

TV: Rehabilitated Wolf

Ritchard Is Stylishly Vulpine in A.B.C.'s Musical Version of 'Red Riding Hood'

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By JACK GOULD

ORIGINAL musicals for television are so rare that Jule Styne, Bob Merrill and Robert Emmett must be accorded A for effort in last night's special, "The Dangerous Christmas of Red Riding Hood, or Oh Wolf, Poor Wolf," on the American Broadcasting Company's network.

It was their agreeable notion to cast the wolf, as a status-seeking animal who has been woefully misunderstood and was a shade passé. Moreover, they had the good sense to employ the services of Cyril Ritchard as Lone T. Wolf. Thanks to the costuming by Raoul Pène du Bois, Mr. Ritchard sported a magnificent set of wolfish ears and a swirling tail of immense éclat.

But, as the fickle fates of show business so often decree, the idea never took wing with consistent enchantment or wit. Mr. Emmett's libretto was neither one thing nor another, not quite a fairy-tale for the young or a sophisticated spoof for their elders. Its labored rambling and protracted uncertainty of attitude led to a slow-moving show. Two of the Styne-Merrill numbers "I'm Naive" and "Along the Way," had a touch of singability, but the score by and large was not very helpful.

Mr. Ritchard carried the night's burdens and injected the sole note of high style that should have been the dominant motif. Liza Minnelli as Red Riding Hood brought an earnest sincerity to her singing and playing, but her limited resources in both were a handicap in raising the program to a gay and tuneful lark. Vic Damone was a suitably handsome woodsman, and the rock 'n' roll group known as The Animals were seen as a bedraggled wolf pack, which spoke well for the producer Dick Lewine's meticulous accuracy and type casting.

Mort Sahl as Host

Mort Sahl, the political humorist, has joined the list of

conversational hosts with a two-hour program from 10 P.M. to midnight Saturdays on WNEW-TV (Channel 5). His maiden trial on Saturday suggested that he will be courting controversy, adding marginal notes of his own and soliciting audience questions.

The show appears likely to turn on Mr. Sahl's ability to be an alert interviewer; on his premiere he was not notably incisive. Judge Joe E. Brown, who presided at the trial of Jack Ruby for the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, was the first guest. He talked about specifics of the trial, criticized defense counsel, contradicted himself frequently and mentioned the new book he is writing. But not once did Mr. Sahl put the logical question:

What of the propriety of a judge's writing about a case that has still not exhausted all avenues of appeal?

John Chancellor, director of the Voice of America, effectively discussed the Government's propaganda arm, but again Mr. Sahl's questions were bland. The final guests were Walter and Miriam Schneer, authors of "Invitation to an Inquest," a book that sharply criticizes the Federal Bureau of Investigation for part of its role in the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg espionage case. The Schneers recently reported that the F. B. I. had brought pressure to keep them off the air.

Mr. Sahl could have a workable format going for him, but he will need to dig beneath the generalities advanced by his guests. Oddly, the humorist's monologues on matters in the news were the show's weakest link. Some of the quips were dimly tactless. But with experimentation "The Mort Sahl Show" may make it; a late evening period of outspokenness could be a welcome complement to the existing innocuous chit-chat.

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