

TELEVISION

Lindy's Law

According to a law established and promulgated by bald-headed, cigar-chomping know-it-alls who foregather every night at Lindy's, where always punctuating their talk with the same expression — a long, quizzically inflected "Fun-ny?" — they conduct post-mortems on recent show biz "action," the life expectancy of a television comedian is proportional to the total amount of his exposure on the medium.

If, pathetically deluded by hubris, he undertakes a regular weekly or even monthly program, his chances of survival beyond the first season are slight; but if he adopts the conservation of resources policy favored by these senescent philosophers of "the Business," and confines himself to "specials" and "guest shots," he may last to the age of Ed Wynn.

Lindy's Law, despite its awesome air of common sense, is more a cautionary fable than an accurate description or prognostic; for, as one might suppose, the factors that determine success or failure for even such simple creatures as comedians are a good deal more complicated than the rule suggests. Indeed, frequency of appearance may be one of the least important considerations, ranking behind ease and originality of invention, competition from rival attractions and the moral and psychological factors of self-confidence and self-acceptance; or so at least the careers of television's greatest indigent comers — Sid Caesar and Jonathan Winters — would lead one to believe.

In his heyday in the early fifties, while presiding over the greatest free entertainment offering since the Roman circus — a mammoth weekly one-and-one-half hour variety program titled with Barnum-like bravado *The Show of Shows* — Sid Caesar made the conservationists at Lindy's gasp and grab for digitalis by regularly burning up in one performance enough comic material to furnish a whole Broadway review. But what the boys with the Pierce Arrow pinky rings failed to grasp was that Caesar and his string of writers (headed by that comic Svengali, Mel

Brooks) were not sitting around snapping their fingers, trying to pull ideas out of the air. The Caesar-Brooks syndicate was systematically mining an inexhaustible Golconda: nothing less than the buried life of a whole generation whose imaginations, having been cut off with their last monster movie or "cowboy," were now sputtering into life again as Sid conjured up through inspired mimicry and distortion the physical appearance, speech patterns (Caesar was a great "dialectician"), thoughts, prejudices and passions of every cinematic hero from Rasputin to Roy Rogers. *The Show of Shows* lives in memory as the First Great International Festival of Film Parody. It made Saturday night the most convivial night in the week for millions, and it earned its modest niche in the history of American humor by paving the way for the more sophisticated use of the movie referent by the "sick" comics, the "black" humorists of contemporary fiction and, eventually, by Hollywood itself.

But then a better, or at least a better rehearsed show came along, and history repeated itself as Sid Caesar went down, like Fred Allen before him, firing beautifully aimed but utterly ineffectual salvos at the glass walls of the isolation booth. There was, too, a personal factor in Caesar's decline: sensing the loss of popular support, the comic began to clutch frantically for the public pulse. Abandoning the unerring inner direction of his early years, Caesar chose unwisely to confine himself to the trite subject of suburban domestic contretemps — a sort of *I Love Shelly*. The fag end of this sad strategy was visible this past season, when he returned to regular programming with a situation comedy show concocted by the most inappropriate writer imaginable — Goodman Ace, the man who put all that soft soap in Perry Como's mouth.

But if Sid Caesar looked bad trying to liven up a dull show this year, Jonathan Winters was practically invisible on the pilot of a series of specials that will run next season on NBC-TV (supple-

mented by six guest appearances on *The Andy Williams Show*). Smothered by costumes, props and trick sets, crowded to the rail by an unfunny but desperately competitive Art Carney, pushed off the screen for long stretches by clips from *Mad, Mad World* and finally fogged out in a *House and Garden* apotheosis (feeding the squirrels with his kids while the sound track drooled "togetherness"), the real Jonathan Winters — the way-out comic whose obsessions have included violence, homosexuality, insanity, flying saucers and two Ohio hicks with wickedly suggestive names, Suggins and Frickert — was totally eclipsed by the public relations image of an affable, modest, regular guy who just does kookie things for laughs. Yet, a few weeks later, safe at home on the Jack Paar show, Winters was his old self: prancing out in a satyr wig, he turned on the audience subliminally with an insanely fruity tribute to "thrping"; then taking a stick from Paar, with incredible speed and assurance he improvised around this simple prop more than a dozen grotesque vignettes. Two of these flashes were perfect Charles Addams cartoons: grasping the stick in the middle and assuming a worried look, he held it out saying, "This came off one of them giant beetles, Doctor." Later, with the stick held against his chest like a quivering spear, he gasped, "The chair recognizes the delegate from Nyasaland."

Success or failure for Winters obviously has nothing to do with the problems of supply and demand; all his difficulties arise from his attitude toward the public and, ultimately, toward himself. Neither a chrome-plated professional entertainer nor a genuine folk artist, but rather a self-proclaimed "square" who believes, with most Americans, that fantasy leads on to insanely fruity tribute to "thrping"; is either clean or dirty, Winters has no clear-cut conventions or social identity with which to structure his work or placate his conscience. Like a plow jockey with a dybbuk in him, he can't be certain whether he's a genius or a nut, a funny man or a fool. Equally afraid to blow his cool or to alienate the prudish mass audience, Winters naturally lends himself to the emasculating demands of TV's image makers.

Only with Jack Paar is Winters wholly

himself. Paar provides a true parental presence — shrewd, sympathetic and uncompetitive, willing to draw the comic out, not afraid to cut him off when he takes the wrong turn, and even tolerant of an occasional put on.

When Jonathan Winters is elevated to TV's highest rank next season, he will face for the first time the inevitable

problems of the prime time complex. The "smaht" professionals, frightened by the unpredictability of the comic's mental fugues, will urge him to develop a safe, clean, dependable formula. If he agrees, the Captain of the Balclutha will soon be, with the gang at Lindy's, a patient toiler on what Fred Allen once described as a "treadmill to oblivion."

ALBERT GOLDMAN

ARCHITECTURE

Cheering Up the Capital

Last week President Kennedy's wish to transform Washington's dingy Pennsylvania Avenue into the nation's most noble and symbolic esplanade was given tangible design. The Council of architects and urban planners appointed by Mr. Kennedy has come up with a model that combines appropriate baroque grandeur for a capital city with a practical scheme which points the way to save all modern cities from strangulation by the automobile. Now President Johnson must set up a model organization which will not only accomplish his predecessor's magnificent intention but will also point the way to save our cities from the strangulation of political inertia, bureaucratic chaos and niggardliness.

The Pennsylvania Avenue plan is worthy of a major, comprehensive and immediate effort. It must be immediate because huge new federal offices are going to be built anyway. Slummy old buildings are being or will soon be torn down. Large, often handsome but obsolete hotels and other buildings on the avenue are being destroyed, remodeled or sold by real estate speculators. Like all downtown thoroughfares in America, Pennsylvania Avenue is rapidly changing and the change might as well be guided and planned before irrevocable follies are committed. The change must be for the better and should make us proud.

The Council's plan would. Where the avenue now indecisively peters out on Capitol Hill, the plan envisions an orderly, beautiful setting. Along the proposed new avenue we would have a dignified forecourt for the National

Gallery of Art and a bustling new plaza in front of the Archives Building whose pedestrian malls, lined by stores and hotels, would reach deep into the downtown area. At the White House end there would be a large new square, approaching in size and splendor the Place de la Concorde. The Council sees it as the first truly urban square in this country making of the White House, the handsome old Treasury and an imposing new White House Gate a majestic unit with unmistakable identity and impact. Double and triple rows of trees, new private and government buildings on the north side which harmonize with the Beaux-Arts Federal Triangle complex on the south side, stepped up sidewalks so people could get a better look at the parades, would complete the new grandeur.

To save it and us from being smothered by automobiles, the Council has adapted the lesson of Britain's already famous "Buchanan Report," officially known as "The Study of the Long Term Problems of Traffic in Towns" of the Royal Ministry of Transport. The English planner-architect Colin Buchanan and his group reject the still-prevalent American notion of ramming big super-highways through the city wherever automobiles want to go in a hurry. They would permit only such traffic as is needed in each "environmental area" of the city, as they call it. Cars that now merely pass through the environment would be routed along "distributor roads" and "feeder streets" with various levels for various speeds and destinations. These are to be sunken, with shelves leading to underground

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