

In Safe Hands

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

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It's not true that words don't hurt. The CBS television network has canceled its presentation of "Sticks and Bones," a play of dramatic savagery about a Vietnam vet who comes home to a family which discards him, drives him to suicide and throws his body out with the garbage.

The play isn't a political allegory on how the Nixon administration does treat the returning soldier, although reports from our veterans' hospitals suggest it could be. Nevertheless, a lot of people are going to think CBS acceded to White House pressure to keep this drama off the air. They will regard it as but one more sign of a growing political control of television, and will, therefore, fail to recognize that even without a Nixon administration the outside constraints on this medium are enormous and constant.

The real wonder of the episode is that CBS ever dared to come so close to putting this play on the air. I confess to some bias here as one who's been moonlighting regularly for CBS News for several years, but the fact remains that serious drama was chased off television a long, long time ago. That the network would hire Joseph Papp, the most creative and energetic theatrical producer of this period, to mount "Sticks and Bones" as well as a number of other productions, indicates a laudable, if obtuse, understanding of television's role. Apparently the guys in the CBS board room haven't reconciled themselves to the fact that they can't get away with broadcasting contemporary work of artistic merit.

Sure, they can do an occasional Shakespeare provided the director doesn't play games that will show uncomfortable parallels between the dramatis personae and living Americans. Nothing like MacBird or even a highly political Macbeth would be tolerated. Even a classic writer like Ibsen would have to be handled with great care not to provoke. The same holds true for Shaw or such fluffy pieces as "Of Thee I Sing." Even that had to be watered down when it was put on last fall.

Drama of substance left television just about the time the lower-middle-class could afford television sets. Upper-middle-class culture permits its members a certain limited contact with disturbing ideas, symbols and emotions, but lower down on our status ladder the pressure to tell people exactly what they want to hear is close to irresistible.

TV dramas like Paddy Chayevsky's "Marty" had to leave the screen as soon as the people like Marty could afford TV sets. He was no more tenable than early

Tennessee Williams coming into the living room of the South.

Clowns have always been able to get away with more than tragedians, so a show like "All in the Family" can become very popular. Yet Archie Bunker is just unrealistic enough so that anybody can disidentify away from him. Even with his long-haired son-in-law he is not quite a caricature from life, but rather a slightly obsolete figure with his Goodwill Industries furniture—a figure from the past, who never did live.

The suppression of the best in the most powerful mass medium is neither new nor particularly American. The ancient Romans never permitted the depiction of real people on their stage. In fact, the only thing that freed Western theater from what has happened to "Sticks and Bones" was its replacement by the movies as the most compelling medium of entertainment. It was then the movies' turn to suffer the same constraints until rescued by television.

Only a society with a great deal more self-confidence than ours could stand the disruption of high art on its TV screens. We are a people who were seriously debating a couple of years ago whether a few thousand school kids who wear jeans and seldom go to the barber could overthrow the government. We live frightened by the notion that our country will unglue itself and blow up like an exploding star, when in reality we suffer from an overly stable rigidity.

So we ask television to reinforce our unity and find new ways to strengthen our sacred national symbols when they're too strong as it is. "Sticks and Bones" would have caused perturbation among all those who not only want to watch each POW come off the plane and cheer, but who grow furious at the minority of us who regard this pitter-patter of military feet across the red carpet as an overdone, jingoistic, lachrymose, political charade.

But what tells us the most about the dropping of "Sticks and Bones" is that the government didn't have to do it. CBS got out of line by thinking it could turn the TV screen for a couple of brief hours into the mirror of art, and it got slapped down by its own affiliates. They wouldn't put it on the air.

Yet Nixon's people complain that TV station owners don't oversee what the networks send them for broadcasting on their stations. They do—and not just in dramatic ways like this. They are forever meeting with the networks and exerting their force so the national digestive tract is only served cream of puree. TV is in safe hands . . . your own.