

# The Magic Mornings Of Captain Kangaroo

NAT HENTOFF

THE LAND of children's television is largely inhabited by cartoon characters engaging in various degrees of violence. The cartoons are old—sometimes old enough to be subjects for monographs by film historians—but neither age nor their constant reappearances have dulled their mechanical ferocity. There are also “performers” who appear between the cartoons and sometimes talk at children on “live” shows. These are the pitchmen who push the children to push their parents to buy. Some of them make it alarmingly clear that failure to own the magic ring or emblem that comes as a reward for buying turns the child into a traitor not only to Mighty Rodent but to his whole class, since he won't “belong” with those who do have the rings.

A unique refuge in this hard, dry land is “Captain Kangaroo” on CBS. When “Captain Kangaroo” won a Peabody Award this spring as the Outstanding Television Youth and Children's Program, the citation indicted other children's television: “‘Captain Kangaroo’ is almost the only genuine children's program left on network television—certainly the only one which puts the welfare of the children ahead of that of the sponsor; which instructs children in safety, in ethics, in health, without interrupting the serious business of entertaining them at the same time.”

## The Magic Word

During this summer, “Captain Kangaroo” has appeared on Saturdays only but on September 29 it returns to its regular schedule of 8 to 8:45 A.M. from Monday through Friday and 9:30 to 10:30 A.M. on Saturdays. Beginning three years ago with forty-five stations, the program is now carried by 116 of CBS's two hundred affiliates. It is seen throughout the country, with the West Coast releasing tapes of it a week after the

original telecast. Its audience is estimated at five to six million in September and rises to eight or nine million in April, the apex of the TV season. The series is aimed at children of six to eight, but surveys indicate that the age range attracted is three to nine. A third of the audience consists of adults, mostly mothers.

The program has already affected the mores of many households. Large numbers of American children are



beginning to respond “please” or “thank you” when a parent, emulating the Captain, asks them what “the magic word” is when they want or get something. There is also evidence that when the Captain ends each program by reminding his smaller viewers that “this is another be-good-to-mother day,” some do remember. One literal-minded boy of four bedeviled his mother mercilessly one day after watching the program and when asked why he had been so bad answered: “The Captain didn't say be good to mother today.” “Please,” the mother wrote in, “don't forget again.”

Apart from improving the manners of its viewers, the program stimulates the child's imagination in

many ways, helping prepare him for school or complementing the adjustment of those already in school. The “teaching” on the program is done as entertainment, and the child learns by becoming voluntarily and often intensely involved in what the Captain and his friends are doing. There are, for example, the animals. Some 160 different kinds of animals have already been shown on the program. They are the province of Mr. Green Jeans (Lumpy Brannum, a musician with Fred Waring for many years). Mr. Green Jeans handles the animals, tells where they come from and what they eat, and otherwise introduces the children to one branch of natural history. Neither the Captain nor Mr. Green Jeans, by the way, uses cards or TelePrompTers on the show. All dialogue is ad-libbed from a preliminary outline.

Another valuable associate is Gus Allegetti, who inhabits—by fingers and voice—all the regular puppet characters on the program and others who appear in musical productions and stories. Among the puppets are the comic Mr. Moose, the poetry-making Grandfather Clock, and the bespectacled Bunny Rabbit, a wildly inventive creature who is occasionally irreverent but never malicious, and who becomes in time uncannily believable even though he never has any dialogue.

EVERY MORNING there's playtime, during which the Captain shows viewers how to make simple but absorbing things like hats and masks and seemingly endless projects from construction paper. His program does include cartoons, among them “Tom Terrific,” made especially for the series by Terrytoons. There is a strong element of parody in Tom's adventures that has led many adults to follow his career, but the child enjoys Tom and his friends and enemies whether he catches the satire or not. Tom is a small boy of astonishing magic powers, vast ingenuousness, and an ego that often gets him into trouble. His companion, Mighty Manfred the Wonder Dog, makes Bert Lahr's Cowardly Lion look and act like a beast of unusual courage. As swift as the action becomes—usually involving Tom's many metamorphoses into animals or forms of transportation—

this cartoon series never descends to the "Tom and Jerry" or "Mighty Mouse" level, where the action consists mainly of aggravated assault and battery.

This fall there will be a series of Captain Kangaroo's experiences in England, which may be the first of similar journeys to other countries.



On occasion the program also has guests, and they are not selected solely on the basis of what children are usually expected to like: in addition to the Lone Ranger and Lassie there have been Admiral George Dufek, explaining through films Operation Deepfreeze in Antarctica, and swing harpist Bobby Maxwell, showing how a harp works and giving some of its history.

"The child," according to the Captain, "is interested in the world around him, and through TV we can show him so much of the world earlier than he used to be able to know it in school. We believe we can handle almost any subject or guest so long as we can make it interesting to the children."

The Captain's getup features a white mustache, a bushy wig, and a captain's cap. He is "Captain" of the treasure house, where everything happens, and "Kangaroo" derives from his big-pocketed coat. Off screen, he is Bob Keeshan, thirty-one, round, amiable, and with the same extraordinarily gentle voice and manner of the Captain. He has been an NBC page boy, a Marine, and, for five years, Clarabelle on "The Howdy Doody Show." He later originated and starred in two New York children's shows, and then became the Captain.

Keeshan, who has three children of his own, does not have a child psychologist or other professional experts on children on his staff. "I doubt if we could work with them,"

he says. "For one thing, there seems to be so much disagreement among the experts themselves, and for another, we prefer to rely on our own instincts. The others on the production staff also have children and we go by experience and what we feel will be right."

A New York psychiatrist, Dr. Saul Miller, whose children are regular watchers of "Captain Kangaroo," feels that Keeshan's instincts have been sound. "It's the only program I know that meets the needs of children, that is *for* children. Even when he advertises, he does it gently without trying to push things on the children. And I notice my own children remember well what they learn on the show. They feel he's interested in talking to them and being with them."

"If we can't maintain that warm relationship between Captain Kangaroo and the child," says Keeshan, "we can have the biggest budgets and the best-known 'name' guests and it won't mean a thing. We'll have no show."

No children are allowed as guests in the studio, nor are children seen on the program. "We had a little girl as a character on the show," Keeshan recalls, "but the children felt she was coming between them and the Captain. We don't have them in the audience because if they were there, we couldn't help playing to them, and there are millions of kids at home to whom we should be playing."

"Captain Kangaroo" consistently avoids violence. Of the emphasis on violence on many other children's shows, Keeshan says: "I don't believe in sheltering children; but while it is true that violence is a part of life, a young impressionable child watching

some of these programs may come to believe there's more violence around him than does actually exist. The rationale seems to be that the children won't imitate what they see in the cartoons because they realize the animals aren't real. That isn't so. It's difficult for a very young mind to distinguish between reality and cartoons.

"I do think, however," Keeshan continued, "that these cartoons can do harm only when the child is vulnerable to this kind of exposure. The cartoons don't initiate the problem. If the child is emotionally healthy, the cartoons won't do him any good but they won't do him any harm either. Conversely, we get letters about the 'wonders' we've done for some children. I don't think we can do 'wonders' for children unless they're ready to receive what we have to give. We can't substitute for parents. A child can only learn when he's ready to learn."

KEESHAN also believes that fantasy will not harm a healthy child; indeed, he thinks it is necessary. "The program is very down to earth," he adds, "but we still have a world of make-believe. Some parents have become so darn literal-minded on this subject from reading too many books on child psychology. They're afraid their children won't be maintaining contact with reality, but fantasy is also an important part of life. A good daydream once in a while can be a healthy thing for a child. On the program, we do fairy tales and make up some of our own. We have magic, and we take advantage of the electronic devices available to us. Characters sometimes fly around."

Keeshan reads a book or so a week on the program, and does not feel that TV has limited children's reading. "From what I can find out, the children's book business has never been healthier. In fact, TV, by broadening the child's interests, can stimulate him to read more. But there are children who do not like to read, and those among them who watch television would have been doing something else years ago."

His own children are not overly fond of television, although they do watch his program (the two younger children still believe that the Captain and their father are quite sep-



arate entities). Keeshan does not think a system of strict rules on when and for how long TV may be watched is of much help. "You can't take it away and not substitute something for it. The child prefers your affection and play anytime to TV, and if parents spent more time with children—I know it's often not easy—TV wouldn't be a problem."

"CAPTAIN KANGAROO" has had its problems—chiefly concerning a relative lack of sponsors—since its beginning. "CBS sustained us for three years," says Keeshan, "and it cost them about a million dollars a year. This year looks as if it will be the best yet. We're at least fifty per cent sold out on Saturdays and have sold four weekday hours. Children's shows, except for some local ones, suddenly became hard to sell a few years ago. We're in a business of trends."

A year or so ago a couple of newspaper columnists outside New York printed a rumor that the network was thinking seriously of dropping the unprofitable show. Oscar Katz, CBS vice-president in charge of daytime

programming, denies that this move was ever contemplated, but Keeshan says, "It was certainly under consideration." In any case, although the rumor broke in only a few cities, the network received more than ten thousand protests. Most were from mothers, but many were from doctors, clergymen, psychiatrists, and teachers whose young charges watched the show. The program was saved and the "be-good-to-mother" days continued.

Keeshan's activities now include making personal appearances, writing "Captain Kangaroo" books (several in the "Little Golden Books" series and a playtime book for Grosset & Dunlap), and recording for Columbia and Golden Records. For the latter label he has also recorded—as Bob Keeshan rather than Captain Kangaroo—"A Child's Introduction to Jazz."

Keeshan intends eventually to syndicate another children's show in local markets and then go into adult television as well. He will find that land nearly as undeveloped as was network children's television when "Captain Kangaroo" was born.

## Kurt Weill And His Public

ROGER MAREN

THE EARLY WORKS of Kurt Weill—particularly a violin concerto and a string quartet—had been performed frequently but had been applauded only in advanced musical circles. Out of contact with the masses, Weill began to feel that he was working in a dangerously rarefied atmosphere and decided to change the course of his career. It was a decision based (according to his public statements) on moral and social considerations: "If music cannot serve the interests of all," he wrote, "its existence is no longer justified."

He found a perfect collaborator in Bertolt Brecht, a Marxist and a firm believer in the political and social function of theater, and in

1928 the two produced *Die Dreigroschenoper*, a play with songs and musical interludes. According to Brecht, the idea of what we know as *The Threepenny Opera* was to show a parallelism between the ideals of the bourgeoisie and the ideals of thieves, whores, and other low characters. This was also the idea of John Gay, whose *Beggar's Opera* in 1728 provided both structure and tone for the two Germans to work on. Brecht's plan was to arrange things so that the sentiments and prejudices of his low and immoral characters would conform to the sentiments and prejudices of the average citizen and theatergoer. Thus, if the plan were successful, the audience would find itself en-

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