

The Sweetening Machine

If you're old enough to remember the days when most television production was broadcast live, perhaps (like me) you have a certain fondness for the kind of energy and mistakes that can only happen in live programming. I don't mean TV programs that are "pre-recorded live on tape", or "taped before a live studio audience", I'm talking about TV productions that are conveyed to us in real-time, as they are happening in the studio or on location. (The distinction has to be made because TV now has so scrambled the notion of what is live.) Of course, nowadays almost nothing is broadcast live. But in the early '50s, when almost everything was, there was a kind of humanness that managed to transcend the reproductive apparatus and come through to us watching at home.

Much of that humanness was the result of Murphy's Law. Anything that could go wrong, would go wrong. Gary Moore his pants unzipped. Red Skelton, making a sales pitch for pies made from Pet milk, had to once went into a wild dance before a camera. The cow promptly delivered its own form of editorial comment right in the middle of the commercial. On a Saturday with morning kids' show, the host was overheard to say, just before the insert of a commercial: "I hope that keeps the little bastards happy."

The problems for doing live TV drama were even more immense. Not only did the teleplays have to be written to facilitate the scene changes and the costume changes, but there was always the possibility that a TV camera might blow-out during the broadcast, actors might miss their chalk marks on the floor and be left in shadow, their lines might be "cold" in front of millions of viewers. Worse yet, a set might collapse or a "corpse" might accidentally be shown crawling off the set. (All these errors did, in fact, happen in one dramatic production or another.)

In addition, there was always the problem of timing. A teleplay might run exactly the required length during rehearsal, but because of the pressures of the actual live broadcast, the actors would often deliver their lines faster. The director would then have to

stretch out the program by either drastically slowing down the closing scenes or, more often, by having the final credits crawl past at the end at an agonizingly slow pace.

But there were unmistakable benefits to doing live TV. The actors performed at peak intensity, and the viewers had that special feeling of "being there". It was daily event programming unlike anything today. The mistakes, the production "errors", only made it all seem human, likeable, risky and exciting. I suspect it's called "the golden age" of TV not only because there was so much creative talent involved, but because the medium was being utilized to do what it does best, and *what only it can do*: transmit live in real-time across vast geographical distances.

Somehow, this unique ability of the TV medium had gotten lost, been forgotten, by the end of the '50s. Or maybe not forgotten, but consciously ruled out by the powers-that-be in the industry. As Erik Barnouw has documented in his books *Tube of Plenty* and *The Sponsor*, advertisers wanted safe, predictable programming that would enshrine consumerism and envy as a way of life. Live TV dramas meant small studio sets, close-ups on faces—with an emphasis on psychological realism and inner exploration. The psychological depth in the dramatic programming tended to make the commercials appear fraudulent. They were proposing, after all, that any problem could be fixed with the purchase of product. So sponsors were basically insecure and unhappy with live broadcasting. They were an important factor in the push towards filming (and later taping) virtually all TV production.

What advertisers preferred was the episodic series, where the same characters and sets would recur week by week. This would ensure not only that production costs would be lower, but that once a safe programming premise had been created (complete with glamorous stars), the episodes could be churned out weekly with little danger of any controversy sneaking in. Moreover, the series could nicely match the commercials, providing a suitable context for them—glamorous sets and people, or simplistic solutions that didn't suggest any need for worry, anxiety, inner depth or political consciousness.

By filming the episodes, not only could they be shot on location (Westerns were popular and non-controversial), they would be guaranteed to be error-free. TV need only adapt the long-standing conventions of classic Hollywood cinema, wherein no human mistakes remain as evidence to reveal the human and technological process of production. And a filmed TV product would also mean that, just like feature

films, TV programs could be distributed around the world to all those countries in the process of setting up their own TV networks.

Well, for these and many other reasons, by the end of the '50s American TV had become largely a filmed product made under the auspices of Hollywood film studios. The whole TV industry had changed to reflect a desire for safe predictability and strict control over all aspects of production. One aspect of programming that, in a way, summarizes this whole ethos is the use of what's called "the sweetening machine"—the apparatus that generates pre-recorded laugh-tracks and "sweeten" (as they say) the sound-track of TV productions.

Not surprisingly, the sweetening machine was invented at the time the Hollywood studios were gearing up to produce the filmed product that would soon take over the network airwaves. A man named Charlie Douglass, who had been a sound technician at CBS, put together a machine that could reproduce a wide variety of laugh-tracks—everything from a few quiet audience chuckles to uproarious crowds guffawing and applauding wildly.

It was, of course, a timely invention in that most of the new filmed sitcoms would have no studio audience. Here, with Charlie's magic box, the production could be given the ambience of live TV. Better yet, there would be perfect control over this "audience". It would laugh at exactly the right moments and to just the right degree. All you'd have to do is let Charlie orchestrate the giggles, whoops, groans and bursts of hilarity into a perfectly tune and time soundtrack, and your production would seem to be the most entertaining that ever hit the airwaves. Charlie Douglass first approached Desilu Productions in the mid-'50s, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Despite the fact that Charlie kept his machine shrouded in secrecy and under lock and key, other independent laughmen sprang up to rival his position in the industry. Nevertheless, there was plenty of work for all. Canada, too had slavishly followed US TV production style, even though the broadcasting structure here was quite different and did not necessitate such imitation. As filmed and then taped production overtook live broadcasting in Canada, Canadian TV producers, too, wanted to sweeten studio-audience response or replace it where necessary. As Peter Campbell, member of CBC's sound-effects department, puts it: "Until recently, guys like John Pratt and Charlie Douglass from the States would come to Canada and sweeten the shows."

Eventually, a Canadian—Rafael Markowitz (now in California)—entered the busy sweetening scene with his own

machine. Says Campbell, who worked with Markowitz for years, "It took us two-and-a-half years to get what we wanted" in terms of variety of laffs. After all, competition was fierce. Joe Partington, current producer and co-creator of CBC's "Hangin' In", recalls that "We used to let Markowitz record the live audience for "King of Kensington" in order to add to his repertoire, "and we always wondered if Canadian laffs were being used for American shows." In any case, the Canadian TV networks were strictly dependent on these travelling laughmen who crossed the border with ease. Says Partington: "When you record (laffs) from outside people, it was a real secret how the machine worked." Douglass or Pratt or Markowitz or whoever was working the sweetening machine would hide it under a table during operation so that CBC personnel wouldn't be able to see how it worked.

But finally, CBC's crew of sound engineers took on the challenge and figured out how to build their own sweetening machine. Nobody I talked to could remember exactly what the historic date of its first use was, but everybody agreed that it was about four or five years ago, during the making of "King of Kensington". According to Joe Partington, most of the laffs and applause were accumulated from studio-audiences for "Wayne & Shuster" and "King of Kensington"—that "they are exclusively Canadian laffs". And people like Tom Wood and Peter Campbell, of CBC's special-effects department, are continuously upgrading the repertoire, adding diversity and nuance to the collection. Says Campbell, "You want to get a special feel, create character to match the situation." This means having a wide range of sounds from a wide range of different-sized audiences. "The machine can respond quite sensitively," says Partington, "generating little touches like 'oohs and ahs'."

For a show like "Hangin' In", which is taped without a studio-audience, the sweetening technician and the associate producer go through the tape during an audio mix and decide precisely where and what kinds of sweetener to add. "You feel like you're directing," says Partington, "making it seem live." The machine has 24 tracks and can hold 6 of the prerecorded laugh/applause cassettes at once, making possible a finely nuanced sound that is different for every show.

For shows that do have studio-audiences, the same process is used. They didn't particularly like the jokes? No sweat. At the audio mix just cut out their lame response and put in some sweetener. Is the applause at the end a little weak? No problem. The repertoire of the sweetening machine can match the dimensions of the room, the size of

the audience, and put into the final sound-track the degree of applause that *should have happened* for this show.

Not surprisingly, the sweetening machine has come to be used even during live broadcasts. By the mid-'70s the US network people were slipping a little sweetener into the Rose Bowl Parade to get that little ripple of applause that should happen as each float goes by. A sweetening technician is now always on hand at the Academy Awards to spice up the production and save-face for anybody who cracks a dumb joke, giving them a small dose of laffs so that the home-audience, at least, doesn't think they're total jerks. In Canada, the sweetening machine helps along the live broadcasting of events like telethons and awards ceremonies (the Junos, the Genies, etc.). "We use it," says one technician, "because it's difficult to mike an audience, especially if there's an orchestra. We may use some of the live response, and then boost it with sweetener."

Of course, if sweetener is used for parades, telethons and awards ceremonies, might it not also be used for other live broadcasts like political conventions, public speeches by politicians, etc.? "Not to my knowledge," says Peter Campbell, "but that doesn't mean it isn't done. Just that I've never heard of it."

In a way, the sweetening machine is a useful metaphor for the institution of television itself—which has more to do with wish-fulfillment than reality. At a critical juncture in its past, the industry abandoned production values that highlighted live reality in all its messy, complex, error-laden but risky and human vitality. In place of that, the industry adopted production conventions that guarantee tight control and "perfection"—indeed, all the illusion-making apparatus of Hollywood itself. The result is that TV offers (not only through its chosen content but also through its style of production) a smoothly-running, error-free, sweetened world in which every problem is easily solved, every mistake is erased and eliminated, every event is controlled and made perfect by whatever means necessary, and human complexity is ironed flat. Rather than examine the real conditions of our lives, exploring in-depth the problems that confront us all, TV has become the rose-coloured glasses for society, or (mixing metaphors) the saccharine solution in which the status quo hangs suspended. By comparison, live reality is harsh, messy and bitter indeed. No wonder so many North Americans choose to spend their time in TV's world rather than work to make the real world sweeter.

Joyce Nelson

The Last Post in Retrospect

The Last Post is like Christ; it's not dead but merely sleepeth. Watch for the Second Coming. Admittedly the people who wrote for it have disappeared into darkest concubinage or have become victims of that lamentable activity described by actors as "doing a nine-to-five" or worse still become teachers or work in media, possibly some of these latter holding onto that illusion perpetrated by "Red" Rudi Dutschke of conducting "the long march through the institutions."

This will not then be by way of a post-mortem; there's no body to be exhumed and in any event, even if there is a death, I'm fortified by something I came across the other day from the Sicilian novelist Giuseppe Lampedusa: "*Finche ch'e morte, ch'e speranza*"—so long as there's death, there's hope.

The particular work from which that's drawn, *Il Gattopardo*, The Leopard, is described in my *Penguin Companion to European Literature* in words that seem remarkably apt as a summation of the Canada into which *The Last Post* was born in the early '70s: the book is "a bitter-sweet sceptical picture of an insular world where, in spite of major political and social upheavals, nothing changes that really matters."

After the euphoria of 1967, after the Toronto media screamed for Jean Drapeau to be next Prime Minister—that was before the bills came in—Canada was well on the way to becoming what the philosopher Ortega describes as an invertebrate state. The magazine's attitude to this state of affairs was best symbolized by Terry (Aislin) Mosher's cartoon of the House of Commons—never having been to the Common House before, he was taken aback at what he saw and heard there. He showed the Honourable Members ranged on both sides of a vast swimming pool on the floor of the House, into which from time to time, the defenders of our way of life were seen to be taking a dive.

And then of course Quebec happened. Here *The Last Post's* coverage was, I think, both informed and cogent. Bolstered by the good knowledge of Montreal and entirely alienated from the smugness of the Anglo-Saxon elites, the *Post* proved to be an excellent disseminator of informed attitudes about the maelstrom there. It was probably the only part of its work it took with a high degree of seriousness and, I suspect, it is for that it will be remembered. During the week of the War Measures Act we distributed from the back of a truck a special issue of the magazine. The invocation of the WMA was described in bold—even cheeky—

headlines as THE SANTO DOMINGO OF PIERRE ELLIOTT TRUDEAU.

I mentioned cheeky deliberately; it's the only way I have of describing the flavour of the *Post*. At the risk of blasphemy, I should venture to say that the *Post* had an American attitude to government: that is to say, a political game between two parties to get power for their friends, while the United Church, disguised as the NDP, bemoans the whole thing from the pews of the left aisle.

Given such a low-minded view of the matter, it is not without significance—there's a typical *Last Post* opener right there: "it is not without significance that Lougheed's name starts with an L, just like Lochinvar"—it's not without significance that one of the *Post's* most successful innovations was a gossip column. It was called, of course, "Last Psst."

More generally, the *Post* frowned upon a peculiarly Canadian 'love of discipline,' a love symbolized by a hundred-dollar bill featuring the backsides of animals ridden by the leading police force. Such a jaundiced view of authority was not, I hasten to say, the particular preserve of the *Post*. Indeed the *Canadian Forum*, with the awful daring of a moment's surrender, published the Gray Report on foreign ownership six months before the Cabinet received it.

However, the cheekiness of the *Post* also sprang from another source. It saw itself as being, if not rootlessly cosmopolitan, at least ruthlessly internationalist in its perspective. This displayed itself most immediately in its response to the Canadian media, whose attitude to their readers and viewers was, as the *Post* saw it, analogous to that of a lazy farmer towards his seeds: "Cover them in shit, keep them in the dark and hope they grow." And there were targets aplenty. Looking back, who would believe that the media would carry without question this bromide from the usually amiable Jean Marchand: "These people (FLQ) have infiltrated every strategic place in the province of Quebec, every place where important decisions are taken . . . There is an organization which has thousands of guns, rifles, machine guns, bombs and . . . more than enough ammunition to blow up the core of downtown Montreal." Aislin's cartoon in response has become a piece of history: a pipe-smoking Marchand cradling the Montreal phone book and intoning: "*Maintenant nous avons la liste des suspects.*"

But such an attitude also meant that the *Post* was going to stomp on the toes of potential friends as well—I say stomp, not step on, because as Robert Chodos, one of the board's most active members, put it: *The Last Post* doesn't expose, it punishes." The Waffle Manifesto of 1969 set in motion, along with the Committee for an Independent Canada, a wave of feeling that wavered—if that's what a wave does—between the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and the latest cyclical manifestation of Canada first-ism; as a result a lot of bad novels got written and praised to the skies, a lot of nine-

day wonders came and went, some of them indeed not waiting out the requisite nine days. Keith Davey's desire to fix up the Canadian newspaper called "Keith Davey saved from drowning," a title from a Renoir film by way of an American short story writer (Donald Barthelme) who'd done a thing called "Bobby Kennedy saved from drowning."

And so we would write our own spring publishing lists, parodies of the new nativist efforts, replete with such titles as *Old Barns of Ontario*, or *The Best Toilets on the 401*, etc. A work as mediocre as Stephenson's *A Man Called Intrepid* would be transformed by *Last Post* alchemy into *A Man Called Inspid*. Larry Zolf's one-paragraph review of the *Memoirs of Arnold Heeney* still stands as a model of this genre: "As a paid-up insomniac, I, Larry Zolf, do hereby swear that the *Memoirs of Arnold Heeney* put me to sleep." And so on. We even found poems buried in the editorials of the *Globe and Mail*; and these we called found poems.

James Eayres it was who pointed out that nothing identifies a Canadian more quickly than the saying, "I'm not an economist, but . . ." Well, I'm not an economist, but I do think that in part the *Post* was a product not only of a sense of outrage at the mediocrity of public life but also of a time when the economy was such that many people thought that the quality of life was a priority item. We were wrong.

Of course, it should be said that magazines are about writing, and we were all writers and the magazine was readable; while attitudes are important, attitudinizing is the ureaformaldehyde of the magazine world. Politically, we had a shared view that we would not fight the Cold War; economists and political scientists were not allowed to write—except for Mel Watkins and Larry Pratt, the former because he was a bad economist but a good writer, the latter because he was libelous, a definite plus in the *Post's* case since none would sue us because we didn't have any money. (When Pratt tried the same tack at the CBC, only then did the writs begin to fly.)

The Last Post moved from Montreal to Toronto and soon began to die. As I knew it would. My perfectly cogent observation that Goethe had remained in Weimar and did not relocate to Berlin fell on deaf ears.

Still, I find nothing unhealthy about magazines appearing and disappearing. They should be like catherine wheels, crackling and illuminating the surrounding dark for a while, leaving behind them a good, acrid stench to remind newcomers that righteous indignation had once been felt here. If I may make an observation: it's a mistake for small magazines to think of themselves as organisms that should grow in size and circulation until that happy day when they take over from Peter C. Newman. A small catherine wheel is better than a big, damp squib.

Patrick McFadden