

Upheaval, talent, Anne and New Years past

AND SO it is time to write of 1985, an uncommonly interesting year for broadcasting in this city and country. A year of significant shifts in private radio. A year of change in public radio. Some saw it as upheaval. Others defended it as fine-tuning. For CBC Television the year was a stage wait while a task force pondered the future of public broadcasting. It might be spring before the task force's recommendations are known.

ROSS McLEAN

The year began with concern over forces that had already impaired the CBC and gave signs of imperilling it. By year's end, the debate had broadened to include all the means by which we manage to know who we expressly are. Our cultural sovereignty must not become a bargaining chip at the free-trade table.

What was greeted as ill-advised upheaval at CBC Radio has proved somewhat less than that. The clear triumph of the CBC makeover is unquestionably the Erika Ritter program, Dayshift. I doubt that anyone — including Ritter herself, perhaps — could have known how right she would prove to be, how instantly at home and in charge or



how valuable to the listener. She bids fair to become a droll model for the nation.

It has always been a bit embarrassing to admit that our national identity was somehow involved in the U.S. careers of Bill Shatner, Lorne Greene and the myriad others we so regularly claim as Canada's own. Nonetheless, we have spent decades basking in the reflected glory of several generations of departing artists once they had certified their talent abroad. But

there seemed something subtly different about the way we responded to more recent successes south of here. Something more wholesome.

Where once we fed hungrily on all signs of acceptance beyond our borders, we appear to be more relaxed about this latest generation of exceptional performers. It pleases us to see them win recognition we know they deserve, but we have less

Megan Follows (right) deserves the superlatives.

need to use their success to shore up our sense of ourselves.

Contrary to mythology and all-too-frequent practice, nice guys were suddenly finishing first all over the place. Michael J. Fox was probably the outstanding example. The diminutive Canadian with the towering talent was breaking through on every front he came near. Never mind that his work for big and small screen in Back To The Future and Family Ties was garnering appreciation. Even more satisfying was the laconic, likeable and effortlessly witty personality he revealed each time he sat for print or broadcast interviews. The kid was a born winner and — forgive the presumption — probably the most attractive advertisement for those virtues we like to believe are Canadian since Ken Taylor took in boarders.

Martin Short also enjoyed huge success during the past 12 months, and demonstrated splendid common sense and appealing normalcy through what seemed to be endless magazine cover stories. John Candy added to the

John Candy and Martin Short: normalcy.



Erika Ritter: Dayshift is a clear triumph for 'made-over' CBC Radio.



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niceness sweep, disproving the Ogden Nash rhyme by demonstrating that Candy was both dandy and quicker.

A friend asked me recently what television program I would be least willing to surrender. It is not a choice anyone wants to make but I was moved to say David Letterman. The asker's voice flattened. "Really?" he said. There seemed to be some division of opinion there.

Now, of course, life with Letterman alone would lack many important nutrients. But I do enjoy him, even in re-run, and feel deprived when he fails to arrive Fridays at 12:30. He is said to doubt his own durability. I believe the anxiety to be baseless. He continues to evolve into something so refreshingly free of showbiz artifice that I cannot imagine his welcome ever wearing thin or out.

Bill Cosby's excellence is unflagging and the rep company that has become his and our second family is uniformly great. The main pleasure remains the exhilaration of recognition that the series' storylines so regularly stimulate. Happily, North America has forgiven him his hasty and too-easy embrace of a new soft-drink recipe.

So far no one has had a harsh word to level at the screen realization of Anne Of Green Gables. Nor is it easy to quarrel with a television program that garnered a mildly historic audience of almost five million Canadians. Megan Follows supports any superlative so far applied to her. She is a total natural and well entitled to the success that surely awaits her.

In fact, the casting was well nigh impeccable. Charmion King was especially fine in a smallish role. There was particular interest, of course, in Dawn Greenhalgh's brief appearance. The imprint of mom is not hard to find in the enchanting Megan. (It used to amuse me that Greenhalgh's married name was Dawn Follows, which itself seems to be a perfect silent movie caption.)

So let us share the triumph of the year in drama, and speak no ill. Except, perhaps, to wonder whether there was a single soul who might have found the pace a tad ... well, unhurried, at times.

No? Okay.



Joni Mitchell contributed to show's fragmentation; left, Bill Cosby and 'family.'

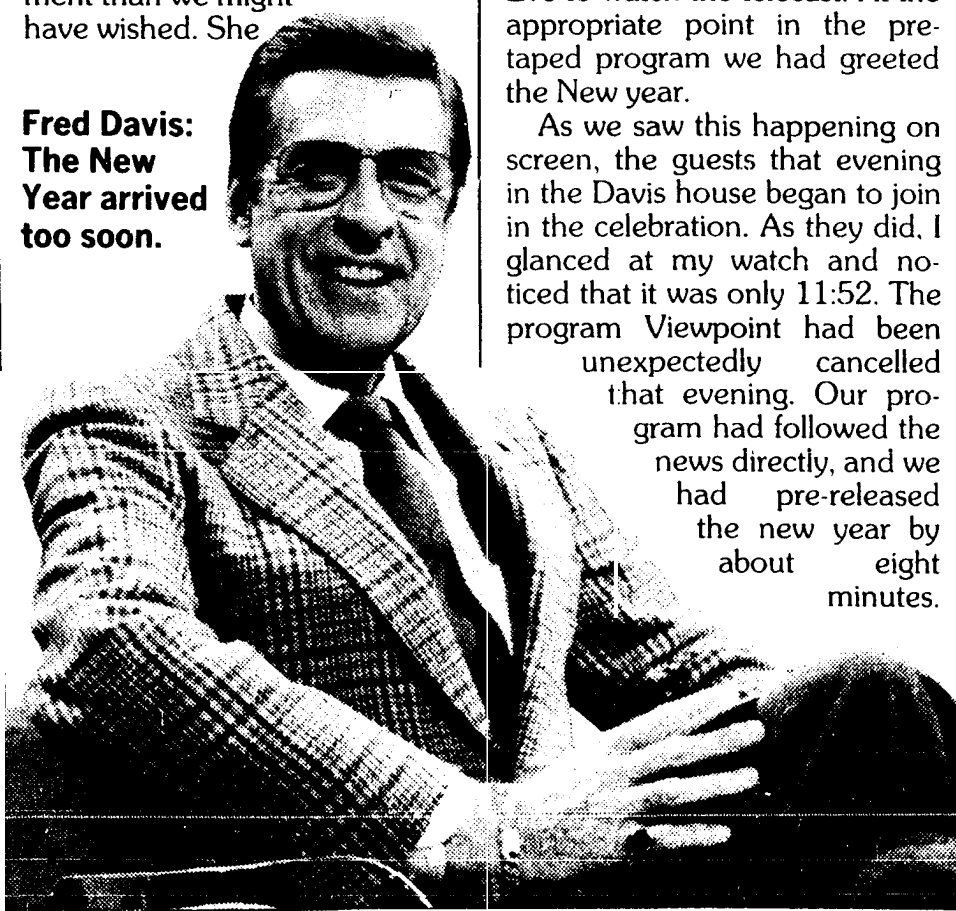
It is just as well that I have no control of any airtime this coming week with which to produce a New Year's Eve special. My obsession with the start of a calendar year has led me time and time again to do just that.

In my radio days I settled for a quarter-hour of satiric review called Footnotes. In television the obsession led me one year to preside over a special edition of This Hour Has Seven Days, in which Patrick Watson, Laurier LaPierre, Dinah Christie, Jean Templeton, Stan Daniels, Barry Baldaro, Warner Troyer, Ken Lefolii and others threw caution to the winds and took part in the strangest and least amusing hour of any decade.

A few years later, undaunted and obviously uncomprehending, I assembled a special New Year's Eve edition of The Way It Is in which **Joni Mitchell**, a large orchestra conducted by the late Ben McPeck, and the cast of Nitecap — Billy Van, Chris Bearde and June Sampson — combined with clustered highlights of the year 1967 to mark the occasion.

Mitchell had written a theme for the program, and was meant to sing it as well as such standards of the period as Circle Game and Night in the City. Unhappily, Mitchell was in the wake of a marriage breakup and less reachable by fervent argument than we might have wished. She

Fred Davis: The New Year arrived too soon.



rejected all the full-orchestra arrangements McPeck had made for her — they were faithful and brilliant — and insisted upon performing to her own unsupported guitar accompaniment. This problem and some technical difficulties that hexed the Nitecap company resulted in a program so unbelievably ragged that even now it can awaken me in the night.

In my last, more recent New Year's Eve outing, I was producing a late-night talk show with Fred Davis as host. The show had been taped a few days before its release on Dec. 31. It was intended to follow a program called Viewpoint, which in those days trailed behind the CBC's national newscast.

Most of the people who took part in the show were among the many guests gathered at the Davis home that New Year's Eve to watch the telecast. At the appropriate point in the pre-taped program we had greeted the New year.

As we saw this happening on screen, the guests that evening in the Davis house began to join in the celebration. As they did, I glanced at my watch and noticed that it was only 11:52. The program Viewpoint had been unexpectedly cancelled that evening. Our program had followed the news directly, and we had pre-released the new year by about eight minutes.