A Shock of Pleasure from the '50s

The Golden Age of Television, *beginning Aug. 24, PBS stations*

It passed by so quickly that most people did not even recognize it, and only later was the decade that began in 1948 crowned the Golden Age of Television. But was it real gold or just a teary gleam in the eyes of TV's founding fathers? Until now, it was impossible to say. Videotape was unknown back then, and since all the shows were done live, even the most famous were seen once, and once only. A few kinescopes—16-mm films shot directly off the TV screen—do exist, however, and from now through March, eight of them will be shown on more than 150 PBS stations. For the first time we have an answer: there really was a Golden Age.

That is dazzlingly clear from the first four programs, the only ones yet available for viewing. *Marty,* starring Rod Steiger and Nancy Marchand, begins the series. Then, dribbled out one a month, come *Bang the Drum Slowly,* with Paul Newman, Albert Salmi and George Peppard; *No Time for Sergeants,* with Andy Griffith; and *The Days of Wine and Roses,* with Cliff Robertson and Piper Laurie. After them come *The Comedian,* with Mickey Rooney, and *A Doll's House,* with Julie Harris and Jason Robards. The last two shows in the series have not yet been chosen. The producers are still searching for such treasures as the kinescope of a 1955 version of *The Petrified Forest,* which teamed Humphrey Bogart, who had played the original Duke Mantee, with a new Gabrielle—Lauren Bacall. Gold must have looked like brass in those days, so casually were now priceless kinescopes discarded.

These are not ordinary reruns, and it is probable that most viewers will react to them not just with pleasure but with shock and astonishment. What no one could have realized until now is that television has not only changed since the '50s, with color and a dozen other technical advances, it has been transformed. It is, indeed, scarcely the same medium. The TV of the '80s is no more like that of the '50s than talking movies are like silents. The loss, it might be added, is immeasurable.

Until videotape was perfected in the '60s, everything that the viewer saw at home was happening before his eyes. Mistakes were common. One writer remembers watching with horror as two actors who were supposed to be dead received an early cue and rose before the camera moved away. Nothing so clumsy happens in this series, but a close observer will hear Paul Newman fluff a line in *Bang the Drum* and see that after Andy Griffith spills a drink on his shirt in *No Time for Sergeants,* he does not change it for inspection the next morning. No matter. There is an excitement in a live performance that technical perfection cannot duplicate.

That, of course, was the experience of the theater. Most of the shows were produced in Manhattan, with Broadway only a few blocks away. Hollywood and the movie industry looked upon television with open hostility, and movie actors who appeared on the tube were seen as renegades. New York was more hospitable, and in crowded studios a revolution was taking place.

Nancy Marchand and Rod Steiger in *Marty*

Andy Griffith telling stories in *Sergeants*

Paul Newman advising Albert Salmi in *Bang the Drum*

Live action imposed limitations too. Treks up mountainsides, car crashes and a thousand other things that are depicted now could only be suggested then. Before he changed a scene, a scriptwriter had to be certain that he had given an actor enough time to run from one studio to another. Yet it is from those limitations that the gold was spun. Since he could not show extraordinary happenings, the writer had to settle for the ordinary, for everyday events like a conversation at the breakfast table or an argument in a bedroom —things that could be recorded by three cameras on one set. Plot was less important than character development, and there was, compared with today, little movement. A modern director doubtless would be fired immediately if he let his camera linger on a single scene, as Delbert Mann did, with considerable effect, in *Marty.*

Most shows then were an hour, or about 50 minutes without the commercials. Paddy Chayefsky likened them to short stories; "miniature works," he called them. The phrase is apt: none of these dramas has the scope of a *Shōgun* or a *Roots.* At the same time, many people may be surprised to discover that the years have not brought greater sophistication, as is commonly supposed. Television was more mature in infancy than it is in middle age. Life was viewed as it is —too complicated to be tied up in a neat conclusion.

What ever happened to the Golden Age? Well, it died, even before Dwight Eisenhower left the White House. Many shows were put on film, then taped; increasing costs made live programming almost a luxury; production was moved from New York to Los Angeles. The TV networks discovered that they could draw a more consistent audience with series, which had predictable characters and situations, than they could with "anthologies," dramas and comedies that changed every week. "All things considered, I suspect that the Golden Age for the dramatist is at hand," said TV Writer Gore Vidal in 1956, glowing with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. about the promise of television. Like most other people, he expected that the medium would get better as it got bigger. But the Golden Age of Television was then and there—and almost over.

—By Gerald Clarke