

Television Today

The Rolf Harris Show

London Weekend, Saturday, January 12, 5.45

"HOW To Lose Friends And Irritate People" would seem to be the title of ITV's current policy. Now that two consecutive issues of Radio Times have provided accurate details and timings of the BBC emergency schedules, it seems almost incredible that ITV should still be publishing inaccurate information about programmes planned before Christmas.

Has it, I wonder, occurred to anyone that since TV Times is not only useless but positively misleading, many viewers may cancel their order and never renew it? Or that many others, finding that Radio Times speaks the truth, will turn to BBC channels rather than sort out what ITV is really doing at the time?

The first 12 minutes of the Rolf Harris Show on Saturday may have been filled with invention, beauty and wit. If so, their quality is lost to me for ever. The programme started 40 minutes ahead of its "advertised" slot, at which time I happened to be broadcasting on Radio 4. However, by courtesy of the BBC I was able to watch the concluding

33 minutes at Broadcasting House. I should not have been desolate at missing those as well.

Somebody, sometime, I suppose, is going to come up with a pattern of light entertainment that supercedes the now obligatory "star - plus - singers - plus - comedian - plus - dancers" routine. Dougie Squires certainly has not done it with the Rolf Harris Show. For at least two-thirds of the programme, the star did little more than act as feed or comper for his "guests": scarcely a legitimate use of Rolf Harris's considerable talent.

Meanwhile the director, Bruce Gowers, strove desperately to introduce a little novelty into the affair by some of the most restless camera work I can remember having seen. No shot, so it seemed, was held for more than five seconds without a mix or a superimposition. From time to time what seemed to be a transparent dinner plate, topped by a Japanese sun, was imposed upon the artists (and once upon a couple of violinists in Harry Rabinowitz' backing), often giving the impression that the programme

was taking place in a section of the Barkerloo tube.

Another production gimmick — directing an artist from the stage and down a flight of steps straight into the eye of the camera was quite effective once, but plain boring on the third repeat.

When will the lesson be learned: no amount of gimmickry, button pushing and settings, however colourful, can produce a good light entertainment show when the basic material is lacking?

Of those who made what are called, for some obscure reason, "guest appearances," the dance group working as The Tribe at least provided unbounded vivacity and some appearance of life. They were joined by Millie Small, making her television come-back after some ten years: her schoolgirl attractiveness has matured into beauty, but her voice has lost none of its raucous quality and as an artist she has not yet managed to lose the millstone of Lollipop.

Stuart Gilles, who appeared to be miming despite the hand microphone, has a pleasant voice and personality. But I still cannot fathom the appeal of Charlie Drake. True he uses his physical appearance and his voice to excellent advantage, but his material is quite appalling. Yet he had an audience (admittedly captive and brain washed) rolling in the aisles with a song-and-patter act that purported to prove that Sally could never have been the pride of any alley, that Lily of Laguna came from Hackney (or thereabouts) and that Polly Perkins had never been near Paddington Green.

It was all as pointless and thin as the last line, following slavishly the current trend in TV humour — "and we still don't know if Cyril has a nice one." Though even less funny, perhaps, was the earlier dialogue that accompanied the description of a court case.

"How do you plead?"

"Blood."

"No, no. I said 'how do you plead?'"

"It depends how deep the cut is."

As for Rolf Harris himself, his big moment must have come in the first 12 minutes, for I can remember nothing substantial that he was allowed to contribute afterwards.

If ratings, rather than any vestige of pride, are to be the sole criterion of standards, then heaven help the future of television light entertainment.

Oh for the days that are gone — Rolf Harris and the Young Generation! At least that series had a blueprint of its own.

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