

BOOKS & THE ARTS.

The Televised Past

ERIC FONER

A few weeks ago, I spent three days in California attending a conference devoted to the docudrama, that blend of fact and fiction now so much in vogue on television. Among the fifty-odd participants were such TV heavyweights as David Suskind and *Roots* producer David Wolper, along with a host of writers, directors and network executives. There were also a few TV critics and a number of outside stars such as Gore Vidal (who angered his audience by announcing that he never watches television), along with four historians of rather more modest fame.

Like the rest of television programming, docudramas run the gamut from serious drama to soap opera, but most begin with the laudable intention of illuminating an aspect of the past. Some of these, like two shows re-creating the Entebbe raid, are thrown together with a haste mirrored in the shoddiness of the productions. Others, like *The Adams Chronicles* or the dramatization of Watergate, John Dean's *Blind Ambition*, are high-budget affairs, thoroughly researched and years in the making. *Collision Course: Truman and MacArthur* and *The Ordeal of Patty Hearst* typify, each in its own way, shows which deal with real people in real situations. Others, like *Holocaust*, portray fictional characters in a historical setting.

Obviously, the mingling of fact and fiction, history and drama, is nothing new. What is new is not the docudrama form itself but the insistent claims for historical authenticity that accompany it and the controversy these claims have aroused. Sharp criticism of the genre has appeared in the pages of *TV Guide*, *The New York Times*, *Saturday Review* and other publications. The docudrama form has been accused of allowing fiction to masquerade as history, of allowing writers to play fast and loose with the facts while retaining the veneer of historical authenticity. The critics are alarmed by what they perceive as distorted history reaching the huge audience commanded by television.

Not only TV critics but network executives, too, are uneasy over the recent

flood of docudramas. In particular, they are alarmed by a vulnerability to litigation arising from ambiguities in the law governing privacy, publicity and defamation of character. A docudrama on the Scottsboro case resulted in an unsuccessful lawsuit by one of the surviving white women in the trial. CBS settled out of court with the former wife of blacklisted newsman John Henry Faulk, who objected to her portrayal in *Fear on Trial*.

Despite quibbling by the critics and occasional lawsuits, docudramas are big business. Their ratings range from the spectacular success of *Roots* to the disaster of *King*, but most do significantly better than the average series. Moreover, television people believe that the claim of historical authenticity is especially important for promotion. Although historical fiction is a time-honored genre, networks, producers and writers all resist the notion that docudramas should be labeled and thought of in this way. The claim of truth, according to one executive, means ten extra ratings points, an important consideration at a time of the fiercest ratings war in television history.

It is interesting that many docudrama producers are ex-documentary makers who blend their respect for "reality" with an affinity for the larger audiences and freedom to invent which are afforded by the docudrama. As one producer told the conference, "I used to film the outside of the White House and wonder what was going on in the Oval Office. Now I can imagine it." Thus, like the term "docudrama" itself, practitioners of the art are somewhat schizophrenic. They want the creative freedom of the artist but also the imprimatur of the historian, an air of authenticity without the full responsibility that goes along with it.

Despite these inherent problems, docudramas like *Roots* are in a class of their own when compared with what passes for prime-time TV entertainment. Historians, moreover, should be grateful that, at a time of declining enrollments in college and high school history courses, the docudrama boom reveals a broad receptivity to historical subject matter. Much of the interest in televised history is simply voyeurism, a video exposé of the secret lives of histor-

ical celebrities. But the better shows not only present compelling explorations of historical themes, they challenge the historical profession to respond creatively to the mass audience for history reflected, and stimulated, in successful docudrama.

Nonetheless, it is not surprising that many historians look askance at this particular gift horse. For the history presented is, almost inevitably, distorted. Compared to film, the medium of television seems to demand a smaller scale—close-ups, small groups, scaled-down sound—in its presentation of historical events. It is hardly surprising then that in so many docudramas, the dramatic space is reduced to a single focus: a historical personage, a famous courtroom trial, a family.

But the fact that individual action is highlighted and collective action ignored is not simply a consequence of the small screen. Even more, one suspects, it reflects the persistent hold of that peculiarly American strand of individualism on the writers. In *Roots: The Next Generations*, for example—possibly the finest exploration of the black experience ever presented on television—political and economic forces are transformed into personal ones. Blacks are disenfranchised because a few white leaders stand to gain from it; black sharecroppers get their A.A.A. benefits not by organizing a sharecroppers' union but through the intervention of Alex Haley's father. *King* made the black revolution the work of one man, *Tail Gunner Joe* made McCarthyism the product of a single somewhat deranged individual. If "the personal is political" was the slogan of the 1960s, docudramas seem to assume that the political is unfailingly personal.

Nonetheless, no one can claim that television is presenting a sugarcoated version of American history. *Roots*, both the first and second parts, was a powerful indictment of American racism. Audiences have been treated to extremely unfavorable portraits of McCarthyism (*Tail Gunner Joe* and *Fear on Trial*), a harrowing account of the detention of Japanese-Americans (*Farewell to Manzanar*), and the suppression of the American Indians (*I Will Fight No More Forever*). Several projects dealing with Vietnam are being prepared, and while NBC recently killed a proposed docudrama on the Pueblo Indians, ABC is dramatizing our home-grown holocaust, the experience of the

Creeks and Cherokees in the Trail of Tears.

Although many of the assembled writers and producers at the conference insisted that there can be a docudrama without a point of view, or, in good positivist fashion, that an interpretation emerges inductively from the mass of material gathered for the production, television is, in fact, presenting a coherent vision of America's past. Recent docudramas are consolidating and validating for a mass audience the revisionist view of this country's domestic history which gained currency among historians in the 1960s, and is now broadly accepted in the academic world and increasingly incorporated into American history textbooks. This revisionist literature, a reaction against the bland "consensus" history of the 1950s and a response to the rise of black consciousness in the 1960s, portrays American history as filled with group conflict, racial injustice and threats to democratic institutions.

Television's point of view seems firmly ensconced within this revisionist consensus. Nor does it venture beyond it, either to the left or to the right. It is difficult to imagine the networks dramatizing Watergate from Richard Nixon's point of view, just as I do not expect to see a docudrama on Eugene V. Debs and the old Socialist Party. Also, TV history is only selectively revisionist. If racial injustice is an acceptable subject, class conflict is not. The history of American labor is ignored in the docudrama, as is the experience of the immigrant. The fiftieth anniversary of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, the occasion of extensive coverage on French and Italian TV, passed unmarked by the American networks, including PBS.

Nor has television proved particularly adventurous in dealing with foreign policy. A docudrama on the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 virtually canonized John F. Kennedy, and the same approach characterized *Truman at Potsdam*. The revisionist portrait of Roosevelt and Truman as deeply implicated in the origins of the cold war has yet to appear on the TV screen. Aside from Nixon, in fact, twentieth-century Presidents tend to be treated with kid gloves. The recently aired *Ike* did portray Winston Churchill as being more interested in confronting the Russians than in rescuing France from Nazi occupation during World War II, but it suggested that Roosevelt and Eisenhower would have none of this "politicization" of the war effort. In *Backstairs at the White House*, a succession of modern Presidents are presented as, thoroughly apo-

litical individuals, inoffensive and rather congenial, except for Warren Harding who, we are told, had a drinking problem and an eye for beautiful women.

Television, moreover, seems distinctly uncomfortable with historical material which does not have a finite ending. The ratings failure of *King* is widely attributed to its "depressing" denouement—the assassination and the program's suggestion that the racial problem remains with us. How much more uplifting to view *Roots*, "the triumph of an American family." Some of the emphasis on docudrama may, in fact, reflect an escape from contemporary social issues into the past. Even Watergate is almost noncontroversial seven years after the break-in; like the Vietnam War, it seems safely behind us and, thus, safe for television.

Another reflection of TV's flight from current problems, and one of the lamentable side effects of the docudrama craze, has been the virtual banishment of the documentary from network television. This is especially unfortunate since, by contrast to docudrama, the straightforward documentary has a clearly delineated structure

of factual content. Its focus on issues rather than personal drama seems far better able to present the complexities of history and of current affairs.

Many current issues, however, are considered by television simply too hot to handle. First and foremost are those for which large and vocal pressure groups exist. Don't expect to see a show dealing with abortion or gun control on the air anytime soon. Or, as one reporter asked at the conference, "what have you done on the oil companies lately?" Even historians can be a pressure group, although their effectiveness has yet to be determined. The announcement that CBS is considering a production based on Jefferson's purported relationship with his slave, Sally Hemmings, has elicited a furious response from the self-appointed guardians of our third President's reputation.

Even more important than a fear of controversy in explaining the demise of the documentary are the almighty ratings, a consideration never far from the surface in any discussion of TV programming. Executives, writers and producers are unanimous in one conviction: "No one watches documentaries." (Of course, "no one," in this context, may mean 20 million people.) As Art

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Buchwald observed, the motto of the conference might have been, "Whether you are a producer, director, writer or historian, you have a right to make a buck."

This conclusion may be harsh, but it does point up a problem left unresolved at the docudrama conference. The writers and producers are being pulled simultaneously in three directions by the claims of drama, history and finance. If the marriage of history and drama is difficult, that of art and industry is even more so.

The fact is, however, that these docudramas are teaching history. My students' conception of slavery is more likely to come from *Roots*, their picture of McCarthyism from *Tail Gunner Joe*, than from the monographs I and my colleagues write. But given the present structure of the television industry, it seems unlikely that, however outstanding individual productions may be, television can fully live up to its potential for illuminating the American past. □

The Odd Couple

LEONARD MICHAELS

THE NABOKOV-WILSON LETTERS. Edited by Simon Karlinsky. Harper & Row, 346 pp. \$15.

I consider this novel to be my best thing in English, and though the themes and situation are decidedly sensuous, its art is pure and its fun riotous.
—Nabokov to Wilson

I like it less than anything else of yours... the characters and the situation are repulsive.
—Wilson to Nabokov

The Nabokov-Wilson letters, 1940-71, written when they were mainly good friends, have been edited by Simon Karlinsky with useful annotation throughout and a superb introductory essay in which Karlinsky reviews disagreements that flicker and blaze through the letters, anticipating the famous public battle upon the occasion of Vladimir Nabokov's edition of *Eugene Onegin*. A laborious, scholarly, brilliant, idiosyncratic work, Edmund Wilson reviewed it negatively. He also didn't like

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Lolita, which is more surprising because anyone can see the novel is tremendously good and, besides, Nabokov carefully told Wilson how much the book meant to him; furthermore, Wilson did like *The Story of O* and the novels of Genet and, according to Wilson's journal, *Upstate*, he and Nabokov always agreed in relishing pornographic works or, as we say in California, "sharing" them. But of course *Lolita* isn't pornographic; its erotic substance, weirdly sublimated into love, is something like the poetry of Crashaw which is perhaps, in Wilson's sense, also "repulsive." In any case, one thing seems painfully definite: Wilson reacted very negatively, in private letters and public commentary, to the works Nabokov cared about most, precisely his works of love.

Wilson's public commentary certainly does not reflect the affectionate spirit of his letters; indeed, without the letters, it might be difficult to believe, despite his great generosity toward Nabokov in furthering his literary career, that Wilson really liked him personally at all. But Wilson's public commentary certainly does reflect the years of disagreement in the letters on issues large, small, and very different in kind. Examples of this incongruous variety are: (1) Wilson's faith in the Russian Revolution, including such Marxist monstrosities as Lenin, is unqualified by Nabokov's persistent efforts to give him the bad news; (2) Wilson is unconvinced that sexual intercourse is possible in a taxicab despite Nabokov's insistence that it is; (3) Wilson never seems to believe he doesn't know enough about Russian poetry to argue about its metrical system with Nabokov, and neither of them notices how tediously intricate, mechanical and irrelevant to any poetry their arguments become.

Nabokov is sometimes pedantic and provocative in the letters, but he is generally more right than Wilson and, if more heated, also warmer; once, urging Wilson to write him, he says, "I love your letters." When they disagree about the quality of famous writers, Wilson is much more right than Nabokov but, apparently, Nabokov was constitutionally incapable of respecting certain great names. Henry James and Dostoevsky, so different from one another, are examples of his unpredictable distastes. The letters contain a good deal more than disagreements. There is a lot of interesting talk about money, illness, jobs, writing projects, editorial policy at *The New Yorker*, books, persons and butterflies. But the disagreements will attract the most attention not only be-

cause they make the best literary gossip but also because they give fascinating complexity to the drama of the Nabokov-Wilson letters and the disastrous friendship.

Like many marriages, apparently, their friendship seemed to require bickering and contradiction lest the couple discover its fundamental incompatibility. This becomes more complicated in the Nabokov-Wilson friendship if one looks at Wilson's comments on Nabokov's novels and his comments on *The Story of O*. A peculiar inconsistency appears, suggesting an incompatibility Wilson suffered with himself. In *Upstate* he complains that Nabokov humiliates the characters in his novels, but then he merely refers to *The Story of O* as "that highly sophisticated and amusing pornographic work." One might suppose, if Wilson was sensitive to humiliation in novels, he would notice that the heroine of *The Story of O* is whipped repeatedly, violently penetrated at every accessible orifice, and at last hideously disfigured. In effect, somewhat humiliated—certainly more than any humiliatee in Nabokov's novels. As for the "highly sophisticated and amusing qualities of the novel," what could Wilson mean? Its systematic and rectitudinous clarity? Its severely chaste, humorless, invincibly un-self-conscious, narrow objectivity? Wilson says, "I asked Volodya whether it seemed to him there was something a little queer about the French, and suggested the book might have been written by a Russian. He answered, 'A Pole, perhaps.'" It isn't obvious that Wilson is joking. If he is, he is being too heavy and not funny. But he is answered with the delightful flexibility of feeling typical of Nabokov and, though Nabokov makes only a little pun, it suggests, just as their respective styles suggest—one so wittily volatile and luxurious, the other plainly precise and strongly "self-consistent"—a difference in sensibilities which, given certain competitive dispositions in the great writer and powerful critic, might have made them mutually repugnant sooner or later. And yet the letters, wonderful for their humor, intelligence, love and sincerity, make this seem impossible. Their friendship seems too good to have culminated in such wretched disconnection.

The letters are important in many ways and they are excellent reading, but it is hard to discuss them with a good conscience. One begins taking sides without being able to know the personal complications behind the letters, complications that are not one's business anyhow. Of course Nabokov