

MORE ON TINTED TV

Addition of Color Alone Will Not Make A Show Good, It Must Also Entertain

By JACK GOULD

ENTHUSIASTS for color television are going to have to readjust their sights. Seeing last Sunday's color telecast of Donald O'Connor's appearance on the "Comedy Hour" left no doubt that the novelty of color can wear off quickly and that the acid test of the tinted medium will be the same as in black-and-white—how good is the show? Color by itself will not save any show.

Mr. O'Connor's presentation was the first regular commercial program to be put on the air in color and also the first not staged for the special benefit of an invited audience. In some ways it was probably a clearer indication of what may be expected as a matter of routine during the transitional days when color is being introduced and black-and-white service also is being maintained.

After seeing three color programs in the home—"Carmen," the C.B.S. Friday afternoon variety attraction with Mike Wallace and now the "Comedy Hour"—a viewer of color TV cannot avoid one inescapable conclusion.

If the quality of the color program is either second rate or not to individual taste, the set owner indicates no reluctance to turn the color off and look for something better in black and white.

Interestingly enough, this is not an isolated reaction. Others who watched Mr. O'Connor's uninspired show also were altogether willing to tune in an alternative monochrome attraction.

Chief Emphasis

The repercussions from this instinctive audience reaction, needless to say, could be profound during the difficult and costly period of getting color TV going. The sponsor who thinks color alone will give him an edge in the ratings could have a sad and expensive awakening. If there is a better show on a rival black-and-white channel, the audience is not going to stay with him.

Up to now the chief emphasis in color TV has been on the technical feat in reproducing good color on the home screen. But it must be doubted whether the layman and the average housewife will attach anything like the same importance to this accomplishment as the engineer has done. Even after a very short time of sustained looking at color under normal home surroundings it is surprising how quickly the color is accepted as a matter of course and interest shifts to the older and more familiar program values, i. e., quality.

In this connection it is bound to add to the creative burden already carried by producers, directors, actors and writers. A program that is bad in black and white can seem twice as bad in color because the eye is more aware of what could have been done and wasn't. Mr. O'Connor's program was a case in point.

Much, if not most, of Mr. O'Connor's show was turned over to extremely lengthy sketches which were not particularly funny and quite repetitious. This, of course, reflects the current fashion in variety comedy, which is to stress a book or dramatic routines beyond all reason. The old-fashioned variety

program that is well balanced between sketch, song and dance has all but disappeared. The stars seem determined this season to be on stage continuously.

After the long siege of sketches a viewer yearned for more of Mr. O'Connor's dancing, which was truly exciting in color. His graceful movements in the long red coat were extremely effective, as was the dancing of the chorus line.

Increased Scope

If the value of color is to be realized fully, the major TV popular shows must move away from the close-up approach with its concentration on a single personality. Rather it must aspire to the broader panorama and variety of visual movement associated with the Broadway musical. Because color does give a viewer a greatly added sense of depth and dimension this increased scope must be put to work. This means much more attention must be paid to production than has been done in black-and-white. Just as black-and-white TV had to develop its own techniques apart from radio, color TV must strike out on its own too.

These precious weeks before the formal authorization of color must be used advantageously for a much greater awareness of the artistic use of color than is being displayed on the current test programs.

Although its technical reproduction of color three Fridays ago on the Mike Wallace show was not good at all—C. B. S. seems to be having more than its share of tough luck with minor mishaps—the Columbia chain did display, if only for a few moments, an exciting and imaginative appreciation of color values, more so, in fact, than were noticeable on the O'Connor show.

A couple of the C. B. S. gowns were visually breathtaking whereas on the O'Connor show the costumes of the dancers in the closing number were all of solid colors and lacking in any noticeable originality. It must be hoped that "Your Show of Shows" will be done in color soon so a viewer can see Paul Du Pont's designs, which look ever so much better in color in the studio than they do on black-and-white TV.

The lesson to be drawn from the current color telecasts is twofold. For the broadcaster there is a very real danger if he relies on the color per se to introduce the new tinted medium. It is not enough. It may be helpful for some shows but only if it is employed with maximum imagination. To be blinded by the excitement and novelty of color could be fatal to its future success. The color show had better be a good show first and in color second or the public is going to wonder what all the shouting is about.

For the viewer who wonders whether he should wait for color or stick with black-and-white, he can apply his own test. Look at the shows that are done in color (N. B. C. announces such programs but C. B. S. does its one show on the Q. T. at 5:30 Fridays) and see how they stand up as entertainment regardless of tint. If the

shows are not hits, and they haven't been as of this writing, a viewer doesn't have to worry and can rely on black-and-white.

Even limited firsthand experience with color TV in the home makes a viewer look somewhat askance at the wild predictions currently making the rounds. That color TV ultimately will supplant black-and-white would seem assured, but when that date will be is a different matter. Black-and-white programs, be they "live" or drawn from the stockpile of unreleased Hollywood films, can be assured of an audience indefinitely if they are superior to color shows. The play, not the hue, still is the thing.