

Pay-TV's media doctors

Just when it began to look as though the specialty channel Hospital Satellite Network might have been sent by some providential satellite to save us from the other pay-TV demons, we were told, not so fast. We may well feel incapacitated for one reason or another, but to live in Canada, medicare aside, is not to be confused with actually being hospitalized.

Which is not to say we don't have oodles of media doctors out there, all of them ready to cure what ails us. André Bureau, chairman of the CRTC, is one such person. His diagnosis is based on somewhat premature readings of vital signs but true to the office he holds, he says he may call for a major check-up in the fall, having first met with broadcasters and producers. To activate a little interest in the idea, the subject of Canadian content levels is apparently open to discussion: more quality, less quantity - just the kind of thing we're generally very fond of discussing.

The problem is the old story of Canadian viewers wanting access to more American programming. In the far north some talented citizens dish themselves up some alternative programs and get shut down by the RCMP no less. Meanwhile condo owners, bar patrons and other special interest groups in the south are allowed the very same access.

During the first week of May in the midst of these discussions, First Choice asks and answers: "Are you

free this Sunday and Monday? We are." And so they were, but looking at the line-up of programs offered on these two days, one couldn't help but wonder whether the people responsible for the offerings had been well all winter.

Certainly there was an attempt to offer a schedule for a variety of tastes: children, families, teen-agers, jocks, etc. Conspicuous by its absence, however, was any kind of blockbuster movie, something very original and not available elsewhere, some kind of sure-fire hit, something very popular or very exciting or very good or very... well, very anything. The mystery of it all was not so much is this all there is as can this really be the best way to market pay-TV?

For the kids there was *Snoopy Come Home* and *Mighty Mouse in the Great Space Chase* on Sunday, followed by *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* and *Inspector Gadget* ("...the biggest animated series ever to come out of Canada," according to a First Choice program guide) on Monday. Clearly if First Choice wants to be taken seriously in its claim to being "the Home Entertainment Channel", it must offer quality children's programming. If this Peanuts-heavy line-up isn't it, at least it's a beginning.

The same might be said of the Monday night USFL football game. Football on Monday nights once worked for ABC, but the jury is still out on the league in the U.S., let alone in Canada. If you're looking at how to

carve a niche for yourself in the highly competitive field of sports broadcasting, the USFL may be the best risk worth taking. The fact remains, however, that First Choice will stand or fall on the basis of the movies they manage to obtain either through purchase or their own investment. And it is here that these two "Free-view" days were such a bewildering disappointment.

Table For Five, *Eddie Macon's Run*, *Baby It's You*, *One Wolf McQuade*, and *Hanky Panky*. Family drama, a thriller, a teen-age romance, Kung-Fu and a comedy: variety, to be sure, but as Gary Hart says to himself just about every morning, where IS the meat?

To say that none of these films was especially well-received by the critics during its theatrical release would be to simply state what pay-TV programmers have come to expect from 'purist, intellectual, cretinous critics who live in another world.'

To remind people that apart from *Inspector Gadget*, none of this schedule even hints at anything Canadian would be equally ridiculous, as this type of comment is read as the rhetoric of extreme nationalists who want us all forced through 'boring' Canadian movies.

Given that the success of pay-TV in general and First Choice in particular is in everyone's best interests, the point is more salient: these First Choice choices represent more than bad taste, they represent bad business sense. If nobody went out of their way to see any of these movies when they were released theatrical-

ly, what would lead anyone to believe that putting them on pay-TV would suddenly make them a draw? Instead of bringing in new viewers, this kind of programming confirms what too many people already suspect: pay-TV is a waste of money.

Can you imagine anyone being so thrilled at having seen *One Wolf McQuade* (a Chuck Norris epic for the uninitiated) that he or she would make a point of calling up their local cable company first thing Monday morning prepared to cough up the more than \$35 required for installation and one month of service?

Surely the purpose of these free days is to show off the channel at its best, to make subscribers of the larger, regular television audience, those who may not even have heard of pay-TV. In the February issue of First Choice's Program Guide, our national licensee congratulates itself on having attracted 300,000 subscribers. It's difficult to imagine a significant increase in this figure based on the attractions offered during the latest freeview days.

Congratulations to Leonard Cohen on turning 50, finding God and being discovered by the CBC, not necessarily in that order. His half-hour video, *I Am A Hotel*, directed by Allan Nichols, remains a rock video in form if not in content, but there is no denying Cohen's charisma or his talent. In Toronto, CBC executives may right now be discussing just how much of a future this kid has.

Kevin Tierney ●

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