

'SEASON'S GREETINGS'

Creative Folk of Video Show Color Artistry

By JACK GOULD

GORGEOUS color television, incredibly rich in texture and gay in brilliance, truly came into existence last week.

The occasion was the National Broadcasting Company's special offering on Tuesday evening entitled "Season's Greetings" and the reason for its success was plain. For the first time the creative color specialists really were given free rein to try out their new art. They acquitted themselves magnificently.

The meaning of the addition of color to the home screen could hardly have been more vividly emphasized than by "Season's Greetings." Because, if judged solely as a black-and-white presentation, the program was distinctly pedestrian and much of its contents quite routine. There was one inexcusable slip in good taste. To cap matters there also was the disheartening spectacle of Basil Rathbone, one of the theatre's more distinguished players, turning into a boardwalk pitchman to sell a remedy for indigestion.

But these shortcomings did not detract from the larger significance of the evening. More than any other color show yet done either in rehearsal or on the air "Season's Greetings" was a brilliant realization of all the hard work put into tinted video by scores of the industry's engineers and scientists.

The quality of the color literally beggared description. The mixture of hues varied from a poignant delicacy to a festive liveliness that was different from Technicolor, different from the theatre, different from a printed picture. As one scene of complete visual loveliness followed another, a viewer actually saw color tell its own story in a way impossible before the advent of electronic tints.

Opportunity

Up until Tuesday the choice of programs to be done in color by N. B. C. had largely stemmed from the executive echelon. For practical reasons they were mainly black-and-white presentations to which hues were added. But "Season's Greetings" was done first and foremost for color and only incidentally for black-and-white, in which it was seen by owners of existing sets.

The opportunity was not missed by members of the color staff—Norman Grant, Reid Davis, Richard Day, in overall command; Burr Smidt, who designed the sets; Rose Bogdanoff, the costume designer and Henry Frisch, who worked on the lighting.

Most of their previous productions, including "Amahl and the Night Visitors," had been done in subdued tones but "Season's Greetings," with its many varying moods, called for many visual contrasts. In particular there was reason to use "hot" lighting, lighting of brilliance and vividness. The effect was thoroughly exciting.

Of the many individual items on the program there were two that, colorwise, were exceptionally outstanding. The first was the appearance of Andre Eglevsky and Maria Tallchief in a pas de deux from "The Nutcracker."

Eglevsky's jacket was Burgundy red and Miss Tallchief's tutu was a fragile dusty pink. In the rear stage there were soft yet distinct blues and yellows with scenes dissolving one into another. In the first extensive use of background lighting in color TV the over-all hue was varied for changing effect. If such a thing can be imagined, the program was as if a joyful painting had acquired motion. Call it electronic painting; that's what it was.

Range of Color

The program's close featured a boys choir. Against a cathedral background the youngsters were attired in cottas of the softest but-tercup yellow. For the final fade-out the camera shifted to a statue of the Madonna in barely discernible blue. Coupled with the high voices of the boys, the picture was a moving emotional experience.

Because color TV has not yet reached the point where it can undertake too much extensive movement on one program many of the participating artists were seen in rather confining close-up—Ezio Pinza, in an aria from "The Magic Flute," Eddie Albert, who was host, in a rendition of "September Song," and Paul Winchell, in a reading of "Letter from Virginia." One could not help be impressed, however, by the extraordinary good quality of the flesh tones.

The Robert Shaw Chorale took part in the program and again the color made the difference. The vivid plaid scarves were reproduced with astonishing fidelity, as were the hats of the ladies, the ornaments and the Christmas tree.

The increased lighting used on the Tuesday program illustrated the blessing that color TV is going to be to the weaker sex. Jane Kean, who with her sister, Betty, held down part of the comedy assignment, was dressed in a bronze-color gown and was wearing an orchid. Her facial coloring was life itself. It all added up to one thing: genuine feminine oomph.

Now for the less attractive aspects of the program, which in their own way, should give potential users of color pause for thought: As an introduction for the commercial there was a most appetizing "shot" of a Christmas dinner in full color. Then came an excessively reddish picture of the

indigestion remedy accompanied by Mr. Rathbone's suave intonations on how to relieve distress. In black-and-white its juxtaposition was bad enough; in color it was little short of monstrous. Can't even the family Christmas dinner be free from huckster opportunism? And the participation of Mr. Rathbone in such a demeaning affair was the last straw.

Harpo Marx also did his old vaudeville bit of cutting off a singer's dress while she was rendering an operatic excerpt. The turn went too far for TV's family audience and was not funny. Harpo should have played the harp.

"Season's Greetings" made clear that the introduction of color television could be almost as revolutionary in its impact on entertainment as the coming of black-and-white video.

For the TV manufacturers the show presents a greater lesson. They had better forget about leisurely transition to color. The switch to color TV very easily could assume stampede proportions.