

# The TV Networks Do Combat And the Truisms Come Tumbling Down



By JEFF GREENFIELD

**S**hortly before the start of network television's "second season" earlier this month, NBC programming vice president Irwin Siegelstein paused over lunch 65 floors above Rockefeller Center and commented on the current television year.

"I suspect," he said, "this has been the damnedest, strangest year for programming we've ever seen."

Coming from an executive in an industry that has been known to

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ballyhoo a costume change as a "significant breakthrough," such an assessment might be taken with a grain of salt. But the fact is that many of the long-held certainties of this multi-billion dollar business are gone:

- The 20-year reign of CBS as the network-ratings leader is over. This season, CBS is running dead last, and ABC has left behind its perennial third-place image to become the most-watched network, with more successful series in the past two years than CBS and NBC combined;

- The effort to combat the ascendancy of ABC has pushed CBS, in particular, to shift its schedule with unprecedented fre-



With Fred Silverman in the saddle, ABC is digging its heels to retain its first-place standing.

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atings battle has CBS feverishly schedule, while NBC tries longer dramas.

# Truisms Come Tumbling Down As the Networks Do Combat

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quency. In the past 12 months, the network, whose schedule was traditionally the first to be announced and the most stable, has juggled the slots times and/or days of the week of every one of its key shows, including "All in the Family," M\*A\*S\*H," "Rhoda," "Phyllis," "Good Times," "The Jeffersons," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "The Bob Newhart Show," and "Kojak."

● NBC, which pioneered the long-form (90 minutes or more) dramatic program a decade ago, has followed ABC's success last season with "Rich Man, Poor Man" by making the "mini-series," under the umbrella title of "Best Sellers," a permanent part of its schedule, thus violating one of network television's long-standing taboos against the closed-end dramatic format. And its scheduling of highly promotable offerings ("Gone With the Wind," "The First Fifty Years," the World Series) in the heavily watched Sunday night-time period with the catch-all title of "Big Event" has given that network second place despite the almost total failure of its new weekly series.

Most important to the viewer, the presence of ABC as the dominant net-

work, coupled with the economic compulsions of CBS and NBC to lure audiences away from ABC's front-runner series may well result during the coming spring—and perhaps next fall—in more varied programming fare. Out of the most self-interested of motives—to draw the biggest audiences possible, so that advertising rates can be raised as high as traffic will bear—all three of the networks are showing some signs of breaking the old-wine-in-old-bottles habits that have formed such a high percentage of regular television programming.

The story begins—as it almost always does where commercial television is concerned—with the three-way competitive battle for audiences. When ABC's fall 1974 schedule fell into the cellar, Frederick Pierce was installed as president of ABC-TV; it was he who hired Fred Silverman, television's number-one programmer, away from CBS. What Pierce began, and what Silverman accelerated, was an aggressive attempt to develop hit shows that culminated this past fall season in ABC's ranking first in the ratings race; at last count, ABC had six of the top 10 shows, including the three leaders: "Happy Days," "Laverne and Shirley" and "Charlie's Angels." The network scored especially well with an 8 o'clock

lineup of light, fast-paced shows strongly geared to younger viewers: "Donny and Marie," "The Bionic Woman," "The Six Million Dollar Man," "Happy Days" and "Welcome Back, Kotter" ("By accident or design," says CBS executive Oscar Katz, "Freddie Silverman was the only one to capitalize on the Family Hour; everyone else was making shows about kids with dogs"). By year's end, ABC had moved more than a full Neilsen rating point ahead of the competition—an audience lead of more than 800,000 households.

● For NBC, failure came in the form of a disastrous 1975-76 season, which saw the cancellation of every new series, a last-place ratings finish and a programming-department housecleaning that elevated former researcher Paul Klein and brought about the hiring of Irwin Siegelstein away from CBS. Klein—who developed the "least objectionable form program" theory of TV watching, which holds that audiences don't watch particular programs, they watch television—saw in the "mini-series" and "event" programming a chance to attract audiences away from highly rated shows on opposing networks as well as a clear economic gain ("You get better demographics with



'novels-for-television' and 'docudramas' like stories based on the lives of Aimee Semple McPherson and Amelia Earhart, so advertisers will pay more. And with long-forms, you can get in a couple of extra commercials").

This year, when CBS found itself at the bottom of the heap, it also found itself with a decimated executive suite and with little in the area of new program development. Resignations and firings had erased the CBS corporate president, the president of the television division and the programming vice-president, as well as his two West Coast deputies. In addition, according to the network's current programming vice president, Bud Grant, former CBS executives (by whom he presumably means the same Fred Silverman now reigning at ABC) did not generate new programming ideas. "While we were very successful in picking clean 'All in the Family' and 'Mary Tyler Moore' — counting spin-offs, we got seven series out of those two shows—we've had very little success in coming up with new shows."

"Freddie was always a genius in straightening out a schedule in mid-season," says another CBS source, "but program development was always weak."

It is the reaction to these failures to develop weekly series that represents some good news for viewers in the coming months. Even though the demand for commercial time by advertisers far exceeds the supply, thus guaranteeing big profits to the networks, no network rests content with poor ratings. ("In the real world," says an NBC vice president, "there are three big companies and they all want to make more money than they did last year.") And if a network does not have strong series to throw against the leader, it tries to siphon off audiences by breaking their usual viewing habits with specials or with "event" programming.

Thus, CBS will be offering an unprecedented number of specials in the coming months, including dramas about black minstrels in the late 19th century and about emotionally disturbed children. It has already put a public affairs show into prime-time by scheduling "60 Minutes" on Sundays at 7 P.M. opposite two children's shows, with the result that "60 Minutes" is often among the 10 highest-rated shows. And, since it has nothing to lose anyway, the network has also put a new CBS News show, "Who's Who," opposite the ABC "Happy Days/Laverne and Shirley" hour on Tuesday nights.

All three networks are aggressively developing two other forms, both relatively new and both first offered by ABC. The "mini-series," pioneered last year by ABC's presentation of "Rich Man, Poor Man" over seven different nights, is now being mirrored by NBC with its "Best Seller" on Thursday nights. ABC is currently filming a 10-hour adaptation of John Ehrlichman's novel, "The Company." And on Jan. 30, it will pre-empt regular programming on eight consecutive nights to present "Roots," a dramatization of Alex Haley's search for his African forebears. Meanwhile, CBS is planning what Grant calls "short bursts"—dramatic shows four to six hours in length, spread over two or three nights—based on John Dean's "Blind Ambition" and Harold Robbins's "The Pirate."

historical novels ablaze with lust, wealth, power and combat; the "docudramas" have sometimes collided with the facts of real life—but they nonetheless represent a welcome change from the heavy reliance on the sit-coms and action-adventure series. Almost 20 years ago, the networks began to move away from the anthology programs of television's so-called Golden Age ("Playhouse 90," "Studio One," "U.S. Steel Hour") because they found it easier to attract faithful audiences to shows with a regular pattern of characters, situations, even catchphrases. An

sible that next fall our schedule will include another 'Rich Man, Poor Man' chapter, another book adaptation and a few limited series. But I don't want to create the impression that next season will be a pastiche. Bill Paley's old maxim is still true: the network with the most shows in the top 10 is the most successful network."

In that regard, ABC still appears to hold the upper hand, in part because Silverman is simply more aggressive than any of his counterparts. Last year he signed Nancy Walker for her own sit-com on ABC, taking the comedienne



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audience that cares about characters, the maxim within the industry runs, will return to them week after week and will forgive weaknesses in plot, script or production.

The problem, as Stan Kallis, the producer of NBC's "Police Story," has pointed out, is that such series are "sterile, lifeless forms" because characters can't grow or change. Kojak can't turn corrupt, Starsky and Hutch can't be killed—despite the fact that they face more danger each week than the average police officer does in a career—and Laverne can't leave Shirley.

What the "mini-series" offers is a way to combine the network's demand for continued viewer involvement with a wider range of dramatic possibilities. In "Rich Man, Poor Man," one of the two title characters died; in the novels dramatized by NBC so far, protagonists are permitted to grow old, to change careers, to behave with a mix of good and evil. And one-shot long-form specials—once considered a dangerous temptation to let an audience sample the wares of a rival network—have shown that high ratings can be won by shows moving out of the sit-com-cop-doctor mold ("Jane Pittman," "Eleanor and Franklin" and "The Secret Life of

out of a key role in a CBS show ("Rhoda") and out of a supporting role in an NBC show ("MacMillan"). This year he has signed Redd Foxx, thus removing the lead actor from NBC's single most successful comedy series, "Sanford and Son." (NBC will try to salvage the show by teaming the "Son" with a new partner, but the Sanford character will be gone; Foxx will wind up with his own hour-long variety show in late prime time.) ABC has also taken Harvey Korman away from the Carole Burnett show; a half-hour situation comedy is being developed for him.

As for CBS, its troubles are far from over. This is the last season for the "Mary Tyler Moore Show"; Bob Newhart wants to leave his show; Richard Thomas is quitting "The Waltons" after this season; and Rhoda has still not recovered from her marriage to Joe (in an effort to resuscitate her character, the show will split Rhoda and Joe permanently). And NBC still has to resolve the differences in emphasis between the series-oriented Siegelstein and the event-oriented Klein.

If this has been a strange year for network television, one development may rank as the strangest of all. After years of claiming that repetitive

and Harold Robbins's "The Pirate." And all three networks are developing "docu-dramas," more or less fictionalized versions of real-life events similar to ABC's "Pueblo" and "Missiles of October."

These departures from the norm may amount to something less than Nirvana for home viewers—the "mini-series" tend toward adaptations of sweeping

and Franklin" and "The Secret Life of John Chapman"—dealing with a college president's excursion into blue-collar life—all were highly rated shows).

Although all of the networks will be running more specials and "mini-series" this spring, and perhaps next fall, ABC's Silverman cautions against interpreting this development as a trend that will supplant the series: "It's pos-

After years of claiming that repetitive predictability is a result of viewer preference, the networks have been forced by new competitive pressures into a startling discovery: there is a large and receptive audience for forms, characters and subjects cast from a different mold. If it isn't a programming revolution, at least there's a dent in the cookie-cutter. ■