

TELEVISION

by Karl E. Meyer

AS EVERY discerning viewer would agree, a new television season fits Dr. Johnson's description of a second marriage—a triumph of hope over experience. Hope is fed by summertime promises that programming quality will be better, brighter, and more varied. Experience instructs that after the autumn honeymoon, the same old ennui will edge in as the networks revert to chasing the Nielsen woman and the dollars she brings.

Still, people continue to remarry despite Dr. Johnson, and most of us, including reviewers, hope against hope that *this* season will be different. In fact, the 1977-78 network schedule may be somewhat less offensive than its predecessors, for a reason that has escaped general attention. This fall, the U.S. Congress will weigh for the first time a thorough revision of the fundamental charter of broadcasting, the Communications Act of 1934.

For the past months, the industry magazine *Broadcasting* has devoted columns of space to hearings conducted by Congressman Lionel Van Deerlin, a Democrat from California. As head of the House Communications Subcommittee, Van Deerlin has been conducting an inquiry into the power structure of broadcasting and the workings of the Federal Communications Commission.

It is still unclear how far Van Deerlin wants to go or what Congress will do. But from the network vantage, some of the views aired before the subcommittee must seem worrisome indeed. Concern has been expressed about the programming power now concentrated in the three giant networks. In June, for example, a group of independent producers testified that "the networks increased their net pre-tax income by almost 500 percent [from 1970 to 1976], yet during this period the network expenditures for outside programming increased only 55 percent."

What Congress could do to disperse programming power is to give a green light to pay television, via cable or over-the-air, thereby stimulating a competing programming source. A loss of audience to pay TV would diminish the advertising revenues of the networks, whose profits derive from their monopoly rights (for which they pay nothing) to the airwaves,



Public TV's Dickens of London—"Hope is fed by summertime promises."

which, of course, belong to everybody.

One does not have to be excessively bright to sense a connection between the House hearings and this May 9 headline in *Broadcasting*: FALL LINE-UPS NOW COMPLETE—EMPHASIS IS ON COMEDY AND SPECIALS—NO NEW HARD-ACTION SHOWS ANYWHERE. I think we can credit Congressman Van Deerlin for the momentary decline in prime-time gore.

Against this background, I believe, we can more realistically appraise the new television season. There are more goodies than usual on the menu. Here is a sampling, network by network:

Probably because it finished third in prime-time ratings last season, NBC is taking the boldest lead, to the extent that it has provided firm dates for forthcoming specials. Its rivals, by contrast, are holding back air dates until the ratings pattern becomes clear. Of the NBC specials, the blockbuster surely will be the entire *Godfather* saga, to be broadcast on four successive nights, November 12 through 15. Francis Coppola's two films are being re-ordered in chronological sequence, from De Niro to Brando, and fresh footage—outtakes from the movies—will be included. The package is NBC's answer to *Roots*. *Brutes*.

On November 6 and 7, NBC will pre-

sent *King*, a five-hour dramatized biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., with Paul Winfield portraying the civil rights leader and with Cecily Tyson as his wife, Coretta. Harry Belafonte appears as Malcolm X, a daring casting decision.

The network is also reviving *Laugh-In*, the old Dan Rowan and Dick Martin revue that vanished, along with much else, during the grim years of Vietnam and Nixon. George Schlatter, who produced the original show, is back in harness, though Rowan and Martin are not. There will be a new troupe. The premiere date of the six one-hour *Laugh-Ins* is September 12; later installments are due on October 10 and November 2.

Meanwhile, ABC is sitting smugly in the catbird seat, confident of maintaining its prime-time dominance for a third consecutive season. The network has announced a whole array of specials, but broadcast dates are being withheld. I'll bet, nonetheless, that on November 22 we will see *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald*, a four-hour dramatization of the trial that might have occurred had Jack Ruby not killed the presumed assassin. John Pleshette, who is said to be an uncanny look-alike, plays Oswald, and the entire film is being shot on location in Dallas—Deely Plaza, the Oswald apartment, and so on,

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which I find a trifle macabre.

However, ABC has assigned a firm date to another political drama—*Washington: Behind Closed Doors*, a 12-hour film inspired by John Ehrlichman's novel, *The Company*. Scheduled for September 6–11, the dramatization concerns a conflict between a President (played by Jason Robards) and a CIA director (Cliff Robertson), with John Houseman in a supporting role.

The most risky and interesting of the new ABC series is *Soap*, which the network describes as both "outrageous" and "done in good taste," a neat trick. *Soap* is a takeoff on daytime serials that is supposed to be even more audacious than *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. I wonder whether that vein hasn't been overmined, but we'll see. Another half-hour weekly comedy is tentatively called *Carter Country*. It is set in a small Georgia town and likened by ABC to *Barney Miller* in a southern setting. It sounds too cute to work, a surfeit of peanut butter.

Most significantly, ABC has dropped three of its police-action shows; all six of its new series focus on comedy. We are also promised, sometime during the year, a two-hour sequel to *Roots* and an adaptation of Gail Sheehy's book *Passages*.

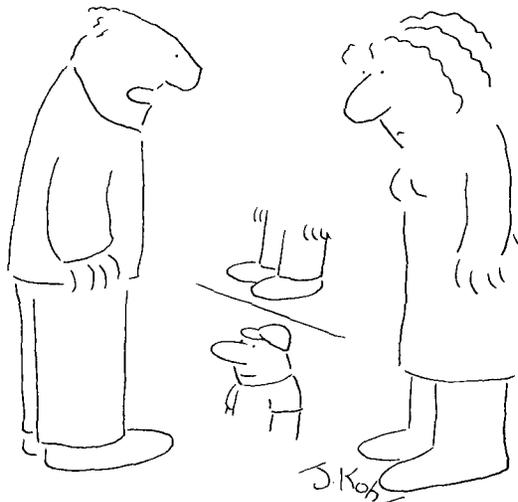
Nursing its injured self-esteem as the 20-year prime-time champion unseated by an upstart, CBS is the most reticent of the networks when it comes to disclosing programming plans. But following the same path as its competitors, CBS has no new hard-action police shows on its fall schedule. (Thanks again, Congressman Van Deerin.) We will be getting a space opera, *Logan's Run*, based on the movie of the same title and clearly intended to cash in on the popularity of *Star Wars*.



Al Pacino in *The Godfather*—"The NBC blockbuster will be the entire saga."

The Mary Tyler Moore Show passed away last season, but on television there is always life after death. The *MTM* spin-off on CBS this season is *Lou Grant*, in which the Ed Asner character moves from Minneapolis to Los Angeles to continue his role as the long-suffering professional journalist enduring the whips and scorns of impudent juniors and incompetent seniors. According to CBS, the weekly hour-long drama will have "overtones" that are "comedic." As the ablest performer on the *MTM* team, Asner should deliver. (Betty White, also of the *MTM* troupe, will appear in *The Betty White Show* as a veteran movie actress coping with Hollywood, but not, alas, with Asner.)

Finally, we come to public broadcast-



"I suppose it's just another little trick he picked up from TV."

ing, the sole national television system that, whatever its admitted flaws, shames the networks by recognizing as a matter of policy that there is a plurality of audiences. Without PBS, we would all have to subsist on a diet of junk food, with only an occasional soufflé and filet mignon.

As if to confirm my point, PBS is bringing back Dick Cavett as host of a nightly half-hour talk show in late September or early October. Cavett was dropped by ABC a few years ago because his ratings were undernourished and his wit regarded as too effete. But he was the only talk-show host who could intelligently adventure into the realm of the unconventional; besides the predictable show-biz types and authors like Dr. Reuben, who told us more than we really wanted to know even about sex, Cavett included among his guests people like I. F. Stone, the great radical journalist.

The new nightly PBS lineup begins with the excellent *MacNeil/Lehrer Report*, ends with Dick Cavett, and gives PBS just what it has lacked: a coherent shape in prime-time hours.

Masterpiece Theatre will of course be back again, an evergreen. Leading off, beginning August 28 on most PBS stations, is *Dickens of London*, a 10-week series produced by Yorkshire Television that stars Roy Dotrice as the author and that includes vignettes from the novels. The probable follow-up will be a 15-part BBC opus, *The Duchess of Duke Street*, set in Edwardian England and produced by John Hawkesworth of *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Later, we are promised BBC adaptations of *Anna Karenina* and *I, Claudius*. Alistair Cooke should have his hands full. ©

Fraser Young
Literary Crypt No. 89

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer on page 76.

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KHAHQZ JHVDLJ DK
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