

Bayard Rustin says:

BLATANT RACISM IS ON THE DECLINE!

...but new TV show insults blacks

In many important respects, American society has overcome the coarse and crude racism of the recent past. Most people, except the most ignorant and provincial, are now willing to accept

black citizens as equals, as neighbors and as co-workers. Today, we can find blacks and whites living and working together in harmony where only 20 or 30 years ago they lived separate

existences, never crossing their paths on equal terms.

With the overall improvements in race relations, many of the old stereotypes about black people have disappeared.

No longer do we have degrading spectacles like the Amos and Andy shows, shuffling black men, and happy, singing slaves entertaining their lovable white masters.

But while blatant racial

type-casting has become socially unacceptable, racism lingers on in some subtle but no less demeaning ways. I realized this several weeks ago when I switched on the television and watched an episode of a new NBC program called Skag.

Since the program, which stars Karl Malden, supposedly depicts the daily life of an East Pittsburgh steelworker, I thought it might be interesting. After all, workers, whether they be black or white, receive little or no attention from the mass media except for occasional attacks against their unions, alleged greed, and crude lifestyles.

Unfortunately, Skag turned out to be more of a caricature than a fair and sensitive portrayal of blue-collar life. Worse still, the writers and producers of Skag present black people in a particularly unfavorable light. Indeed, all the old

porters won their rights from the Hugh Pullman Company.

They did it on their own; they relied on their own creativity and resources. But seeing the blacks in Skag, a viewer might easily conclude that blacks can do nothing on their own, or that blacks have never done anything on their own.

The "stage blacks" of Skag also insult the thousands of black steelworkers who hold elected posts in the United Steelworkers of America, a union which has an outstanding civil rights record. Blacks, who make up over 25% of the work force in the basic steel industry, have played an increasingly important role in the union. But as Skag presents it, blacks seem to be an insignificant force in steel production.

Aside from the subtle and refined racism of Skag, the program has other serious flaws. Rather than attempting

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stereotypes are there -- blacks are stupid, subservient to whites, and flunkies who are willing to do anything for a quick buck.

In an episode about a wildcat strike to protest unsafe working conditions, only two blacks have speaking roles. One of the black characters is a union official, obviously an Uncle Tom, who is sent to Peter Skagska's plant to undermine the strike and to reassure management.

The other black character is one of the strikers who sides with Skagska. In his bit part, the black man does nothing but repeat the words and ideas of Skagska, the white foreman who heroically defends the interests of the workers.

In short, both black men are depicted as idiots who are incapable of independent thought, who have no capacity for intelligent leadership, and who are willing to sell-out to whatever side offers the best price.

Apparently, the writers of Skag have never heard of A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. After years of relentless and sometimes hopeless struggle, Randolph and the small band of black

an honest and balanced depiction of working-class life, the program offers up an array of distortions.

Since Skag's writers and producers seem to think that ordinary working-class life is dull, uneventful and lacking in vitality, they "spice up" reality with a little prostitution, alcoholism, an abortion here and there, and other sordid events. In a way, they probably think that they are liberating workers from what must be a boring life. But such liberation is an act of condescension, an exercise in lecturing the unwashed masses (in this case, workers) about what real living is all about.

But black people and workers can do without lectures from the "better class."

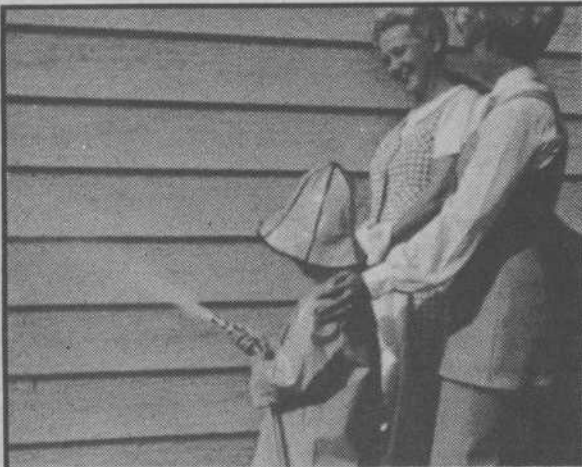
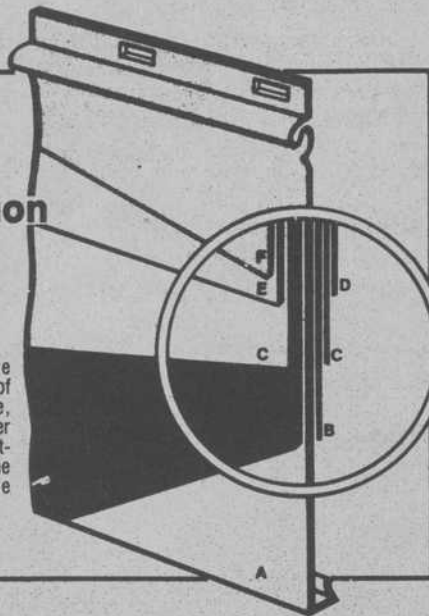
Since workers support the television industry by purchasing the products of sponsors, the industry has a duty to produce programs which do not insult the very people whose sweat keeps the industry alive. Skag, despite its stated intention of promoting a better understanding of the working-class, is one program that is especially insulting, and NBC would do us a favor by junking it.

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