

Glad to be Alive—Proud to be Human

Humanitas Prize Luncheon

Welcome to the Eleventh Annual Humanitas Prize Luncheon. It is a delight to see so many old friends here today.

Do you know this is the fifth year in a row that Hill Street Blues has been in the finals? David Milch has been responsible for three of those nominations.

In the last three years, St. Elsewhere has had four shows nominated, thanks to Tom Fontana and John Masius.

In the last two years, Family Ties has placed four shows in the finals. Gary Goldberg had a lot to do with those.

And this is the second year in a row for Peter Silverman. Congratulations, Peter.

I am also delighted to see so many new faces here today. For those of you new to Humanitas, it might be well to spend a moment talking about the prize and its objectives. And the best way to do that is to tell you about the men and women who created the prize and now administer it.

We're Jews. We're Protestants. We're Catholics. We may even have an Agnostic or two. I don't usually hear their confessions.

We're all from the Business—Writers, Directors, Producers, Critics.

What we share is a commitment to the dignity and fulfillment of the human person.

We care about human values. We care about helping our fellow human beings grow and develop and become the kind of human beings God made them to be. We care about harnessing the tremendous humanizing potential of Television so that it can contribute to that process. In a word, we want to use our art and our craft and help others use theirs to enrich rather than degrade the human person.

I think all of us are aware of Television's tremendous power. In our culture, at this time, only the human family itself has a comparable power to communicate values, form consciences and motivate human behavior.

But what kind of values is it communicating? How is it forming the consciences of its viewers? What kind of behavior is it motivating?

Poorly used, TV can do great damage. It can stunt the process of human growth. It can impoverish its viewers, leaving them bored and empty, alienated and hostile.

Yet well used TV can greatly enrich their lives. It can cast sparks into the dark corners of the minds of its viewers, so that they can discover the answers to those questions with which, late at night, we all wrestle—Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What am I doing with this life of mine? What does it all add up to anyway?

TV can also challenge the freedom of its viewers so that they can take charge of their lives, weigh their options intelligently and make responsible choices. It can dissolve the walls of fear and ignorance that separate one group of people from another. And it can motivate respect, love and compassion in the human family, so that a global society can be built in which the dignity of every person will be affirmed and the rights of all people respected, a society in short, of peace and justice.

That's what TV can do. But is it doing it? Is American TV realizing its humanizing potential? If not, why not?

To answer these questions, we have to place American Television in its commercial context. For better or for worse—you can argue either way—in our system, it is the advertisers who foot the bills. They pay the networks to deliver to them the largest and demographically most desirable audience. For the networks, the name of the game is ratings, the larger, the better. Cost per thousand is the criteria by which so many decisions are made. As a result, there is tremendous pressure on the networks to do exploitive and manipulative programming, programming that appeals to the lowest common denominator and caters to the basic instincts of its viewers. They are tempted—I should say—we are all tempted to do whatever is necessary to pull the largest possible rating and pay little if any attention to Television's humanizing role.

And yet, those of us who have been around the business for any length of time know that there are many, many people, hundreds of them, perhaps thousands who do want to do value oriented programming. They are Writers and Directors and Producers and they are Programming Executives at the networks. They want to use their art and their positions to explore the moral dilemmas of this society, to challenge their viewers to move the real a little closer to the ideal, to help them live more enlightened, more free, more loving lives.

All of you in this room fall into that category.

But, let's face it. You struggle against considerable pressures, and often it seems that you fight alone. You would like some help, some support, some encouragement.

The Humanitas Prize exists to give that help, supply that support, and extend to these in the creative community the needed encouragement and recognition. It exists to leaven the commercial facets of this business.

To be sure, Television is a mass media. Our programs are broadcast. TV Drama is a popular, rather than a fine art. We fail if we narrowcast, appealing only to a small elitist segment of the viewing public. Our job is to entertain. But I am convinced that while we entertain, we must also enrich. And I am further convinced that there is no incompatibility between entertainment and enrichment. I'll go one step further. I am convinced that the most entertaining shows are also the most enriching ones and the most enriching shows are also the most entertaining ones. Not only are the two not mutually exclusive, they presuppose and demand each other. Each is incomplete without the other.

Why do I say that? Because I have seen the shows you have created. You have faced the creative challenge and you have mastered it. You have enriched while you have entertained and you have entertained while you have enriched. You've done it. Recognizing, encouraging, supporting, celebrating people like you is what the Humanitas Prize is all about.

And you are not alone. Like John and Arthur, I've been involved in the Humanitas Prize judging from the beginning and I can tell you this is the best year we've ever had. I'm not saying TV as a whole is better. But I am saying we have a wider range of choices this year than ever before. Many other writers and producers are tackling subjects of significance. They are probing deeply and they are trying to say something.

In the 30 minute category, this year we had shows on nuclear war, homosexuality, child molestation, death, dope, unselfishness, the meaning of life, sharing oneself, despair and hope, and having a baby.

In the 60 minute category, there were two shows on violence, two on adoption, one each on illegal aliens, race, the struggle for justice, the Vietnam War, sexual harassment, the search for meaning, and the third world.

And in the two hour category there were two shows on death, two on teenage suicide, one each on race, dope, courage, fear, sexual exploitation, wife abuse, mental retardation, homosexuality, guilt and heroism.

I don't mean to say that all of these attempts have been successful. But the effort has been made—we have to recognize that—and more often than one might suppose, they have been successful.

So you are not unique in dramatizing themes of importance. You are not unique in creating shows that succeed in being both entertaining and enriching. In the opinion of the judges, you are unique because you did it so very, very well.

The improvement in the sitcom area is especially noticeable. For years we had the classic character comedies—Mary Tyler Moore, All In The Family and MASH—which went inside their characters and said something important about what it means to be a human being. But then we lost them and we were afraid they would not be replaced. We were wrong. Family Ties and The Bill Cosby Show belong to the same classic genre. They are very, very funny. But they are also very insightful. I especially like the positive image of the family that they project.

And let's face it, these shows are very, very popular. It may just be that the American viewing public is growing up, that its craving for escapist programming is now on the wane, that it wants its entertainment laced with enrichment, that it will support shows that stretch and nourish the mind, that fire the 'will' with hope. That warm the 'heart' with compassion. That challenge us to take charge of our lives, affirm our dignity and reach out in love to each other, shows, in short, that give insight and perspective is what it means to be a human being.

These kind of shows didn't always do well in the 60s or the 70s or even in the early 80s. But they are doing well now.

The times, they are a-changing. The viewing public is in a different place now than it was then. I like to think the Television audience has grown up, that it hungers for stories that compress life and distill reality in order to reveal its meaning. I think it wants its bad news about the human situation balanced

by good news. I think it wants to see husbands and wives who love each other and are not afraid to sacrifice for their children. And it wants to see children who respect and obey their parents.

In the sexual area, I think the audience is more fascinated by the struggle to be honest, trusting, and emotionally intimate than it is with the mechanics of physical coupling.

And in the area of human conflict, I think it finds the attempt to resolve problems without physical or verbal violence much more riveting than it does the gun or the fist or the abusive tongue.

Anyone can write a shoot-out or a seduction. It takes an artist to dramatize the alternative.

I hope I'm not being Pollyanna. I certainly am not suggesting a view of reality that is naively optimistic. Evil is evil and all too pervasive, so we have to portray it. But I wonder if we haven't overdone it, portraying evil without its alternative, portraying those who do evil without hope or compassion.

The rose-colored glasses of the Romantic have no place in our business. But neither do the shades of the Cynic which filter out everything but human depravity.

We need to portray human beings as they are, not stereotyped villains or caricature saints, people like those we work with or who live next door, or in our own home, people like us, real people, flawed yet loving, attracted by evil, yet capable of good, torn between grandeur and misery, beautiful in their ambivalence.

I think the viewing public has had it with anti-heroes and the prophets of despair.

It wants positive role models. And it wants a vision of hope.

I think it yearns for stories about people who live with dignity and are not afraid to struggle for what they know is right. Stories that make you glad to be alive and proud to be a human being.

I think the viewing public hungers for human values and will support shows that communicate them.

If I am right this may be one of the few times in history when virtue is lucrative, when the right thing is also the profitable thing, when those who write and air humanly enriching programming may be financially enriched as a result. The jury is still out. But there are grounds for hope.

As most of you know, this is the first year we will be giving Humanitas Prizes for Children's Programming. This is an area where there is a desperate need for humanizing programming.

In the United States today, there are seven million latch-key kids, kids who come home to a parentless home. They come home to a TV set. It is their surrogate parent.

Children's Programming in America has been called a disaster area, a national scandal. In evaluating the programs submitted, we didn't find it quite that bad. But we do feel it still has a long way to go before realizing its potential. This is especially true in the area of animation.

All five nominees in the Children's area are from CBS. You are to be congratulated. This time next year, we hope NBC and ABC will also be in the running.

But enough of this. In the name of the executive committee and trustees of the Human Family Institute, I congratulate all of our nominees today. You have made a significant contribution to the American viewing public. You have enriched us all. In their name, I thank you.

And in my own name, I'd just like to say that I wish we had 17 prizes to give out today. You're all winners. Thank you very much.