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## TV: 'The Serpent,' a Ceremony Based on Genesis

### Adaptation of Play Seen on N.E.T. Playhouse

"The Serpent," which was presented last night on the N.E.T. Playhouse over Channel 13 as the main body of a 90-minute program "Open Theater: The Serpent," is the seminal work of The Open Theater, America's most important ensemble theatrical workshop.

It is not really a play, but a ceremony, based, freely, on Genesis, as created by the company, under the direction of Joseph Chaikin, with words by Jean Claude van Itallie. It is so much a part of The

Open Theater that it is impossible to imagine it performed by anyone else.

Furthermore, as Chaikin's associate director, Roberta Sklar, says in the brief, provocative documentary that follows the taped production: "There is no way of notating our work so we can repeat it." Like dance, "The Serpent" exists in each performance.

For that reason the presentation over the National Educational Television network is invaluable, and if the frequent reports of The Open Theater's demise are true then the N.E.T. Playhouse has the only record of the group's enormous contribution to the

theater. For that, one must be particularly grateful to Jac Venza, who produced the program through Pittsburgh's public service station, WQED, and to The Open Theater for permitting its work to be taped. Through N.E.T., the usually elusive Open Theater is now open to the public.

Transferring a performance event to television obviously presents problems, some of them insurmountable. The alternatives are to restage the work entirely or to choose to do only the parts of it that seem readily adaptable to the medium. Venza and director Sam Silbermann took the second, saner course.

### Chaikin Directs Work by the Open Theater

As a result, things are missing. The television "Serpent" begins with the work's first spoken word "Autopsy," and not, as in a live performance, within the audience with the actors slowly, rhythmically, and musically coming to life. The new beginning is formal, rather than free-flowing.

Gone also is the wildly exuberant after-the-fall, in which apples tumble all over the stage and are gaily bestowed in the audience. The orgy that counterpoints the saying of the "begats" is now seen in selective, self-censoring closeups. This "Serpent" loses some of its sensuality and sauciness.

But in certain areas it is enhanced. When I first saw "The Serpent," it was in a church. Although the cumulative effect was awesome, in a single viewing, with bad sight lines, one necessarily missed some individual elements. On camera, the line is much clearer, from the stylized re-enactment of the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination through the slaying of Abel. Certain moments, like the Cain-Abel dance of death, are actually heightened in close-up.

The program ends with two of the most haunting sequences from the company's other major work, "Terminal." Since "Terminal" relies less on audience involvement than "The Serpent" does, it seems even more accessible to television.

"Open Theater: The Serpent" will be repeated Saturday at 8:30 P.M. on Channel 13.

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