

# Papp vs. CBS About 'Sticks and Bones'

By John J. O'Connor

WHEN Joseph Papp's production of David Rabe's "Sticks and Bones" was "postponed indefinitely" from the evening of March 9, on the Columbia Broadcasting System, the debate for and against the decision was quickly drawn along predictable and obvious lines. On the surface, the issues lend themselves to immediate clarity.

The plot involves a blind veteran of Vietnam returning to declare war on his own All-American situation-comedy family. Much of the material is, as the phrase goes, unusually strong for television, whether commercial or public. A large number of CBS's affiliates objected to the production, and the network made its decision, maintaining that the play might prove "unnecessarily abrasive" at a time when the country was watching and reading about the return of veterans and POWs from Vietnam.

An infuriated Papp charged the network with cowardice. His position was joined by a broad range of supporters, and the arguments cover everything from

basic obligations to infringements of the First Amendment to the specters of Clay Whitehead and censorship.

There are hunks of truth on both sides of the debate. Papp's indignation is certainly justified and legitimate. It is not as if CBS realized what the play was about only a week before the scheduled air time. The stage version of "Sticks and Bones" had won several awards, including a Tony, and surely the involved network officials were familiar with its content.

Papp did not choose the air date. That was done by the network at a time when it should have been obvious that the returning POW's would be in the news. Papp was willing to compromise on certain elements in the play, some of the language and even some of the situations.

Working closely with the network, he delivered a production only to be told in the final days before broadcast that it might be unnecessarily abrasive. He has every right to object loudly.

The case for the network, on the other hand, goes directly to the core of the dilemma encompassing all television.

Within the parameters of the medium's new and much-publicized search for "serious" and "adult" material, CBS was no doubt sincere and well-intentioned in committing itself to "Sticks and Bones." It took a chance, an expensive chance, and at least for the moment, it appears to have lost.

Most of the network's problem is tied to what is always referred to as the "economic realities" of the medium. These are reflected rather accurately in those mysterious numbers called ratings. Presumably the network that comes out on top in the course of a week, and eventually over a season, will be demanding and getting the most dollars in terms of being able to deliver the largest audiences to advertisers.

Each evening is crucial in the ratings sweepstakes, and certain types of programming demonstrably work better than others. Special news hours do not attract the largest audiences, and they are in relative decline. More "serious" programming is a general trend.

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