

TV: A.B.C. 'Re-Creates' Pueblo Story

Drama Focuses on the Actions of Buchner

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

As the second production in the ABC Theater series, "Pueblo" will be shown this evening, from 9 o'clock to 11, on the network of the American Broadcasting Company. The play was originally produced at the Erena State in Washington.

Stanley R. Greenberg, the writer, has "re-created" the story of Comdr. Lloyd Mark Bucher's surrender of the Pueblo to the North Koreans in 1968. The viewer is told that all names are real, every action is based on fact, which Mr. Greenberg has explained as meaning that "when a name is used, it is the real name of a real person; when a synthesized character is introduced, every action he performs, every word he utters is based upon an actual

statement and an actual action."

The viewer is also told, at the beginning and the middle, that "parental judgment or discretion is advised" on exposing the production to children or the hypersensitive. The play includes bits of strong language and scenes of prison-camp brutality. Both elements are kept, however, within a rigidly justifiable dramatic context.

"Pueblo" succeeds powerfully as television. The major reason is that it sticks closely to the essentials of the Bucher story. That story had ramifications beyond Commander Bucher, extending to the rules and administration of the United States Navy and the Department of Defense. But these are not underlined or inflated, and, as a result, become all the more inescapable.

The basic framework of the production is built around two Courts of Inquiry, one organized by the Navy and the other by Congress, upon the return of Commander Bucher and his crew after a year in a North Korean prison. The return was negotiated, with obvious embarrassment, by an official United States "apology" to North Korea for spying.

The Navy understandably needed a scapegoat, and Commander Bucher proved the obvious target. In apparent contradiction of naval law, he gave up the ship. He argued that his actions were consistent with naval law, that he held out as long as possible and then was responsible for saving the lives of his men.

As the hearings progress, there emerges an over-all pattern of incredible official bungling. The Pueblo was not equipped to deal effectively with possible seizure. Under cover of scientific exploration, it was indeed a spy ship. On hazardous duty, its mission was officially labeled as "minimum risk." And a contingency support plan turned out to be relying on forces that did not exist.

Scenes of the hearings are

Korean Prison Scenes Intercut With Hearings

intercut with flashback scenes on the Pueblo and the Korean prison. Bitter Korean speeches about American imperialism are counterpointed with Naval officer condemnations of the enemy as brutal savages. The righteousness of Navy chiefs is contrasted to the shocked bewilderment of Commander Bucher and his crew.

Anthony Page's direction is excellent. With Herbert Brodtkin as producer, "Pueblo" was taped in a New York studio, eliminating the possibility of on-location realism. Instead, Mr. Page has devised a quietly stylized visual form that works quite effectively on a TV screen.

The hearings are consciously formal arrangements, using virtually bare spaces with a minimum of props. The actors' faces are frequently held in close-up, and portions of dialogue are buttressed with the expert use of sound effects. The flashbacks reach for more realistic details, but the production provides the realism of a good stage production, keeping the theatrical core of "Pueblo" in perspective.

As Commander Bucher, Hal Holbrook gives still another one of the outstanding performances he has been contributing to television. Subtly suggesting a constant balance between dedication and resentment, the actor creates a memorable portrait of unwavering moral conviction. Others in the unusually good cast include Gary Merrill, Richard Mulligan, Stephen Elliott, George Grizzard, Larry Gates and Andrew Duggan.

The hero of "Pueblo" is Commander Bucher. Typically, his concluding observation is modest: "It was an experience I'll have to think about for a long time in order to come to a sensible conclusion." For television, the use of that experience is remarkably intelligent and provocative.



Hal Holbrook as Commander Bucher on "Pueblo," Channel 7 at 9 P.M.