

Humanitas Trustee

The Writers' Vision in Television

Humanitas Award Luncheon

Our Father who art in Heaven's Gate—well, so much for the troubles of the movies—let's turn to the troubles of T.V.

What's the biggest problem in T.V.? The sets are too big! When one of your shows is on T.V., I want to run over and hug the set, but I can't! It's too big! Now there are two ways to get around that problem—buy a smaller set, or set up the Humanitas Prize—it's our way of hugging you! And I'd like to say here and now that it is your creative talent, your vision, your commitment to striving for human excellence in the world of television that gives meaning to this prize, and life and worthiness to television.

That commitment, that striving for human excellence, was important 7 years ago when the Humanitas Prize was first given. It's even more important today because T.V. programming is getting worse. It's getting better through efforts of people like you—but there is a growing group of Falwells-and-Company who've decided to make their own opinions of T.V. absolute with tactics of coercion—coercion like that spoken of by Terry Dolon of the National Political Action Committee. "A group like ours could lie through its teeth and the candidate it helps stays clean." Their way is further exemplified by Rev. James Robeson who said, "If necessary God would raise up a tyrant—a man who might not have the best ethics—to protect the freedom and the interests of the ethical and the Godly." They feel that their mission in the world is to criticize from God's point of view—except they have the nerve to tell God what God's point of view is! They bring God's point of view into their point of view. I wouldn't mind if they were disciples of God but they take God's name in vain; they feel God is a disciple of Falwell, that Falwell is the Supreme Being and God is his disciple.

The only good coming from this immoral group is that it indicates very forcefully that television, for better or worse, is a major catalyst in modern consciousness. Multi-million dollar sponsors, program executives, SAG, AFTRA, DGA, the Writers Guild—all are caught up in some aspect of the T.V. debate.

But the way to change, the way to humanize T.V. even more, is not Falwell's way—it's your way. It's the way a group of dedicated, caring, hard-working, skilled creative artists—proud of their accomplishments, miserable over their misses, their anguish, and travail; but who in their trying, trying, trying send out the message of the worth of humanistic values, the worth of compassion, the worth of human dignity, the worth of love, of mortality, of responsibility.

Ernie Lehman, a creative and caring writer and a dear friend, just wrote a marvelous piece in American Film that I heartily recommend, and that relates to you. In part he says, "forever getting up off an infinity of floors after numberless counts of ten, walking into unending storms of rights and lefts to the chin and to the heart as well, taking the jeers of the critics when they deserve it and the indifference of the public when they've earned it, coming back, coming back, coming back, always coming back, wanting another chance, maybe this time they'll get it right...and the amazing thing is that out of all this striving

and struggle there comes a great boon to the world, comes pleasure, comes entertainment, comes laughter and tears and illumination and knowledge and identification and understanding... and nothing will stop them, not you with your scorn and your sniping and your condescension from afar— you'll never stop them, nor you with your patronizing pronouncements from the Olympian heights of your subway trains, you'll never stop them, they'll just keep on coming back for more and coming back, and coming back, and not even death will stop them because right behind them are all the others waiting for a chance to have a go, who'll take all the misery and pain and punishment you can inflict on them as long as they can continue to fight and struggle to get back up again and try to do something well, to get something right."

Ernie was writing about Hollywood and films, but the worth of the struggle applies to T.V. too.

Why? Because the artistic and technical power of T.V. enables it to convey "images" of the world to the mind and heart of the viewer. And the total combination of these images help shape the viewer's vision of the world and of people. In a very real way, television is to the viewer what a parent is to a young child. T.V. presents, informs, entertains, invites, and shapes the images that become part of the thinking and feeling of the viewer.

And so, for the television writer, there is a most serious responsibility, a sacred responsibility if you will, to create images of the world and the human person that humanize rather than destroy.

The writers here present appreciate this most fragile power. You hold in your words and images the channels to a viewer's perception of the world. Your writing can uplift, inspire, encourage, and give some path of light in an often confusing and threatening world. Or your writing can present a vision of the world that prompts the viewer to bitterness, resentment, dulled passivity, total confusion, or final despair. In short, you have the power to create a vision that instills life, or leads to a form of death.

And so, it is with a deep sense of gratitude that we praise the writers nominated today for the agony and the sweat, the compassion and sensitivity that inspire their creative vision of the human heart.

*And to the networks, the production companies, and the creative personnel who enhance and convey this vision, special thanks are due. Four of the nine shows in the finals this year were produced by MTM, and so Grant, your recent appointment is a source of special encouragement to the Humanitas endeavor. This is the fourth time an episode of M*A*S*H has been nominated, and the third time for an episode of Lou Grant, and the second time for White Shadow. Hugh Wilson, WKRP In Cincinnati, and Harriett Weiss and Patt Shea of Archie Bunker's Place have been nominees before.*

To all of you whose vision has made the world of television and the world shaped by television a place of hope rather than darkness, our deepest thanks.