

Radio-TV

Soap Comes to TV

Last week television caught the dread disease of radio—soapoperitis. It happened in Chicago, which holds, rather bashfully, undisputed claim as originator of radio's daytime serials.

What Chicago viewers saw over station WNBQ was the first in a daily series of 15-minute capsule dramas called *These Are My Children*. The camera focused first on widowed Mother Henehan, and with her thumbed through an old family album to introduce the characters who will form the framework for the Henehans' lives, loves and family troubles.

Temptation. Whether soap opera on television can coax housewives to leave their domestic duties to watch a small screen was a question yet to be answered. But if anything will catch the housewife's eye, *These Are My Children*, written by 47-year-old Irna Phillips,* should do the trick. In 18 years and 30 million words she has probably brought more tears and laughter to more women than any other daytime serial writer.

Late in 1930, she introduced Chicago housewives to Mother Monyhan in *Painted Dreams*, one of the original five-a-weekers. Then came Mother Moran of *Today's Children*, first successful network soaper (and still going). Later from the prolific Phillips' typewriter came *Guiding Light*, *Woman in White*, *Right to Happiness* and *Road of Life*.

All New Material. *These Are My Children*, however, is no warmed-over radio fare. To make sure of this, Miss Phillips and director Norman Felton built the first episodes backward, by fitting the dialogue to the action. When the producers cast about for radio actors with stage experience, they had to reject some experienced youngsters (on unseen radio, age makes no difference) before finding 55-year-old Mrs. Alma Platts for the role of 55-year-old Mother Henehan.

*Miss Phillips chose the title for sentimental reasons: whenever she introduces her two adopted children, Thomas 8, and Katherine, 6, she always says: "These are my children."



Irna Phillips. *On TV, serials take stage planning, too.*

Some 2½–3½ hours of rehearsal—more than twice the time required for radio—are devoted to one 15-minute show. The actors, if memories fail, will ad lib dialogue, but in case of emergency the sound track will be shut off while a prompter throws a cue. Viewers will scarcely notice the momentary lapse in dialogue.

Props & Backdrops. To solve the problem of scenic backgrounds, a three-room apartment set was designed. Director Felton doesn't think lookers will tire of watching the same scenery. And occasionally films of outdoor scenes will be dubbed in to relieve the monotony.

These technical problems do not concern Miss Phillips nearly so much as keeping the story line moving fast enough to satisfy viewers. Radio's *Just Plain Bill* once had the same man in the barber's chair three week's running, but TV customers are likely to be more sensitive.

Plugs & Products. Still a major

problem to the producers is the cost of a television dramatic show—"substantially higher" than a radio soap, says Felton. Like its radio forebear, the TV drama will, of course, be sponsored. *These Are My Children* is taking bids for sponsorship—and getting them. To weave the commercials into the script, says Miss Phillips, will be simple. For example, daughter Henehan is studying home economics in college. She might easily get a job—in the show—and be put to work at the sponsor's company. Each day she could chat for a few minutes about her job and the sponsor's product.

Miss Phillips, a life-sized version of one of her own gentle, philosophical radio characters, expects the Henehans to be only the first of her visual children. And with them, television last week had the stamp of soap opera on it.

