

PBS

Choices theme of PBS film

Oscar nominee Meryl Streep, Swoosie Kurtz, and Jill Eikenberry are among the stars of **UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS**, which encores over PBS Saturday, June 23, at 9 p.m. on the **GREAT PERFORMANCES** series. Produced by WNET-THIRTEEN, New York, the presentation of **UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS** on Channel 57 is made possible by Wilbraham-Monson Academy.

UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS, one of the most highly praised television productions of the 1978 public television season, is a lighthearted look at a serious subject: choices. Seven years after graduation, five former Mt. Holyoke College classmates hold their own informal reunion and set the stage for a series of flashbacks filled with incisive humor and an often manic exuberance.

Kate (Jill Eikenberry) is a successful corporation lawyer. Samantha (Ann McDonough) is, ostensibly, a normal housewife and mother. Holly (Alma Cuervo) is the perennial student, and Muffet (Ellen

Parker) is an Insurance Seminar Hostess. The always brash Rita (Swoosie Kurtz) is finally, almost, ready to be a writer.

Playwright Wendy Wasserstein says she's written "a play about choices," and she has. But it is also a look at struggle — the struggle to achieve and the struggle to remain an individual. The icy, beautiful Leilah (Meryl Streep) decides to move to Iran, claiming reasons of dedication to her newly embraced profession (anthropology); in fact-it is the only way she can escape the competitive life. For **UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS** gently examines the first generation of American women who truly have had a variety of choices.

The anxiety of the young women is suggested by constantly shifting scenes: from the communal living room with its "gracious living" get-togethers; to the dorm bedrooms full of James Taylor music, laughter, and hidden loneliness; to every snow-bound collegians's lifeline, the pay phone in the hall. Episodic in structure, **UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS**, Miss Wasserstein muses, "is picaresque, actually. You come up with fragments and images in your memory, separated by dots. I don't know what's going to happen to the characters, and the play wouldn't be as good if I did."

UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS is performed by the Phoenix Theatre, and it is a production of WNET-THIRTEEN, New York. It was produced by Phylis Geller; Ann Blumenthal is associate producer. Jac Venza is the executive producer of **GREAT PERFORMANCES** on public television.



Oscar-nominee Meryl Streep ("The Deerhunter") portrays Leilah, a lonely Mt. Holyoke College senior in the encore presentation of **UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS**, airing Saturday, June 23, 9 p.m. on Channel 57.

PBS looks at American heroines

Elizabeth Cady Stanton never had a silver dollar struck in her likeness and memory, but she was the other half of the Susan B. Anthony coin in the early fight for women's suffrage and equality.

Stanton and Anthony led a lonely crusade for the vote in 1867, campaigning virtually alone on the Kansas prairie and its cities and towns in support of the first state referendum on women's suffrage. They lost then, and would lose again, but that spade work laid the foundation for a growing national movement that would achieve victory in 1920 with passage of the 19th Amendment.

The women like Stanton who moved and shook America to its social roots in the 19th and 20th centuries, and who many say have been largely overlooked — or downright ignored — by the historians, will receive due recognition in a dramatic series that begins tonight on WGBH-TV, Channel 2, and the public television network.

"Under This Sky," (9 p.m., Ch. 2), the story of Stanton and Anthony in Kansas, offers insight into the motivation that compelled this well-bred, fun-loving mother of seven to leave her comfortable New York home and venture into a hostile social environment for a cause, to fight a battle that was lost from the start.

"If only everything could begin here," actress Irene Worth says as she stands on a creaky wagon step and looks into the sunny,

TELEVISION

By ROBERT A. McLEAN

cloudless Kansas prairie sky. "Men and women, starting all over, free from history and myth and religious rigamarole. It ought to be possible under this sky."

Worth plays Stanton with a great dynamism, controlled and unswerving, overlaid by a natural ebullience and a saving sense of humor. Paired with Collin Wilcox-Paxton as the cool, steely Anthony, they present a marvelous one-two punch, a force to be reckoned with, the vanguard of the army that will follow.

But it's a harsh, real world they must face as they stalk through the wheat fields, the scruffy farm hamlets and the rough-tough market towns, preaching a new, almost scandalous gospel to downcast women and surly men against a barnyard chorus of clucks, squeals, bleats and grunts. Their strength is quickly sapped, their enthusiasm shaken, and their funds exhausted.

With election day fast approaching, and in desperate need of help, they at last must compromise and ally with a man whose white supremacy ideology clashes with their own reasoned plea for equality for both blacks and women.

Railroad tycoon George Francis Train, ele-

gant scoundrel, eccentric spellbinder, offers help and Stanton accepts, putting them "in league with the devil himself." John Glover is excellent as the foppish Train, an egocentric reformer with presidential aspirations. After Kansas, Train would set them up in their newspaper "The Revolution," whose motto was "Men, their rights and nothing more; women, their rights and nothing less!"

Noted stage and screen star Worth was born in Nebraska, but has spent most of her theatrical career in England. Willcox-Paxton has appeared in numerous American stage and film productions.

The Stanton Project, as the series is known, is being produced by Red Cloud Productions of Cambridge for the public network, under grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Rockefeller Foundation. The piece is the pilot, and other episodes being planned will spotlight such famous American women as labor organizer Mother Jones, journalist Margaret Fuller and economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Christine Herbes was executive producer for the pilot, Randa Haines the director and Phylis Geller the producer. "Under This Sky" was produced for WGBY-TV, Ch. 57, Ch. 2's sister station in Springfield, which is presenting the series to the public network.

● TV-radio listings, other features, Page 81

Mon., March 9, 1981

Geller Joins KCET In Dramatic Programming

Phylis J. Geller has joined KCET to develop and supervise dramatic programming, including offering for PBS' upcoming "Playhouse" series.

As an indie producer and public tv worker, Geller has contributed to "Theatre In America," "The American Short Story" and "Great Performances" on PBS.

For the past two years she's been developing projects for commercial tv.

"Playhouse," a 22-week series, is designed to showcase the country's top tv talent in varied productions. First 11 are already completed shows from various pubcasting sources. Grants of \$6,500,000 are coming from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Station Program Cooperative to fund the second 11 programs.

eric mink

television/radio



Working-Class Heroes

Maybe it's the celebration of work, no matter how inconsequential. Maybe it's the affirmation of the importance of the individual and his desire for dignity and nobility in his daily life. Maybe it's the simple, honest corniness of it all.

Whatever the reasons, there's something very American about "Working," a 90-minute, musical based on Studs Terkel's book of interviews of the same title. The show, which had a brief and unsuccessful run on Broadway, has been adapted for television and will appear Tuesday night at 9 on Channel 9 as this week's "American Playhouse" entry.

"Working" is a collection of little character sketches of working people, 24 in all. Each one talks about or sings about (or both) his work — what he thinks about it, how it makes him feel, how he deals with its ups and downs. Although the emphasis is on blue-collar workers, there is a smattering of white-collar people and even a senior corporate executive.

The mix is intentional and lies close to the heart of Terkel's theme: Work is this country's unifying force, America's shared experience.

Jobs differ. Some stimulate, some stultify. Some pay well, others poorly. Some liberate, some enslave. It is all work, and we are all workers.

We define ourselves, one particularly cynical but correct character points out, by what we do. I'm a writer. I'm a salesman. I'm a secretary. I'm a waitress, a gas man, a fireman, a hooker, a trucker, a switchboard operator. I'm retired.

They're all here, sharing their thoughts, doubts, joys and resentments. The company president talks about job insecurity. The waitress gushes about the challenge of turning her work into artistry. The gas man talks about dogs and women, the two central elements of his daily life. The parking lot attendant, an older man, talks about the old days, when nobody could touch Lovin' Al, the Wizard, when it came to babying cars.

Several scenes stand out. Patti La Belle's funky, rambunctious song about being the third

generation of cleaning women in her family will pop your eardrums. Charles Durning, as a retiree, sings a touching tune about the post-work experience, when "even getting beat at gin beats doing nothing." Singer-songwriter James Taylor does a fine job as a trucker singing about driving the big rigs.

The play's shining moment, though, is a quiet one. Eileen Brennan plays a millworker who forms hot, wet felt into trays, one after the other, one just like the other, for eight hours a day. Off-camera, Jennifer Warnes sings a haunting and sad song written by Taylor about the millworker's life and dreams. The soft camera work, the spare choreography, the contrast between the older woman and the young girl on the line all are powerfully affecting.

"Working" is hardly flawless. Not all those asked to sing can pull it off. Lyrics sometimes dance on the edge of preachiness. There's no mention of an occupation in which increasing numbers of people find themselves: unemployment.

And although the show nods in the direction of the exploited, it seems unwilling to admit that some work truly is demeaning. The implication is that people, eventually, come to like what they do, no matter how demoralizing. The reality is that people powerless to change their lot eventually learn to live with it, to make the best of it.

On balance, however, "Working" succeeds on the small screen. Unlike live theater, television restricts viewers's field of vision, giving the production staff absolute control over the electronic "reality" offered to the audience. Visual distractions can be wiped out and viewers' attention concentrated exactly where it's wanted.

Co-directors Stephen Schwartz and Kirk Browning and co-producers Phylis Geller and Lindsay Law have used their power well.

☆ ☆ ☆

Channel 5 news director George Noory called to say that his job as a lieutenant in the Naval Reserve is that of public affairs officer, not public relations officer as reported here last Friday.

Geller president of Women in Film

Phyllis Geller, director of dramatic programming for KCET, and producer for PBS's "American Playhouse," has been elected president of Women in Film, along with first vp Annette Welles, vp creative affairs, Universal Studios.

Newly elected board members of the organization, which numbers more than 800 working women in the film and TV industries, are Nona Brown,

development executive producer; Anita De Thomas, president of De Thomas Associates; Cindy Dunne, vp of TV development for Lorimar; Helena Hacker, production vp for Universal Films; Karin Howard, director-writer; Arla Sorkin Manson, production vp for FDM Prods.; Susan K. Merzback, vp creative affairs for 20th Century-Fox; Marcia Nasatur, executive vp of Carson Film Company, and Brady Rubin, performer-writer.

Board members who will continue for a second term include Joanne D'Antonio, Willie Hunt, Mary Leding and Maggie Malooly, as well as Geller and Welles.

Geller will preside over a joint board meeting Aug. 8 to honor retiring and new officers, including former president Mollie Gregory.

KCET COMEBACK SHIFTS TO HIGH GEAR

By LEE MARGULIES,
Times Staff Writer

The recent Los Angeles area Emmy Awards gave clear-cut evidence that local programming at public television station KCET is alive and well. Channel 28 won nine of the local Emmys, more than any other station in town except KCBS-TV Channel 2.

Only two years ago, KCET didn't even garner that many nominations, reflecting the severe programming and personnel cutbacks that had been instituted in 1982 to stave off bankruptcy.

But while the station's local programming has bounced back from that financial crisis, what hasn't been so quick to revive is its national programming—the big-budget productions for the Public Broadcasting Service that once were KCET's hallmark.

Station officials say, however, that progress is being made there, too, as the next two installments of PBS' "American Playhouse" will demonstrate. Both were produced by KCET.

Airing Monday is "Paper Angels," an hourlong drama by Genny Lim about the painful experiences of Chinese who were detained on San Francisco's Angel Island while trying to immigrate to the United States between 1910 and 1940.

Following on June 24 is a new production of Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," with Jessica Lange as Maggie, Tommy Lee Jones as Brick, Rip Torn as Big Daddy and Kim Stanley as Big Mama. (A co-production with Showtime, the program already has run on the pay-cable network.)

The back-to-back scheduling of the KCET productions is purely a coincidence, says Phylis Geller, director of national productions for Channel 28. But she says they conveniently serve to kick off a new push that the station is making to increase its presence on the PBS schedule.

"We are in as good a position as any public television station in producing for the national schedule," Geller maintained in an interview.

That wasn't true three years ago. The national programming staff was virtually wiped out by the KCET layoffs. Only Geller, who then was the executive representing KCET in the consortium of stations that produce "American Playhouse," kept her job.

She continued to produce for "American Playhouse," but nearly everything else came to a standstill while KCET's management righted the ship and slowly began moving it forward. They made their first priority improving service to the local audience.

Now the national department, under the supervision of David Crippens, vice president of national productions, has regained the manpower it had before the cutbacks and is busily developing projects for next season and beyond, Geller reports.

Because national productions take longer to mount than local ones—the decision-making process is more cumbersome and the larger budgets require more fund-raising efforts—projects in the works at



MARY FRAMPTON / Los Angeles Times

Phylis Geller . . . carving a programming niche at Channel 28.

Channel 28 now might take years to get on the air, she cautions.

But already slated for production are a new installment of "Musical Comedy Tonight," Sylvia Fine Kaye's history of the American musical, and a performance program featuring choreographer Trisha Brown.

In a sign of how the times have changed in public television, however, these and many other national projects in development at KCET are geared for existing PBS series rather than as showcase specials or KCET-produced series.

Just as "Paper Angels" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" are appearing on "American Playhouse," so will "Musical Comedy Tonight" air under the "Great Performances" banner and the Trisha Brown program under the coming "Alive From Off Center" umbrella.

Gone are the days when KCET could by itself mount a major series such as "Hollywood Television Theater" or "Visions," Geller says. There just isn't enough money in the public television system—among both the stations and the corporations and foundations that traditionally have underwritten PBS programs—to launch major new series in genres that already are represented.

"We have to feed into these ongoing series; they are existing pools of financing," she explains.

KCET isn't limiting itself to developing for the existing series, but other projects are being kept to a modest size to improve their chances of being funded. For example, the station currently is seeking financial backing for six half-hour episodes of a comedy anthology series called "Survival Guides," about coping with life in the '80s.

It also is looking for support for a six-part documentary series about the United States and Japan since the end of World War II.

Meanwhile, Geller is proud of the two coming "American Playhouse" productions—and not just because she was the producer of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and the executive producer of "Paper Angels." She feels both are relevant to the special role that KCET has desig-

nated for itself in the public television system.

Part of that role is to tap into the talent pool that exists just outside its doors in the television and movie industry. Thus the new production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"—which was made into a film in 1958 (with Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman and Burl Ives) and was done on NBC in 1976 (with Laurence Olivier, Natalie Wood and Robert Wagner).

"This is a revival of a classic. That in itself has validity," Geller contends. "And considering the actors we got, I feel very comfortable saying that I believe each generation should reinterpret these roles. I mean, Maggie is a role that Jessica Lange should play."

Another part of KCET's self-made role, she says, is to reflect the diverse ethnic and cultural constituencies that it serves. Thus "Paper Angels" deals with part of the history of Chinese-Americans. The actors are Chinese-American, as are its writer, director and some of the other production staff.

"This is something about a minority group," Geller says of "Paper Angels," which Lim adapted for TV from her stage play, "but in the emotion of its drama will appeal to everybody."

"I think we are carving out a niche for ourselves," she sums up. "These are the kinds of programs that don't already exist and that have something to do with who we (at KCET) are."

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Lange purrs as Maggie in 'Cat' role

When Jessica Lange made her film debut in 1976 by playing second banana to an ape in Dino De Laurentiis' unsuccessful remake of King Kong, few people thought that this beautiful young actress would ever be more than a lightweight ingenue.

Today, nine years later, Lange has proven all of her critics wrong. Along with Meryl Streep and Sally Fields, she has become one of the most powerful stars in Hollywood, an actress whose films make money at the box-office and whose performances are consistently rewarded with high critical praise — and awards!

She has been nominated for an Academy Award for each of her last three films: *Frances*, *Country* and *Tootsie*, winning the coveted Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her performance as a soap opera star in the latter comedy film.

Now Lange has taken on one of the greatest acting challenges of her career — the role of Maggie, the hot-blooded, sexually-frustrated Southern wife in the television adaptation of Tennessee Williams' classic American drama, *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, to be broadcast on AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE, Monday, June 24 at 9:00 p.m., ET, over the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

The drama will be the season finale of Season IV of AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE, the weekly drama series presented over PBS by KCET/Los Angeles, South Carolina ETV, WGBH/Boston and WNET/New York.

Please check local listings for area broadcast date and time.

Jessica Lange creates her characters by "trying to become them," she says. "I don't know how else to practice my craft."

During the days and weeks preceding the taping of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, at KCET in Los Angeles, Lange would read and re-read the play nightly, wondering how Maggie,

whose husband, Brick, was refusing to sleep with her, and whose in-laws were plotting to write her and her husband out of the family fortune, had simply not cracked up.

"It was astonishing," she says. "All my life I had played weak women who had capitulated and cowered to their men. Now I was playing the strong one."

In order to find the right neurosis, she had to reach back into her own past and explore her own anxieties and repressions. The two months she had spent making *Frances*, the acclaimed film biography of actress Frances Farmer, a successful film star of the 1930s and 1940s who ended up in a mental institution, had left her scarred.

She describes what she did in front

of cameras for that film as "Hurtful. Sometimes, it's like it's hard to breathe."

On the set of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, some people thought she was edgy and not too friendly. "I can't help it," she says. "Everything looks like a blob to me when I'm working. I get so caught up in my character, I block out everything going on around me, and that often means the people I'm working with. If I appear edgy and unfriendly, I don't mean it. It's the way I work."

Playing Maggie "cleansed me," claims the actress who has been quoted in the past as saying "Most of the time acting for me has been so painful, I've dreaded it."

"What keeps Maggie going is her ability to vent everything, her anger, wants, fantasies, frustrations. She moves everything out, which is a tendency I don't have in real life. I felt really great playing this part."

The AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE production of *Cat On Hot Tin Roof* also stars Tommy Lee Jones as Brick; Penny Fuller as Mae; Kim Stanley as Big Mama; Rip Torn as Big Daddy; and David Dukes as Gooper.

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, was produced for AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE by KCET/Los Angeles and International Television Group. Jack Hofsis is the director; Phylis Geller, the producer, and Lou LaMonte, the executive producer.

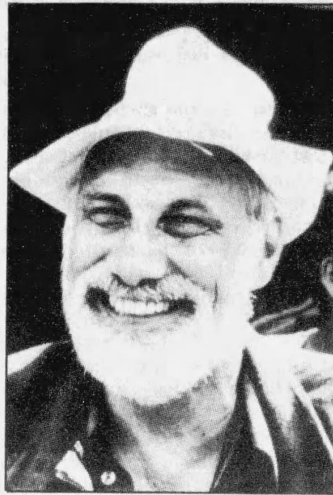


Tommy Lee Jones as Brick and Jessica Lange as Maggie in scene from American Playhouse presentation of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*.

PBS series examines world from tribal cultures' perspective

■ "Millennium" has an important message for ethnically diverse America: Learn from one another and learn to respect one another.

By Elizabeth Mehren
Los Angeles Times



David Maybury-Lewis

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Even the Brazilian Air Force had its doubts when it dumped David Maybury-Lewis and his family off in a remote corner of the Amazonian frontier 35 years ago.

After all, the nearest landmark was the Rio das Mortes, the River of Death. And the tribe that inhabited the region, the Xavante, was known either to be bellicose or fiercely self-protective. Either way, no outsider was about to mistake it for friendly.

So while his wife and baby son watched the small Air Force plane take off without them, Maybury-Lewis kept his eyes on the approaching Xavante tribesmen.

"Could someone help us take this stuff to the village?" Maybury-Lewis finally asked, to the great mirth of the young men who were surrounding him.

It seemed not so much that the anthropologist's request was ridiculous — but that his accent, in the dialect of Xerente, another nearby tribe, was. Touched by his attempt to speak their language, and curious about a tall, bearded Englishman who would bring his wife and small son into their wilderness, the tribesmen led the Maybury-Lewis into what evolved into a lifelong relationship.

His years with the Xavante became the foundation for Maybury-Lewis' firm belief that all the peoples of the world can learn from one another, that "there are other

"The critical thing to remember," she says, "is that the series is about choices — how different societies choose to govern, to share wealth, to define identity. While we are still reeling from last week's events in Los Angeles and all over the country, the themes of 'Millennium' seem more compelling than ever."

With his crisp accent from "the other Cambridge — the one in England," and with his anthropologically correct rubber-soled shoes, Maybury-Lewis, the host for the "Millennium" series, presents an inviting persona that seems to be equal parts Alistair Cooke and Indiana Jones.

Maybury-Lewis, in his office in the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, cringes at the suggestion.

"Anthropology isn't an Indiana Jones-like experience anymore and it shouldn't have been in the first place," he says with healthy indignation. Rather, says this Harvard professor, his attraction to the field began "as an attempt to understand how people lived — to walk a mile in their shoes, in other words."

He soon realized that in dealing with indigenous peoples, "to understand them takes an enormous feat of empathy." And then, says Maybury-Lewis, "you have to come back and communicate a vision to your own folks back home."

His desire to bridge those two mandates led Maybury-Lewis and his wife, Pia, to found an organi-

zation called Cultural Survival 20 years ago that seeks to defend the rights of indigenous peoples. Maybury-Lewis likens the non-profit group to a lesser-known version of Amnesty International.

"Everybody understands the problems of the political prisoner," Maybury-Lewis says. "Whereas the right to self-determination of remote peoples, that strikes a lot of people as too abstract."

While "Millennium" deals with a number of tribes around the world, Maybury-Lewis says it was his experience with the Xavante that made him sense how imperiled such indigenous people really are. Without television or telephones, without fax machines or even a language understood by large numbers of people, these tribal men and women could not possibly be aware of the threats to their cultures from the ostensibly civilized outside world.

"The Xavante didn't know what was about to happen to them. We did," Maybury-Lewis says.

This same sense of urgency impelled Maybury-Lewis and one of his former students, Richard Meech, to begin shaping a television series that would examine the precarious lives of tribal peoples. With his partner, Michael Grant, Meech found private funding for the project that ranged from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to the Body Shop, which manufactures and sells environmentally safe

skin-care products.

"I wanted through the series to encourage people to stop and think about how we organize our lives in certain ways," Maybury-Lewis says. "Obviously, I'm not going to parade through 10 episodes telling people how to live their lives, which would be intolerably arrogant. But what I could do was to show how other people live. What I could do was to start the discussion."

As an academic, Maybury-Lewis says he courted social opprobrium by venturing into the scandalously popular medium of television. "All my friends were telling me horror stories," he says.

But Maybury-Lewis says the allure of television was its non-exclusivity: "The whole purpose

was to reach such a large audience with the notion that these people are real people."

Still, Maybury-Lewis concedes, xenophobia dies hard. "I'm not sure we're going to effect an instant change," he says. "But there are a lot of people who are more ignorant than prejudiced — or, they are prejudiced because they are ignorant. These are the people to whom we are trying to reach out."

He refutes the suggestion that the series — and indeed, his entire life's work — is a kind of endorsement for ethnic diversity. Rather, says Maybury-Lewis, "what we're arguing for is a world in which people live together with mutual understanding and respect."

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STENNETT WILDLIFE SCULPTURES

TV: Katherine Anne Porter's 'Jilting of C

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

WITH Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," public television's "American Short Story" series can claim still another fine production illuminated by an outstanding performance. Geraldine Fitzgerald gives one of the more brilliant acting demonstrations of her distinguished career. She can be appreciated tonight at 9:05 on WNET, Channel 13.

The Granny of Miss Porter's story, published in 1929, is a tough old woman, still tending to the chores of her farm with the help of a long time handyman (William Swetland) and one of her daughters (Lois Smith). She is a nonsense matriarch who recalls that "when I was young, most people thought 'holding your own' was about as far as you could get."

On this particular morning, Granny decides she has embarked on a special day. She insists on the house's being cleaned thoroughly. She plans to bake a white cake, churning her own butter because she doesn't use store-bought anything for white cake. She arranges a small party, complete with music on the Victrola. Gradually, the reader, and now the viewer, begins to realize that this is to be the day of Granny's death.

The woman drifts between current challenges and past pains. Still grieving over the death in childhood of a favorite daughter, she is insensitive to the needs of the daughter who is caring for her. Most of all, she remembers the pale, poetic young man who failed to show up for their wedding 50 years earlier. Granny married another man, but her heart remained with the jilter.

Written by Corinne Jacker and di-

rected by Randa Haines, the television adaptation of "Granny Weatherall" captures the extraordinary complexities of an ordinary life. This is a defiant woman, sneering at those who would try to "talk sense" into her. She is religious, clutching her rosary beads in moments of loneliness. She is skeptical, convinced that God is fickle: "He can snuff out a dream without even blinking an eye."

Miss Fitzgerald captures all the fascinating colors of the character. Preparing for her party, she is the epitomy of cold, gritty efficiency. Entertaining her guests, she is the beautiful hostess, warmly delighted that "you've all come to have a piece of my cake." On her deathbed, she refuses to go easily into that goodnight. She must finally depart, of course, but it is on her own terms. On all levels, in every bit of subtle shading, Miss Fitzgerald is superb.

LA Herald Examiner

TV REVIEW

Frank O'Connor's welcome 'Guests'

By Peter D. Bunzel

Begorra, now they've gone and made a nice little television play out of a classic Irish short story by Frank O'Connor. Called "Guests of the Nation," it's about the abiding humanity of man even amid the inhumanity of warfare. The TV adaptation will be shown tonight as part of PBS' "Great Performances" series (8 p.m., Channel 28) and warrants your hour-long witness.

Yet it must be said that the O'Connor tale doesn't lend itself ideally to dramatization, for its effectiveness lies more in the grace, humor and naturalness of the writing than in the stark narrative line. Indeed, it is the contrast between the almost sunny surface and the increasingly dark portents that makes the story so memorable.

"Guests of the Nation" takes place in the Irish countryside during the "troubles" of the early '20s. It tells of a pair of Irish insurgents who capture two British soldiers and are assigned to guard them during their captivity in a widow's hilltop cottage. Though the British and Irish are at each other's throats, this unlikely four-some develops an unexpected

sense of camaraderie during their enforced togetherness. They take tea together, play cards, argue robustly over religion and capitalism, even join in doing some jigs.

The idyll ends with a jolt when word comes that the British have executed four Irish hostages. Now, in retaliation, headquarters has decided the British captives are to be shot. They are taken out to a field and the deed is summarily done. This shocks one of the captors into realizing that "there are things you do in life...that change the whole world around you, so that you see and feel different from before..." Fadeout.

O'Connor's narrative is little more than an anecdote, but it abounds with unspoken pathos. All four of the main characters are decent, honorable men who, under different circumstances, wouldn't dream of harming one another; indeed, until the fatal order arrives, they are pals who trade not only badinage but even bird calls. It is events beyond their control — or so they believe — that transform kindly, gregarious individuals into executioners and their victims. "Why do you want to shoot me?" one of the victims asks pitifully. "Aren't we chums?"

The theatrical version by Neil McKenzie was performed originally off-Broadway by the Colonades Theater Lab, where it won considerable acclaim. With two exceptions, the same actors appear in Kenneth Cavender's TV adaptation — Frank Converse in the leading role as the senior of the

two captors and Estelle Parsons in the much lesser part of the widow in whose house the captives are sequestered. Converse plays with stoic forcefulness, his pain pimpling just under his not-so-thick skin, and Parsons, clenching a pipe in her teeth, is the perfect picture of an Irish peasant woman who becomes as fond of the British prisoners as she is of her fellow countrymen guarding them.

Re-creating their stage roles are Charlie Stavola, superb as an anti-capitalism, anti-religion captive ("think not," the widow warns him, "to make light of the hidden powers"); Nesbitt Blaisdell, delightful as his bird-calling comrade; Richard Cottrell, appealing as the younger captor; and Brian O'Mallon, chilling as the man from headquarters who heads up the execution squad.

"Guests of the Nation" — a wonderfully ironic title — was produced by Phyllis Geller for WNET-Channel 13 in New York at the Connecticut Public Television Studios in Hartford. The understated direction by John Desmond heightens the tension by its very terseness.

A word of caution is in order: By all means turn up the volume for this teleplay. Though thoroughly convincing, the British and Irish accents at times make the dialogue hard to follow, and every phrase is worth hearing. For even when transposed to TV, O'Connor's affecting vignette gains its cumulative power more from what is said than what is shown.