

# Stylized puppets making fresh remarks

By Judith Martin

Untold numbers of children watch television every Saturday morning, and many sensitive but gutless parents--the kind who worry about what their children see, but don't quite have the nerve to make them turn the damn thing off--have complained about the networks' offerings.

The chief fare is cartoons, about as nourishing for a child as the snacks they advertise. The alternative--again assuming you don't just push the button and order everyone to go out and play--is educational television. "Sesame Street," "Misterogers' Neighborhood" and "The Electric Company" have deservedly earned parental approval, but after a few years, the child gets the idea about the alphabet and feeling good about his body, or whatever.

So now we have "Sneakers," a children's program given the quality treatment, which will be shown on Saturdays from 9:30 to 10 a.m. on WTOP (Channel 9), starting August 14.

In its way, it is much more appalling than any cartoon

"Sneakers" means well. It has stylized puppets who make fresh remarks about adult mistakes--the hallmark of those educational programs. It intersperses instruction with quickie jokes.

But it presents the child-viewer with a world that is three steps re-

moved from reality. The main satire of the program spoofs television newscasts. Children do not watch television newscasts. They watch regular programs, some of which, such as "Mary Tyler Moore," draw on television for their satirical base. So here we have a television program satirizing a television program about a television program.

What's the matter? Aren't parents and teachers considered laughable anymore?

The puppet stars of "Sneakers" are a handsome but dumb anchorman, a flaky weathercaster, a goofy sportscaster, and so on. It's often hard to tell if this is really a spoof, considering how hard the real newscasters try to be entertaining.

For instance, a roving reporter is shown running around asking people on the street on a nice day, asking, "What does a day like this do for you?"

Now, if that's supposed to be funny, it's too close to the typical non-question asked by real roving reporters with nothing better to do. Or maybe it's meant to be charming, the sort of question you might ask a child, hoping to get a darling, darling answer in return.

But even that is better than a running joke about a newsman who has lost his notes and can't speak without them. That should get a 10-year-old right where he lives.

One of the few segments which isn't about the troubles of television personnel features an Air Ace, World War

I style. This program is aimed to 9-to-12-year-olds, most of whom missed World War I. What they know about it is probably from the Red Baron in the comic strip, "Peanuts;" another assumption that the child lives in a world of one-or-twice-removed experience.

When the program tries to deal with a child's actual life, it seems ill at ease. There is a segment which purports to teach how to tie shoelaces (a skill which a 9-to-12-year-old has probably not missed, and if he has, he has probably tripped in the traffic and killed himself by now). You cannot learn to tie shoelaces from watching someone else do it on a show which is looking at you toe first.

A quickie lesson in the making of mustard, a more suitable topic, contains the information that "dinasauers were the first creatures on earth to discover mustard plants were good to eat." Really? How do they know? If we're supposed to distrust that, because it's so hilarious, how do we know the rest of the recipe is accurate?

And so on. It seems a shame to pick endless faults when commercial television is trying to produce something good. It's an open invitation for some executive who listened to parents' complaints to shrug and decide that there's no pleasing them.

Maybe "Sneakers" is right. Maybe there isn't anything quite as funny-patetic as earnest television personnel.

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Puppeteers (from left) Ingrid Crepeau, Julian Yochum and Sarah Toth Yochum bring life to puppets (from left) Susan Sorenson, Foster Benjamin Bright and Duke. All provide "Sneakers" Saturdays on Channel 9.

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