death in Canaan* is also a docudrama, with the familiar clichés of a bastard film form. Some of the characters are given their real names, others are rebaptized or are composites of several people, with little indication of where truth ends and fiction begins. Filmed in California and not New England, the program substitutes a phony Our Town folksiness for the grit of Connecticut, and the accents are hopelessly wrong.

These are minor blemishes. For the more serious defects, blame rests on the producers, Robert W. Christensen and Rick Rosenberg, and on director Tony Richardson, of British film fame (*Tom Jones*), who here makes his American television debut. With the exception of Paul Clemens, who sensitively depicts Peter Reilly, the cast consists of comic book stereotypes of real life counterparts.

A Death in Canaan is based on a fine

book of the same title by Joan Barthel, the enterprising free-lance writer who brought the Reilly case to national attention. In the film version, Barthel is transformed into a starlet, the lithe and winsome Stefanie Powers, apparently on the theory that a mass audience could never accept a heroine who is plain.

In reading Barthel's admirable book, I was struck by its thoughtful preface by novelist William Styron (one of the many notables who came to Reilly's aid). Styron describes the presiding judge, John Speziale, as humane, compassionate, and civilized. Renamed Judge Revere in the film and played by William Bronder, the magistrate comes across as an impersonal mediocrity who presses the jury to convict.

Of the police, Styron remarks that they were "nice" men who thought they were doing their duty. This immensely important fact does not come through in the more simpleminded film version. The state police lieutenant in charge of the investigation has the mien of a stormtrooper (he is called Lieutenant Bragdon and is played by Tom Atkins).

In short, this film on justice does not do justice to the truth. The caricaturist's crayon here supplants the writer's pencil, with its exact line.

The question I asked myself is why CBS did not produce a genuine documentary on the Reilly case, which could have been filmed in Connecticut rather than California and which would have given us a look at the real people involved in this troubling legal scandal. The culprit, I am certain, is Nielsen and his rating machines. Stefanie Powers playing Joan Barthel may generate a huge audience, while Joan Barthel playing herself represents a risk. Since the cause is noble, we are supposed to swallow our doubts about the gussied-up gimmickry of the docudrama. I refuse to do so. The form itself is pernicious, and despite my awareness of the futility of shouting at the wind, I urge that all such future projects be dropped forthwith. ©

Answer to Middleton Double-Crostic No. 141

(David) McCullough:
(The) Path Between the Seas

The New York Times scarcely let a day pass without some new assault on the President and his "act of sordid conquest." Cartoons in the *World*... showed a brutish Rough Rider, armed to the teeth, pouncing on Panama or glowering down the barrel of an enormous cannon at a helpless little Colombia.

Chaplin's Flawed Successors

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

THE DEATH of Charlie Chaplin provokes reflections about the state of humor in America. Among movie fans, to judge by the American Film Institute poll [SR, January 21], Chaplin is already forgotten. In this poll, citizens of the Republic, presumably sane, voted that *Gone with the Wind*, *Star Wars*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* were greater films than *Modern Times*, *City Lights*, *The Great Dictator*, and *Monsieur Verdoux*. One might conclude that our national sense of humor is in decay. I am not sure that this is so. After all, most critics—in my view, rightly—chose Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* as the best movie of 1977.

And Hollywood turns out comedies as assiduously as ever. This month's entries are both from 20th Century-Fox. The presiding geniuses are Mel Brooks, who produced, directed, wrote (with assistance), and played the lead in *High Anxiety*, and Gene Wilder, a chip from the Brooks workshop, who wrote, directed, and played the lead in *The World's Greatest Lover*. Both even contributed songs to their movies. All this, of course, is in the great tradition. Chaplin wrote, directed, produced, composed, and so forth. So does Woody Allen today. Name-dropping, however, is not in the tradition. Brooks dedicates his film to Alfred Hitchcock, "master of suspense." Wilder concludes his with a self-serving message of thanks to his "friend" Federico Fellini "for encouragement at just the right time."

Some comedians, like Chaplin, Fields, Groucho, Lahr, Ed Wynn, were intrinsically funny men. For all I know, they may have been grouches in their private lives; but the moment they appeared on stage or on screen, one began to laugh. Neither Brooks nor Wilder is intrinsically funny. This is not a fatal disqualification. There have been other comedians not wildly comical in themselves but possessed of a rueful conception of character and a capacity for droll invention that suffused their movies and made us laugh helplessly when we saw them—Harold Lloyd, for example, or Buster Keaton. Mel Brooks, one

feels, is growing in this direction. Gene Wilder tries hard. Too hard.

High Anxiety is homage to Hitchcock. It offers spoofs of *Spellbound*, *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *The Birds*. It also sends up a number of non-Hitchcock films, from *Blow Up* and *Frankenstein* to *The Wizard of Oz*. The kind of spunky, dumb character Ed Brophy used to play a generation ago reappears here played by Ron Carey; the character looks like, and is named, Brophy. *High Anxiety* is filled with such in jokes, many more of which I am sure eluded me. In jokes are a perishable item. Did Chaplin and Lloyd go in for in jokes? Who can tell anymore?

Mel Brooks is improbably cast as a Harvard professor of psychiatry and a Nobel Prize winner. He turns out to be a surprisingly ingratiating and skilled performer; very funny too, imitating Sinatra singing at a bar or, undone by his fear of heights, sliding along the inner wall on the top floor of the open stairwell of San Francisco's Hyatt Hotel. The parody of a Hitchcock plot is okay, though the talented Cloris Leachman is required to play the villainess rather in the style of the late Lionel Barrymore.

The trouble with Brooks is that he has imperfect taste. Most of the great comedians, Chaplin and the rest, have had excellent taste. Woody Allen today has flawless taste. Brooks's unevenness is exhibited even before we get through the titles. The opening sequence has an external shot of a descending airplane, with cheerful faces at each window until the camera reaches Brooks, a picture of total misery (very funny); then Brooks, disembarking and presenting the stewardess with a bag of vomit (very unfunny); then a manic woman hurling herself at him, so Brooks thinks with murderous intent, only to rush past and embrace another passenger (very funny); then a man in a trench coat summoning Brooks into the "toilet" and revealing himself as a homosexual on the prowl (not so funny). The bad taste has none of the epic, self-loathing quality that made Lenny Bruce, say, a cultural phenomenon. It is just a cheap sense of what makes people laugh: bird-droppings, for example; or S/M bondage; or lunatics.

Still, one can forgive a lot to a man who

moves a camera into a room through a window, only to shatter the pane as it goes; or who permits a crescendo of music when a chauffeur whispers "foul play," only to display it as coming from a symphony orchestra traveling in a neighboring bus. For all his lapses, Brooks is a man of gifts; far more so, on this evidence, than his protégé.

Wilder is amiable and blameless but not naturally comical and inclined to make up in exertion what he lacks in inspiration. In his movie about a young man from the provinces trying to win a Rudolph Valentino contest in the Hollywood of silent pictures, he has two expressions—wounded astonishment and delirious self-esteem. He mugs tediously, as does his entire cast. He also pilfers shamelessly; but the assembly line scene was far funnier in *Modern Times*, and the screen tests, as well as the mistaken identity theme, were far funnier in Lloyd's *Movie Crazy*. Wilder tries so hard at slapstick that he almost wins sympathy. Alas, as Mark Twain said of his wife's attempts to swear, he has the words but not the tune. The audience, when I saw the film, watched it mostly in patient silence. Fellini may be a little promiscuous in dispensing encouragement these days. ●

Wit Twister No. 113

Edited by Arthur Swan

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word. Answers on page 53.

Alone, he downs his _ _ _
_ _ _ and his steak,

Then goes to face his triumph's _
_ _ _ _ and din.

How _ _ _ _ _ the
crowd assembled for his sake!

How grand the _ _ _ _ _
_ _ _ march that plays him in!

This _ _ _ _ _ welcome
makes him wryly view

His life as some pat _ _ _ _ _
_ _ _ tale come true. A.S.