

We Interrupt This Program . .



Ned Sherrin of 'We Interrupt This Week'

There is just one more chance (at 10:30 tonight on Ch. 13) to catch what one reviewer has called "the merriest and most pleasingly snide weekly brawl in all of television." After that, the Public Broadcasting Service will interrupt "We Interrupt This Week" at least until fall, and possibly for much longer.

Tears may be shed in high places. Tom Shales, television critic for The Washington Post who is responsible for the profuse, if left-handed, praise above, has also called PBS' first venture into the quiz show genre a television show for "elitist intellectual snobs who hardly ever watch television."

John Huston watches; so do Stephen Sondheim, Tom Snyder, Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn, the White House's Anne Wexler, and Lassie's master's mom, June Lockhart. So do a lot of less famous Americans. The last time "We Interrupt This Week" was interrupted—last fall—more than 10,000 letters came pouring in asking, and in some cases demanding, that the program be reinstated.

And so it was—for a six-week midwinter run financed by a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. As the reprise comes to a close, PBS affiliates around the country are being polled to see if they like "We Interrupt This Week" well enough to share the cost of renewing it in the fall.

"The chances are not very good," David Othmer, the director of broadcasting for New York's WNET/13, where the show originates, conceded last week. Othmer said that so far only about half of the 90 to 100 stations needed to sustain the show on a cost-sharing basis have indicated a willingness to do so. "The shows that get funded by the Station Program Cooperative tend to be the 'standards,' the proven favorites," Othmer said, mentioning "Nova," "Wall Street Week," and the "MacNeil-Lehrer Report" as prominent examples.

If "We Interrupt This Week" is back in the fall, it will probably be because a corporation or foundation has been persuaded to underwrite the cost of the show, which was \$365,000 for last fall's 13 half-hours, plus a one-hour end-of-year special.

The show is a current events quiz, which Newsday's television critic Marvin Kitman has described as a mix of "Information Please," "That Was the Week That Was," and "Quiz Kids." You could also think of it as the highbrow's "Hollywood Squares," with the difference being that all of the guesswork is left to the celebrity panelists—no audience participation. The scoring is capricious, the prizes whimsical and absolutely ridiculous: two slightly used Nobel Peace Prizes, for instance, or cameo roles in "Lord of the Rings, Part II."

It is the brainchild and total autocracy of Ned Sherrin, a 48-year-old Briton who originated a similar show in London several years ago and also helped create "That Was the Week That Was."

Sherrin found himself in New York two years ago narrating "Side by Side by Sondheim," the

musical review that was transplanted from London to Broadway. "When I found I was going to be stuck here for a year, it seemed a pity not to find something to occupy myself," Sherrin said. He took his suggestion to PBS, which allowed the show to quietly insinuate itself into the schedule.

With producer John Gilroy, formerly of the "Dick Cavett Show," and executive producer Tom Slevin, Sherrin assembled a pool of panelists that was heavily Eastern Intellectual Establishment,

and a far cry from the Vicki Lawrences and Sandy Duncans who get so much of the guest-spot work on network game shows from the West Coast.

Each week there is a "home" team and a "visitors" team, three persons on each side. The home team draws on a pool that includes journalists Jeff Greenfield and Richard Reeves, actress Carrie Nye, and writers Barbara Howar and Marshall Brickman. The visitors have included Bella Abzug, Gore Vidal, Edwin Newman and Roy Cohn.

Screenwriters Peter Stone and David Newman are as likely to pop up on the home team as they are on the visitors' team, and if you think Sherrin is arbitrary about team assignments, you should see him hand out points. Almost no one understands the scoring system except Sherrin, who freely admits that it is "arbitrary, prejudiced and final." Witty remarks and gallant tries are rewarded as well as correct answers, and so are "answers that are evasive in an inventive, charming or provocative way."

Last month, a team of U.S. senators' wives was to face the home team, but David Newman was a last-minute fill-in for Nancy (Mrs. Strom) Thurmond. The wife of the South Carolina Republican bowed out because Washington's snowstorm had kept her children home from school and her newspaper from being delivered. (Only the foolhardy

would venture onto "We Interrupt This Week" without being on top of the news.) Colleen (Mrs. Sam) Nunn, wife of the Georgia Democrat, and Teresa (Mrs. John) Heinz, wife of the Pennsylvania Republican, did appear as promised.

Things were looking bad for the senators' wives, neither of whom was familiar with the game, when Sherrin gallantly awarded Teresa Heinz six points for recognizing her husband in one of the film clips used as visual aids on some questions. It helped even things up.

The questions are taken from the week's headlines, as well as from the week's gossip columns, but they go through some intricate contortions. Thus the correct answer to: "Who went 'the friendship route' for an educational purpose?" was the People's Republic of China, which followed what is called "Friendship Pass" in invading North Vietnam for the stated purpose of teaching the Vietnamese a lesson. "Who tuned in but didn't turn on?"—posed some weeks ago—referred to the gorilla couple at a Boston zoo who were allowed to watch television in the vain hope it would improve their sex life. "The bigger the story," chief question writer Tony Geiss said, "the more you try to conceal it."

The emphasis is not supposed to be on winning,

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though Sherrin feels that the American participants know no other way. In England, he says, panelists did not care if they lost 500 to 1, so long as they had a good time and scored with a witty remark or two. Here, he says, playing to win is "a national disease."

There have been some memorable moments of wit, intentional or otherwise. A favorite is the time when the question asked was "Who said 'The possibilities of heterosexuality are soon exhausted?'" Guest Gore Vidal wrinkled his brow and wondered aloud: "Did I?"

The more acerbic asides are usually Sherrin's. Last week he managed to say that Tuesday's total eclipse "would be the last in this century, unless Lily Tomlin makes 'Moment by Moment, Part II.'" Discussing a California sculptor's plan to chisel Gov. Jerry Brown's features into a rock hanging perilously over a Malibu hillside, Sherrin advised that she had "already started work on both faces."

That's the sort of thing that doubles-up "We Interrupt This Week" fanatics, but not everyone has a taste for bitter tea. WGTE in Toledo is one of the PBS outlets that did not vote to continue "We Interrupt This Week."

"We surveyed 1,045 of our viewers," program director Shirley Timonere said, "and it got only 406 votes. That type of humor—flip, quick, biting—doesn't appeal to a lot of people. A large body of people here consider it ill-mannered." Timonere added that Toledo does have its "We Interrupt . . ." devotees. "And they're absolute fanatics," she said. "They think it's an oasis in the desert."

Similarly rabid followings were reported by spokesmen for stations in Phoenix and Atlanta, both of which voted to sustain the show. So did San Francisco's KQED, reported that station's Jonathan Rice, "until the last round of voting, when it became apparent that the show wouldn't get the support that it needed." Rice said that "We Interrupt . . ." never became popular with San Franciscans, "but we thought it was worth continuing anyway, since it's almost the only

American humor on public television."

Asked if the program appeals exclusively to the toney eastern crowd, Sherrin answered with typical lack-of-seriousness: "I do hope so, although I'm not quite sure we can aspire to that all the time." He added, "seriously," that on his recent trip through Kennedy Airport, the man at Immigration, the woman at Customs and the cab driver who drove him to town all recognized him and vowed their devotion to the show.

Panelist Barbara Howar, a regular on CBS' short-lived "Who's Who" a couple of seasons back, reports that her recognition factor is much higher for her participation in "We Interrupt . . ." "I get enormous feedback," Howar said, "and I mean from waitresses and cab drivers in places like Pittsburgh. So I don't buy this 'elitist' bit."

If "We Interrupt This Week" is not a sure thing to return to PBS in the fall, Sherrin is. His series, "Song by Song by . . ." a tribute to famous American lyricists a la the "Side by Side by Sondheim" show, is to begin airing in the fall, a coproduction of WNET/13 and Trident Anglia in England. But he will not allow "We Interrupt . . ." to perish without a fight. "I don't see how any reasonably informed person can do without it," Sherrin said.

Those who would miss it most may be the celebrity panelists, affluent types who work for scale "for the fun of it" and then find themselves spending hours reading newspapers. "I've abandoned a very lucrative career to work for \$186 a show," Peter Stone said after a recent Friday afternoon taping. "I spend all my time reading newspapers. Give a guy who's written for actors all his life a chance to talk for himself and there's no stopping him."

Stone compared the show's worth with one of his most successful projects, the musical "1776." "It's entertainment," he said, "but people come away with a certain amount of information about the week's news. And it's done with humor. Humor is always socially redeeming." /