# THE SILVERMAN STR

How Fred Silverman is helping ABC get over its inferiority complex. 'Freddie's not out to put "better" television on the air. Freddie's out to win.'

**By Jeff Greenfield**

The corner office on the 38th floor of the American Broadcasting Company's corporate home on the Avenue of the Americas looks directly out across 53d Street at the far more imposing glass-and-granite building of the Columbia Broadcasting System. Only a few hundred feet separate the two buildings but, by other measures, the distance between the two companies is enormous.

For 20 years, the CBS television network has been the godfather of American commercial broadcasting, drawing more viewers and making more money than NBC-TV or ABC-TV. For more years than that, ABC has been the industry's stepchild, a perennial last place entrant in the ratings race. Until three years ago, the network had gone more than a decade without making a profit; in 1974, the spread between CBS's pretax profits and those of ABC was more than $60 million. And in the fall of 1974, ABC's prime-time schedule had been the laughingstock of the industry. As an expression among insiders had it, "in broadcasting, CBS is Bloomingdale's, NBC is Gimbel's, and ABC is Korvette's."

Now, however, ABC is making its most ambitious bid for network parity. Since the start of the mid-January "second season," it has won the race for the highest ratings every week. Its new shows are almost all hits, three of them appearing among the top 10 shows, one of them—"Laverne and Shirley"—twice winning the highest ratings of any series. And, barring a sharp change in viewing habits, ABC will beat out NBC for second place in the viewing averages for the whole season.

A keystone in this effort is the man who occupies this corner office, a programming executive whose commercial instinct and competitive drive are something of a legend. After 13 years spent helping to keep CBS the most-watched of the three networks, 38-year-old Fred Silverman was lured across the street—with a salary of

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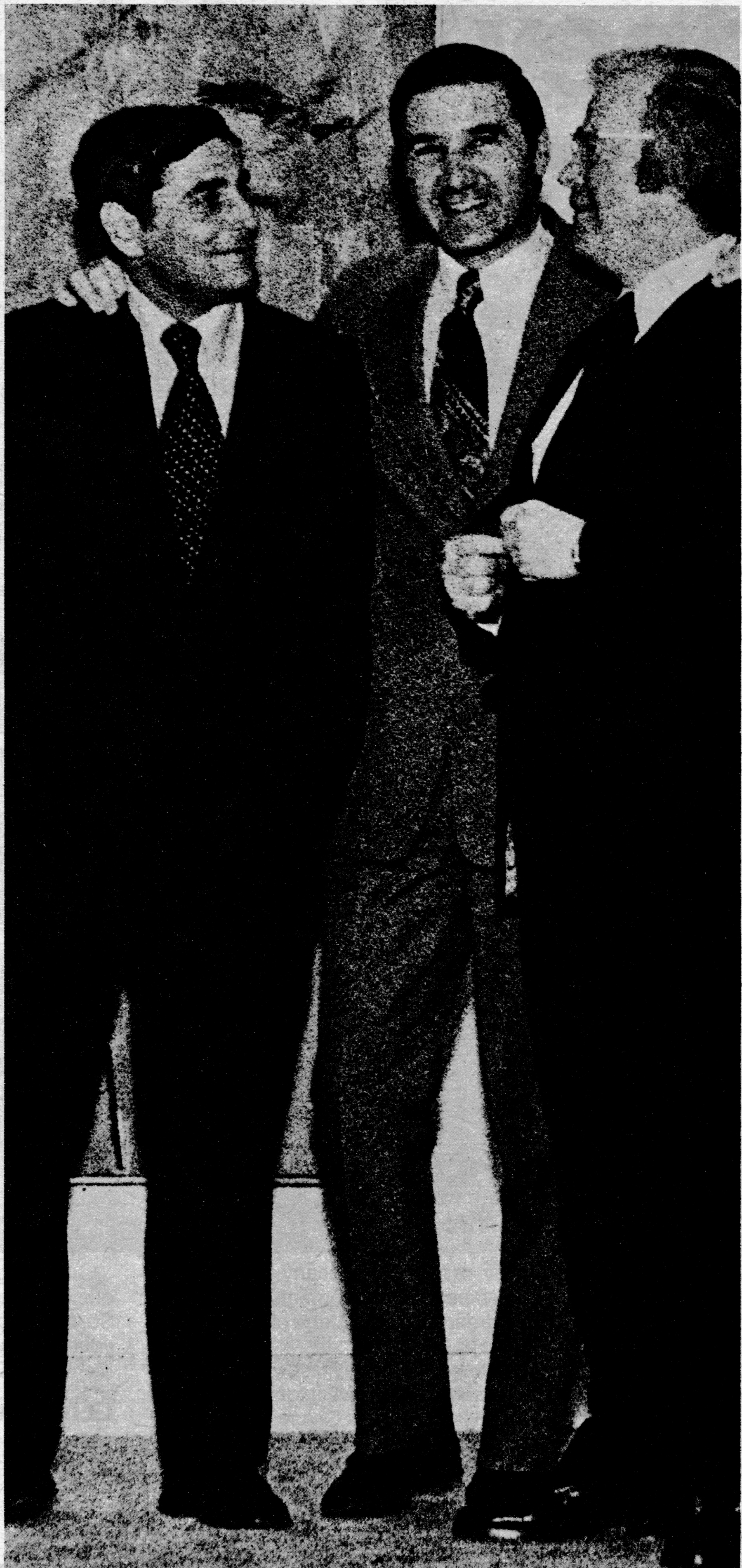
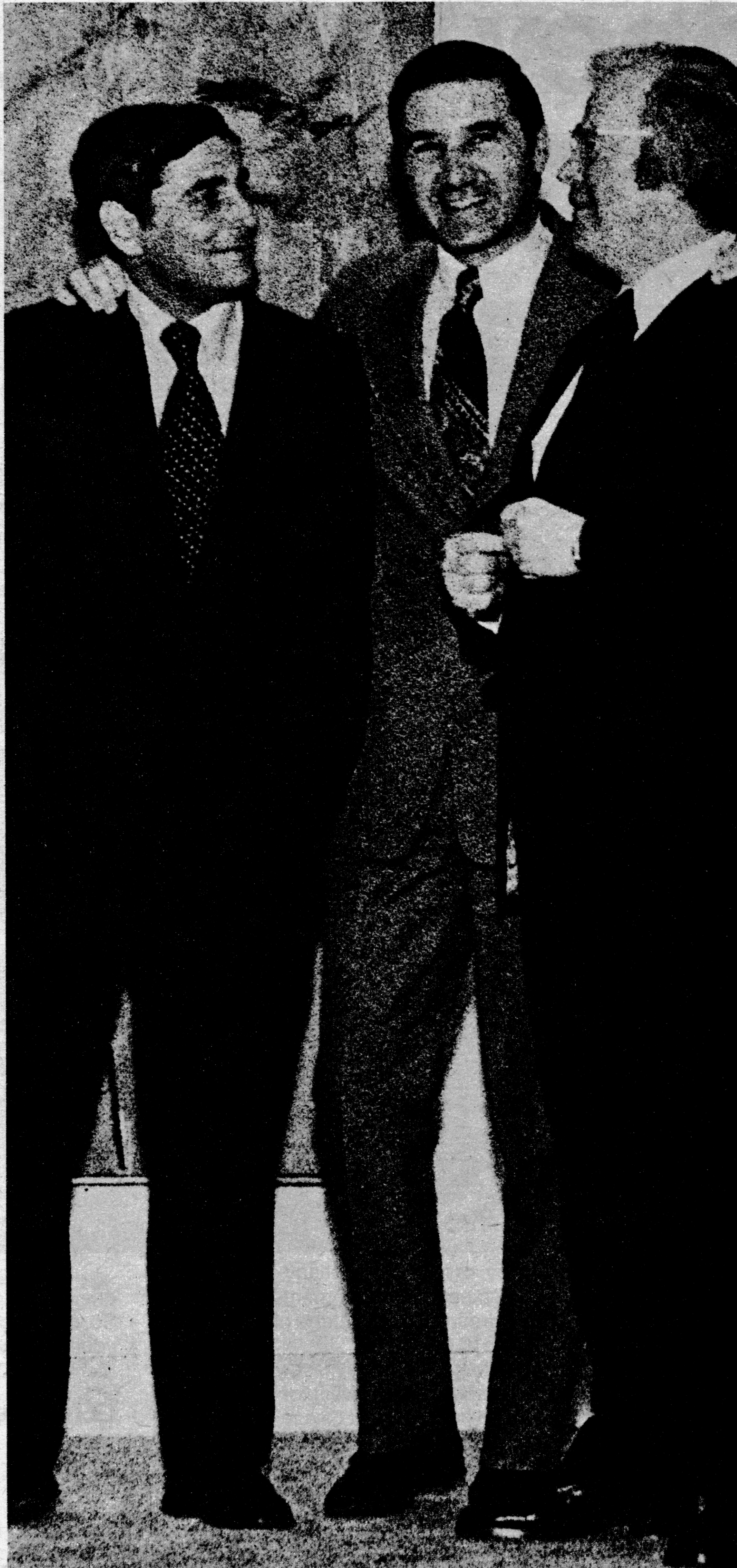


Neil Selkirk

*TV team: Fred Silverman, new president of ABC Entertainment, left, confers with fellow presidents Fred Pierce (ABC-TV) and Roone Arledge (ABC Sports).*

# LVERMAN STRATEGY




*TV team: Fred Silverman, new president of ABC Entertainment, left, confers with fellow presidents Fred Pierce (ABC-TV) and Roone Arledge (ABC Sports).*

$250,000 a year, stock options, a paid-up $750,000 life-insurance policy, and corporate "perks" on both coasts—to become president of ABC Entertainment and help build ABC into a fully competitive network.

At stake are millions of dollars in advertising revenues, hundreds of millions of dollars in rising—or falling—stock prices, the reputations and careers of powerful corporate executives. And something else is at stake, too. The three networks are all run by privately owned corporations which derive their revenue from supplying programs to publicly licensed television stations, stations occupying airwaves that are, in theory, publicly owned and operated in the public interest. By examining the tactics and assumptions of so highly regarded a programming talent as Fred Silverman, by watching how ABC is so rapidly moving into network parity, we may learn something about what the incomparably powerful public resource of broadcasting has become—and why.

Fred Silverman is the living repudiation of the stereotyped television executive. Instead of the soft-spoken, sleekly groomed, evasively polite man in the gray flannel suit, Silverman is a blunt, combative, overweight pulling guard. His hair is indifferent to style; his shirt, suit and tie are rumpled and out of fashion. When he is crossed—by the sloth of a subordinate or a challenge to his judgment—his temper can be explosive. He is also candid about his failures ("'Me and the Chimp,'" he said, "represented a new depth in television programming"), and a man whose willingness to make quick decisions has won him the respect of television's creative community.

Mike Dann, who first hired Silverman for CBS and whose job as the network's programming chief Silverman inherited, calls him "the least political executive in the history of broadcasting, and the best all-around program bureaucrat I have ever seen. There were *three* CBS network presidents who wanted to fire Freddie. But he is absolutely brilliant in putting together a winning schedule."

Unlike other programming executives, who came to television from theatrical talent agencies, or from the networks' sales or research departments, Silverman is a "pure programmer": He has done nothing else in his adult professional life. His master's thesis at Ohio State was a study of ABC-TV's programming through the 1950's; his first job was at an independent Chicago station, WGN-TV, in 1960. Two years later, with his sole network experience a summer in ABC's mailroom, the 25-year-old Silverman was hired as director of daytime programming at CBS by Mike Dann, who had been impressed by the insights into **(*Continued on Page 26*)**

# Silverman

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network television expressed by Silverman in his master's thesis.

"Fred was always very commercial," recalls Mike Filerman, a Playboy-TV executive who worked with Silverman in Chicago and later in New York. "He was a perfectionist at picking promotions: what pictures we'd run in TV Guide, what the logo of the advertising should look like. He would box out every hour of every day: how our shows would flow, what the competition was doing."

Ethel Winant, who was a CBS talent executive throughout Silverman's tenure with the network, remembers that, even when he was running CBS's Saturday morning children's programming, "he had plans, charts, cards. He'd broken everything down. He was totally compulsive. He'd go over a script or story line again and again and again. Someone would say, 'We just did that, Fred,' and he'd say, 'Let's do it again.' It was like psychoanalysis. Repeat and repeat until you see something you didn't see before."

After seven-and-a-half years supervising the daytime gold mine of soap operas, game shows and Saturday morning cartoon shows filled with rock music, monsters, and animated violence, Silverman inherited the top programming job in 1970, after Dann quit. In that time, CBS scrapped its rural shows ("Hee Haw," "Beverly Hillbillies") for the more sophisticated, urban comedies of the Norman Lear and Mary Tyler Moore studios. Although some industry sources downgrade Silverman's success because, "with the Lear and MTM spin-offs any network would be first," virtually every television producer I talked with regards Silverman as a uniquely skilled commercial programmer.

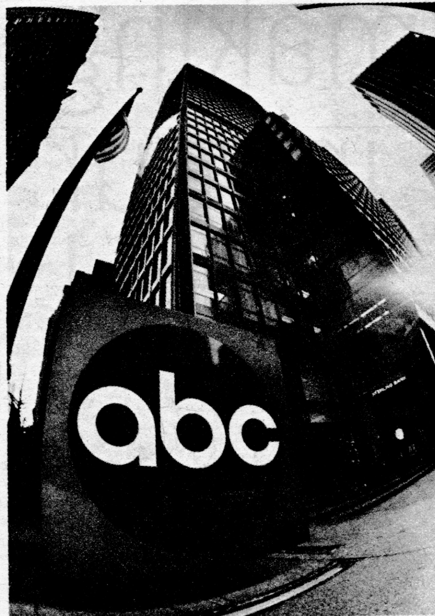
Part of his reputation rests on sheer hard work. "He reads everything," says Universal-TV vice president Tom Tannenbaum. "Every script, every story line. He is on top of every phase of the show, from casting to the story to the promotion and advertising." And several producers tell of receiving telephone calls in Los Angeles from Silverman, who is based in New York, at 1 A.M. or later East Coast time, offering script or casting suggestions.

Producer Gary Marshall ("Happy Days," "Laverne and Shirley") observes that Silverman "doesn't spend time with small talk at meetings. The other guys will ask where you got your jacket or whether you played golf. With Freddie, it's 'What have you got?' "

He is also willing to commit his network to decisions, without the dissembling appeals to research and committees. When Bud Austin, head of Paramount-TV, tried to pitch ex-"Mannix" star Mike Connors, the network's wouldn't accept his terms. Silverman called Austin into his office at ABC and said, "Bud, before you leave this room, we'll have a deal with Mike." They did. "When Fred wants something," Austin says, "he'll get it."

He also lets producers know exactly where they stand with prospective pilots, either assuring them "this is gonna make it to the air," or telling Norman Lear that he wasn't taking "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" because "I hate it."

It is not, however, Silverman's decisiveness that makes him so highly valued (and highly priced) a programmer. It is, rather, his commercial, competitive instinct about what performers and schedules will work. He himself says, "It's a screwy world—there *is* no science to what we do." To build a successful TV show, "you either start with a unique idea, or a personality, and you take it from there." It is Silverman's gift that




he can size up what kind of personality will appeal to the mass audience better than any other programmer—and he can put that show in the right time period to win the biggest possible audience. "He doesn't believe in premises as much as *people*," Gary Marshall says. "He'll suggest *this* actor, *that* actress."

Thus, Silverman suggested to producer Quinn Martin that the portly William Conrad, seldom thought of as a leading man, could work as a hero-detective in "Cannon"; that Buddy Ebsen would make a countrified Columbo in "Barnaby Jones." He called Norman Lear after one Bea Arthur appearance on "All in the Family" to suggest that Maude would make a good character on her own. Sonny and Cher and Tony Orlando and Dawn were signed by CBS after Silverman had seen their acts once. In his first days as CBS programming head, in the summer of 1970, he saw a rough cut of the first Mary Tyler Moore show *(Continued on Page 30)*

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and moved it—at an unusually late date—to Saturday night, where it has anchored the successful CBS comedy bloc for six years.

Further, a typical Silverman success will feature very strong personal and family bonds, at home or at work. Ethel Winant suggests that "Freddie is very much a believer in home, family values, the middle-American silent majority in a society that puts it down. He has a conservative, old-fashioned morality." He is prouder of "The Waltons" than of any other show he helped develop and, coincidentally or not, many shows developed during Silverman's tenure at CBS feature the extended family that is rapidly vanishing in real life. Mike and Gloria ("All in the Family") finally leave the Bunker home—and move next door. Bob Newhart's sister comes to Chicago—and falls in love with Newhart's next-door neighbor. Rhoda Morgenstern moves back to New York—into the same apartment building her sister lives in. Doc rents out the apartment in his brownstone—to his daughter and son-in-law.

Silverman's insights into what will work on television do not exist abstractly. Even as a graduate student at Ohio State, his judgments and values were linked to the maximization of profit. He wrote scornfully of those who demanded higher quality shows:

"Television critics and pasteboard programmers have all the answers (on paper) though they fail to realize that network television is basically a business with profit and loss columns, stockholders' meetings and annual reports." ABC's biggest successes in the 1950's, Silverman noted, came with shows that had "a leading man with whom the audience can easily identify. They are all distinct personalities—flesh-and-blood characters who possess an intangible quality which makes them real and believable. . . ."

It is his capacity to turn this general insight into specific judgments—about personalities and programs—that has made Silverman a winner in the commercial television universe. A producer who has worked closely with him says, "Freddie's not out to put 'better' television on the air. Freddie's out to *win*." "It's like a *war* with him," Gary Marshall says. "And he says, '*This* is how we'll win the war.'"

If any institution needed an executive with a reputation for winning, it was the American Broadcasting Company. It has been the industry's kid brother, last among unequals, throughout its 25-year history. It was born when the Federal Communications Commission ordered the National Broadcasting Company to divest itself of one of its two radio networks in 1941. After years of court challenges, NBC finally sold off its weaker "Blue" network to Edward Noble, the "Life Saver king," keeping the far stronger "Red" network for itself.

The inherent imbalance worsened when commercial television began after World War II. A combination of money, reputation, and prior ownership of desirable big-city channels made NBC and CBS far more powerful than ABC, both in talent and in network size. To this day, ABC has 35 to 40 fewer stations in its lineup than either of the other networks. And even though ABC got an infusion of capital in 1953 when United Paramount Theatres bought the network, the gap has never been narrowed. For more than 20 years, Leonard Goldenson, who engineered the merger and who has served as chief executive of ABC ever since, has witnessed an endless struggle to achieve equality that has never fully succeeded.

There have been successes: ABC was the first to lure the Hollywood studios into television production, first with "Disneyland" in 1954, then with Warner Brothers' products such as "Cheyenne," "Sugarfoot," "Maverick," "Colt .45" and "77 Sunset Strip." In 1960, in 1965, and again in the early 1970's, the prime-time program lineup, with a heavy dose of violence-tinged, action-oriented shows, gave NBC and CBS ratings problems.

But there was, in one current executive's words, "no consistency of performance." Constant management shakeups gave the network a permanent air of instability. Leonard Goldberg, a former programming executive who now co-produces three ABC shows, remembers that "when I took over as head of programming in 1966, I told another executive that we needed a three-year timetable. The guy told me, 'You don't understand—if we don't get better ratings by next Tuesday, we ain't gonna *be* here.'"

Still by the fall of 1974,

ABC was in respectable shape. Under its president, Elton Rule—brought in after the collapse of a widely criticized merger attempt with I.T.T. in the late 1960's—the company was making a $50-million profit on revenues of just under $1 billion. The television network, the dominant source of company revenues, had strengthened its news division with the signing of Harry Reasoner; its sports programming, including the Olympics and "Monday Night Football," was more than competitive with that of the other networks, and its "Close-Up" documentaries had won its public affairs division critical acclaim. But the heart of a commercial network is its prime-time schedule. And in the fall of 1974, ABC-TV experienced what Elton Rule calls "The Debacle."

In a sharp departure from ABC's traditional emphasis on urban, fast-paced action-dramas aimed at the 18-to-49-year-old audience, the network scheduled a string of shows with settings in the old Northwest, Alaska, Kansas, with names that suggested a berserk typewriter: "Kodiak," "Kung Fu," "Nakia," "Kolchak." One Hollywood executive explained that "Marty Starger [then programming chief] had reached the point in his career where he wanted to do prestige things, good things that had no chance for the ratings." And Michael Eisner, the network's 33-year-old vice president for program development, acknowledged mistakes in piecing the schedule together. "There was no way," he said, "that any sane person could have watched our Friday night schedule."

The disastrous performance in the fall of 1974—when ABC was averaging two million fewer viewers than second-place NBC—began the network's most serious effort to cure its inferiority complex once and for all. In November 1974, 42-year-old Fred Pierce was named president of ABC Television. A 20-year veteran of the company, Pierce had always been placed in a subordinate role. As one executive said, "It took an enormous failure for ABC to wake up and see who its strong horses were. They were forced to go with Pierce—the one man who knew the most about broadcasting—and put him in a position of responsibility."

Under Pierce, January 1975 saw a return to the urban, action-oriented ABC style with "S.W.A.T.," about a special Los Angeles police team whose uniforms, automatic weapons and style reminded some viewers of storm troopers, and with "Baretta," starring first-rate actor Robert Blake in the role of a streetwise cop. With "Barney Miller," a funny smart comedy about a New York police precinct, the network also had its most appealing comedy.

In addition, Pierce developed a shrewd—and sound—theory for the fall of 1975. Reasoning that the new family hour would make the 8 to 9 P.M. time period one of mass confusion, Pierce decided to make his strongest schedule at 9 P.M., with familiar returning shows to attract the disoriented adult audience. This gave the network an aura of stability and made its fall schedule work to the limits of the available shows. In addition, Pierce, Mike Eisner and Marty Starger developed new shows with unexpected appeal—"Welcome Back, Kotter," "On the Rocks"—and turned one marginal show, "Six Million Dollar Man," into a smash hit by moving it to 8 P.M. Sunday.

Finally, Pierce reached out to Fred Silverman, whom he had first met when Fred was a graduate student studying ABC. The network wanted to give the industry—and Wall

*"Family": Sada Thompson, as the mother, serves her brood—James Broderick, Elayne Heilveil, Gary Frank and Kristy McNichol. The ABC series, produced by Mike Nichols, starts Tuesday.*

Street—the strongest possible signal that it was moving toward an all-out challenge to its rivals. And Silverman, tempted by the chance to help build a network into supremacy instead of keeping it there, and feeling, according to colleagues, that his work at CBS had been somewhat taken for granted, crossed 53d Street and joined the kid brother.

While Silverman had nothing to do with devising last fall's ABC schedule, he did supervise the execution of the new shows. In so doing, he brought one of his principal theories to bear on the new efforts. Because his emphasis is on people, rather than premises, Silverman emphasizes their likability. Norman Lear remembers that, at CBS, "Freddie worried that we had George Jefferson a little too abrasive in 'The Jeffersons.' When we made 'One Day at a Time,' he said, 'Don't make the young woman so abrasive.' He'd like everybody to be lovable."

One of ABC's new shows, "On the Rocks," was set in a prison, a hard place to find lovable people. John Rich, a one-time Lear colleague who adapted the series for American TV from a British original, declares that "the show was originally harder. ABC changed it to a minimum security prison from medium. Silverman said, 'Stay away from the hard stuff. Don't scare people away.' It hurt us to water it down a bit, but in the long run it helped. Freddie understood that you had to like the characters first—then you could get rougher."

For the midseason schedule this past January—the one which has pushed ABC into first place in the current ratings—Silverman gave ABC a solid string of early-evening, youth-oriented shows by using another of his favorite techniques: making characters attractive to a national audience by showcasing them on already popular shows.

Thus, Silverman noticed the characters of Laverne DeFazio and Shirley Feeney, two working-class girls in the 1950's, on a "Happy Days" episode, and immediately spotted the twosome as a possible series. He also scheduled "Laverne and Shirley" directly after "Happy Days" and kept the highly popular Fonzi from "Happy Days" around for the new show's first two episodes. "The Bionic Woman" is simply a character introduced and killed off in one episode of "Six Million Dollar Man," then "brought back to life" on her own show, surrounded by characters from the parent show. "Bert d'Angelo: Superstar," features Paul Sorvino as a New York cop who has moved to San Francisco; he will also turn up on a segment of "Streets of San Francisco." In the world of Fred Silverman, familiarity breeds acceptability.

Silverman does not accept the argument that this kind of schedule is repetitively old hat. He sees the new ABC schedule as "diverse. There isn't one new show that's like any of the other new shows." He concedes that "The Bionic Woman" is "derivative" but counters this admission by calling attention to the Donny and Marie Osmond show. "It takes a certain degree of boldness to put them on the air," he asserts, "a couple of kids, 18 and 16, who've never done a show of their own." And of "Almost Anything Goes," which features dozens of contestants climbing greased poles and falling into vats of viscous liquids, he insists, "A show like that has as much validity as '60 Minutes.'"

It is not that Fred Silverman doesn't like different kinds of shows altogether; his last CBS schedule did include the high-risk "Beacon Hill." Further, ABC this season has had both critical attention and commercial success with "Eleanor and Franklin," the impressive Winter Olympics coverage, and "Rich Man, Poor Man," which, while more soap opera than profound drama, is at least attempting to tell a story wider in scope than a car chase. Starting Tuesday, the network will present the first of six episodes in a new dramatic series, "Family," with an unusually prestigious roster of talent—Sada Thompson as star, Jay Presson Allen as writer, Mike Nichols as producer, Mark Rydell as director and Laszlo Kovacs as cinematographer.

The point is that Silverman is acting both out of conviction and personal preference

when he helps turn the vast majority of prime-time programming over to weary and conventional forms. "In the TV universe in which I work," he says, "the chances of coming up with new forms are remote . . . If there are two ways to go, and they're equally valid, it's insane not to do something that would involve less risk."

Thus, when he was asked why the appealing male-buddies chemistry of "Starsky and Hutch" wouldn't be successful outside the form of guns-and-screeching-tires police melodrama, he laughed. "What should they be?" he asked. "Architects? Then what happens to them? If you try to develop 22 story lines a season, you find yourself reaching, after the first four or five."

Beyond this reasoning, however, is the apparent fact that Silverman, in contrast to many other network programmers, simply likes what he sees. Mike Dann, his predecessor at CBS, says, "Freddie has a total passion for everything that's on the air." Ethel Winant recalls, "Once when he was on vacation in Europe, I talked him into coming to Ireland. The best time he had was in Dublin after dinner; he would sit in the hotel and watch two-and-a-half hours of American re-runs. If they put *life* on television, Freddie would enjoy it more."

However, Silverman says that, after spending 13 hours a day in the business, "there are better things to do than look at television"—by which he specifically means spending time with his wife (and former secretary), Kathy, and their 3-year-old daughter, Melissa. For all his professional dynamism, Silverman is something of an introvert. "There are very few people with whom I have a personal relationship," he says. "There are some very private people, and I'm one of them." Silverman lives with his family in a luxury apartment on Central Park West; with the midseason schedule in place, he intends to step back from his demanding pace, slow down and lose weight. "I have a very strong imperative," he says. "My doctor says if I don't, I'm gonna die."

Meanwhile, Silverman benefits from an ironic circumstance. The schedule he left behind at CBS proved to be extremely weak, with a Friday night lineup that has already been completely scrapped, and a conspicuous lack of success among the new shows (which might possibly be traced not to Silverman's selections but to his absence during their development). At ABC, the team of Pierce, Eisner and the now-departed Starger built a strong fall schedule which gave Silverman breathing space to develop the new January shows and spin-offs that will give the network its best seasonal ratings in at least a decade. With Jackie Gleason, Nancy Walker, Carl Reiner, Mike Connors and other talent waiting in the wings for next fall, ABC will have its best chance in history to finish first over the course of a season. (NBC, which entered this season with high hopes of finishing first, had a full-scale programming disaster and is now all but resigned to finishing last).

Oddly, the potential success of ABC may only insure that the overwhelming majority of network television will grow increasingly cautious. Lee Rich notes that one reason "The Waltons" was put on CBS's schedule was that the network was so clearly in the ratings lead that it had nothing to lose by trying this relatively innovative show. "Today, with the competition tightening, nobody can afford to take a new form."

While Mike Dann, now a consultant with Children's Television Workshop, asks wistfully, "Shouldn't there be *some* programming for the minority audience on a regular basis some of the time?," the three commercial networks continue to battle for the greatest number of viewers all of the time, for numbers mean revenues, dividends, and profits. "That's the nature of the business," Silverman says. "If you don't like the system, you can get out of the business." ■