

SHOW BUSINESS & TV

Biting the Hand

The *New Bill Cosby Show*, complained TV Critic David Sheehan, looked as if it had been written by high school dropouts. *Gunsmoke* should have blown away years ago, and Doris Day was little more than "peaches and cream cuteness" on her highly rated sitcom. Fair enough comment, except that all the shows happen to be on CBS, and Sheehan is critic for KNXT, a CBS-owned station in Los Angeles.

Though TV stations have had drama and movie reviewers for years, Sheehan is the first example of commercial TV regularly criticizing TV on the air. CBS executives in New York City were understandably reluctant to approve the plan, which went into effect on KNXT's 6 o'clock news two weeks ago. The Los Angeles outlets of NBC and ABC were downright hostile when Sheehan asked them for film clips to illustrate his reviews. "They felt that I would automatically praise CBS shows and pan theirs," he says. ABC went so far as to demand a signed affidavit that the reviews would be favorable. NBC simply said no.

As it turned out, neither had any more cause to worry than CBS. Besides knocking some CBS entries, Sheehan has praised some of the rival programs. He raved about ABC's *Julie Andrews Hour* and saluted *NBC Reports*. To even things up, he said that ABC's new series, *The Rookies*, was a "dumb daydream" and called NBC's first *Search* episode, starring Hugh O'Brian, a "kind of plastic epitome of wasteland television: you want to ask for your hour back when it's over." With all the knocks, CBS of course has had its share of favorable reviews. Sheehan liked, among others, *M*A*S*H*, *Maude* and *Anna and the King*.



Sheehan, 34, was a novelist and the director of an avant-garde theater in Los Angeles before becoming a cultural critic for KNXT last year. He says that he expected to have to battle his bosses over unfavorable reviews of CBS products, but "there hasn't been a hint of censorship. In fact, I've got to the state of reverse paranoia, and I'm so fully convinced of their fairness that I just say what I think needs to be said." He adds, as proof of his paranoia: "That may be my downfall."

The other two networks now give him clips of some shows but withhold others, pleading legal difficulties. Given TV's penchant for imitation, it is a fair bet that other stations will follow with TV critics of their own.