

# STAGE

April, 1939

p. 29

## Lend Me Your Eyes

BY ALAN RINEHART

*Television: Fifteen million dollars spent; the best brains acquired; yet—  
do we want to tune in?*

**A** WEEK from next Tuesday the gigantic eighty-four-ton Yarmouth Kipper is going to fall into the sea. One hundred and eighty people will be drowned.

Goody, goody. Since we know it in advance, that will give the boys time to set up. You see, it takes only three days to set up a television camera and wire it for the proper intensity of current.

Thus will the news be brought right into the bedroom. Mussolini can thrust his jaw plunk into yours while you shave. Perhaps we should at this point thank Heaven for the safety razor, because it takes a skillful eye to determine whose throat might be cut. Think of what you could do with Hitler's mustache! Of course you could turn off your set—but you won't. Television is too fascinating.

You can be darn sure that these various gentlemen, and other personalities in the news, will be properly wired and focused long in advance of each occasion. But you may be certain that the warmth of what we call news will be missing. The story of the mutt who saved the kid, or the kid who saved the mutt, will have to stay among the humanities of the printed and spoken word.

What then, specifically, will be the entertainment value of television? Announcement is made that Mr. Max Gordon will be in charge of National Broadcasting Company's excursions into sight and sound. NBC has a pretty considerable edge over Columbia, having started earlier in its experiments. Columbia has a pretty brilliant staff, with Gilbert Seldes at the head. You can be sure every fiber, if there are

fibers in radio, will be strained to give you programs that you want—and some you didn't know you wanted. It is no news, but merely a tradition in the entertainment business, that you will get some items over Einstein's ether that will make you wonder why you ever bought the set.

When you come to talk about programs on the air, you run into two factors which rate the word extraordinary. One of these has to do with the hit programs of the present moment. The best-pulling items on the air are neither names nor personalities: they are Charlie McCarthy and Major Bowes' Amateur Hour. Think of it! A dummy. And the half-baked.

If you ask why these strange items top radio's haphazard entertainment, you will find that they suffer from our mutual malady—a common humanity, often very common indeed. Just as the poor are always the people who feed the poor, so the ordinary man likes to laugh at the ordinary man, even though he may be made of wood or of the resilient flesh of young strivings. Possibly the greatest overtones of art are lost via static or by playing to a multitude. Perhaps superlative talent can be appreciated only in small fractions. But here's a new medium—and a new art.

**T**HE REVOLUTIONARY idea about television is that the medium has been developed before the art. It's as if the piano had been invented before music, or paint and canvas before drawing.

Fifteen million dollars have been spent on television already. By this vast amount is the inventor in his upstairs attic separated from the laboratories of the great systems. A new inventor has had to come on the scene. He is the poor devil who must invent the ultimate in new entertainment.

Many types of this commodity can be televised. From what might pass for news all the way to formal stage and screen entertainment can be parked in a little cloud no bigger than a man's hand, and drifted in your window. You can have an appendectomy, if you go in for that sort of thing; but it might

be inconvenient if you want a tennis lesson. Your children, the little dears, can learn and learn and learn—and when your back is turned, kick the switch over to a murder, in which the body itself marks the spot where the body was found.

**B**UT HERE is the catch. Whether the range of televised entertainment runs from the grisly to the girlish, it is expensive. It costs like hell. And the companies cannot sell a single minute of television time.

You would see, if you were in a monitor room, just what bands were assigned to the companies like National and Columbia who have made such a huge investment in television. That oh-so-faintly-flickering-needle would mark out for you a broadcast range designated by the Government as "experimental." On experimental ranges time is not permitted to be sold. Television therefore is free—if you have the price of a set. You can begin at \$150 and wind up at several thousand: your reception runs the same gamut as that of radio. If you are a perfectionist, you will have to dig deep. And so we come back to the original problem.

What's to be the entertainment? Why should we tune in? Will we get more than we will on the radio?

That very aware group of people who have tucked television under their wings is following a single rule in developing the new form of entertainment. The rule is as follows: Television must do a job which no existing medium can accomplish—or else there is no point in having television at all.

