

# Live TV Goes Awry

And what the writer learned from a  
*Studio One* disaster. **By Loring Mandel**

**T**his brief narrative, describing a hapless television program at a particular time in the history of that medium, is written in the hope of being instructive. Life is, if fortune has any pity whatsoever, a series of lessons learned. The experience related here was a small but sharp lesson for me. Otherwise, why tell it? But I was merely an observer, since my part in the matter was over the day before all this took place. Except for the moment of epiphany.

I had been asked by Herb Brodtkin, who had replaced Felix Jackson as producer of *Studio One* in 1957, to write an adaptation of a novel for that program. 1957 was a pivotal year in the generally unpalatable history of television. The motion-picture studios, after five years of refusal to acknowledge that television had a future, were opening the floodgates and virtually forcing their contract actors to appear in the electronic format. Slogans such as "Movies are better than ever!" had failed to recapture the audiences enchanted by Uncle Miltie, wrestling and *Broadway Open House*. Now, in 1957, with almost eight hours a week of original live and intimate drama on

television, the studios began a more effective attack: they would subsume television and thus both control it and reap its profits. By 1958, a year after the program here described, control of the medium was already well along down Route 66 toward the sunset.

Another sea change in 1957 was the obvious disintegration of the blacklist. Ed Murrow's exposure of Senator Joseph McCarthy in March of 1954 and the Army-McCarthy hearings that Spring had added to a growing backlash, yet even as late as 1956 when CBS fired John Henry Faulk because his name appeared in Red Channels, the blacklist was still alive. The unnamed gentleman at Young & Rubicam who would tell producers whom they could hire and whom they could not, David Susskind advised me, was still in business at his disreputable telephone. But by 1957, producers such as Susskind, Herb Brodtkin and John Houseman began to cast their shows without calling that gentleman, and the structure of political blacklisting began to crumble.

It was in that time and environment that I was hired to adapt *The Rice Sprout Song*, a novel by Eileen Chang. It was rigorously anti-communist, which

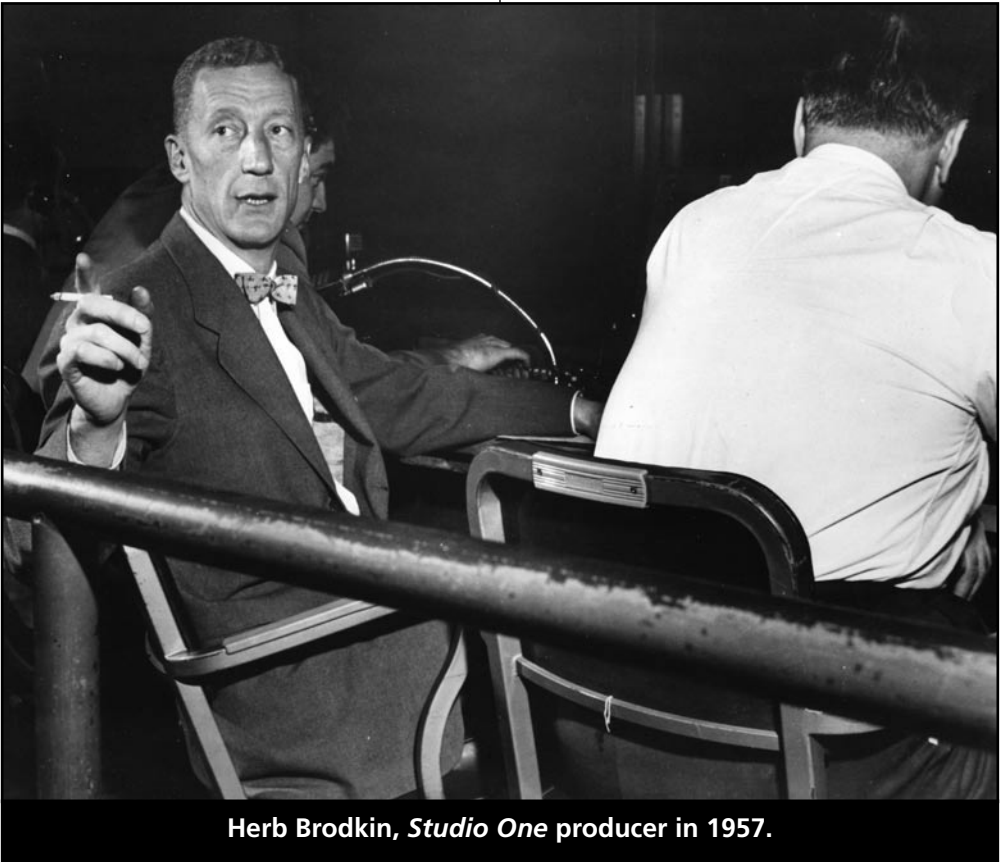
proved to be ironic. The director hired by Herb for this show was Sidney Lumet, a preeminent television director rapidly approaching the beginning of a exceptional film career. And Sidney, to whom we should

all be grateful, cast the show with actors almost exclusively from the blacklist. Some had not worked in TV for years and had seen their careers, once glowing with promise, fallen to nothing. Olive Deering, Vivian Nathan, David Opatoshu and David Stewart were among the leads; Dolores Sutton and Michael Tolan had important feature roles. Only the Canadian actor, John Colicos, cast in the lead opposite

Olive Deering, had no background in or knowledge of the Yiddish theater or the Group Theater. Sidney, of course, was the son of a well-known Yiddish actor; his instant rapport with the cast was a joy, and the first two days

of rehearsal at Central Plaza on the Lower East Side were spent around the rehearsal table swapping stories of the late lamented past. Also, since Sidney was married to Gloria Vanderbilt at the time, there were a few stories of life among the wealthiest. Lunch was at Moskowitz and Lupowitz. After the rehearsal period, the show was moved to the upper east side, into a studio gracelessly fashioned from a former

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Herb Brodtkin, *Studio One* producer in 1957.

Photofest

movie theater.

The story line of *The Rice Sprout Song* is not easy to describe: A woman from a cruelly poor village returns from the city where she had gone to earn money. She is greeted by her starving family. Her husband and little daughter are barely surviving, and she is at first unwilling to divide their small portion of rice with her brother and sister-in-law, who share the hut. Her brother is too weak to work, to even get out of bed, her sister-in-law is uncompromisingly bitter toward her. And her parents, old and unable to work, can only sit and shake their heads at their daughter's troublesome anti-communism. There is also the cheerful, glad-handing official who is constantly demanding a greater tax tribute of the family's rice allotment to the government. When a few sacks of rice are to be distributed, a riot ensues as the starving villagers try to empty the granary, and the woman's husband in the forefront of the action is shot and killed. The woman's elderly parents denounce her to the official. Her small daughter is given away and she is banished from the village, to wander out in the snow of a winter storm to certainly perish.

**This was live television; no stopping, no do-overs: when the red light comes on it goes.**

Sidney wanted this to play as realistically as possible, as I'm sure Herb did as well. The snow effect was decided upon, some kind of gypsum flakes to cover the set and drift and blow in the final scene. All these Jews (and John Colicos) were to be made up with Oriental eyes. By that time in the process, I was just an observer. With

all the technical problems in doing such a show, live, in this small studio, there was little interest in my revising the stolid dialogue.

The dress was difficult. Because of the artificial snow, the actors were suffering certain gypsum-induced respiratory consequences and the coughing was considerable. The greater problem was the make-up. Up above the balcony of the theater, in what was the former projectionist's booth, a make-up room had been created. Cosmetic artists of questionable ability were struggling with the revising of all the actors' eyes. It was not going well. And this was live television; no stopping, no do-overs, when the red light comes on it goes.

Safely out of the way, I sat in a small room that might have been the theater manager's office. I shared this room with a representative of Westinghouse, the sponsor, and his account executive from Grey Advertising sitting beside him. The account executive, with the same cheerfulness as the communist official in the play, sweated as he insisted to his client that a classic television drama was about to be uncorked. A monitor showed what would be going out over the air.

Five minutes before air time, Olive Deering was still up in the make-up room. This performance was to be her return to television after years on the blacklist, and her make-up was a disaster: One eye was open, the other was pasted half-shut. She refused to come down to the set. The assistant director couldn't get her to move. Two minutes to air time. Sidney, faced with imminent catastrophe, ran from the director's booth, up the stairs two at a time into the balcony and forcibly dragged Olive

down toward the set, while she wailed at the top of her very theatrical voice, “These fucking amateurs, look what they’ve done to me!” Sidney pushed her onto the set and returned to the booth. The red light came on.

### **It was more like a runaway truck than a television play.**

I have no doubt that Olive Deering’s anger brought an intensity to her performance that exceeded her considerable professionalism and talent. But it was far more than that; her eyes—or at least the fully open one—were aflame with rage and the rest of the cast, as the drama progressed, grew more apprehensive. She was racing, leapfrogging her lines. Her fury surpassed my peculiar as-translated dialogue and the dramatic structure itself; sections from acts were transposed into other acts, the play staggered along as I watched in horror in the sponsor’s private viewing room. The sponsor and the nervous crew from Grey Advertising watched in suffocating silence. It was more like a runaway truck than a television play. One could sense the drumbeat even through two light-hearted encounters between Betty Furness and Westinghouse kitchen appliances. Once back into the drama, the agonizing story piled tragedy upon

tragedy and proceeded with more than intended speed to its conclusion, a minute or two early.

And there was my epiphany, delivered in the quavering voice of the advertising man to his stunned client. They had just witnessed a ramshackle performance in which starving people are humiliated, killed, a young daughter taken from her mother, parents betraying their children, consumption, bitterness and finally an exile into certain death. The vision of the ravaged face of Olive Deering faded first into the white of a gypsum snowfall, then to a black screen. A moment passed, and the advertising man turned to his client, a smile stretching his mouth. His fist pumped the air in front of his client’s face as he said, “You know, somehow I have the feeling she’s gonna make it!”

And as he said it, I knew he not only *had* to believe it, he *did* believe it. Who better to fill us with faith in those things utterly undeserving of it, to persuade us that illusion is more important than reality, that desire can vanquish rationality? Life’s lessons come often unbidden, but when they do, one must embrace them. The show was a disaster, but somehow I had the feeling I was going to make it. So far, so good.

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Loring Mandel started writing for television in 1949. He has been president of the Writers Guild of America East, National Chairman of the WGA, a Governor of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences and has received numerous awards, including two Emmys, the Sylvania and Peabody Awards and three Writers Guild Awards. His most recent credit is the HBO film “Conspiracy,” which he has now adapted for the stage.