

Marc: Good Show!



FRED SILVERMAN

GOOD SHOW! Symposium Honors Legendary TV Executive Fred Silverman '58

By David Marc

IF YOU'RE NOT FAMILIAR WITH FRED SILVERMAN '58, YOU'VE PROBABLY SPENT MORE OF the last half-century watching television than producing or studying it. In April, Silverman's lifetime of achievement in the art and industry of television brought scholars, celebrities, and colleagues to campus from around the country to analyze his career and honor the man. The only executive to have overseen programming at all three original U.S. broadcasting networks (CBS, ABC, and NBC), Silverman gave the pivotal green light and optimal time slots to dozens of projects that blossomed into prime-time hits, including such culturally resonant programs as *All in the Family*, *Roots*, and *Hill Street Blues*. Dubbed "From Test Patterns to Pixels: Envisioning the Future of Television," the day-

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long tribute was hosted by Trustee Professor Robert J. Thompson, founding director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture. "Time and again, Silverman demonstrated an ability to foresee popular success in programming concepts that his colleagues and competitors found too risky for prime time," Thompson says. "In that sense, he is a rare and proven hand at 'envisioning the future of television.'"

The son of a TV repairman, Silverman grew up in Queens and came to Syracuse to study speech and dramatic arts. After graduation, he earned a master's degree at Ohio State and found his first job at WGN, Chicago. Joining CBS in New York City in 1963, he took a fast lane through the ranks to become the network's chief programmer in 1970. Although CBS had long been at the top of the television ratings, Silverman revamped the schedule to draw younger audiences, reinforcing CBS dominance. Lured to ABC in 1975, he inherited a network that was best known for finishing third in a three-way ratings race every



Top photo: Trustee Professor Robert J. Thompson (center) leads a panel discussion featuring television scholars and critics and, via satellite from Los Angeles, acclaimed producers and writers (from left) John Rich, Allan Burns, Larry Gelbart, and Norman Lear.

Lower left photo: Fred Silverman '58 (left) shares his views on television's future with SU Trustee and *60 Minutes* correspondent Steve Kroft '67.
Lower right photo: *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* TV editor Rob Owen '93 (pen in hand) quizzes comedy producers Marcy Carsey and George Schlatter.

year since the A.C. Nielsen Company began keeping track. By 1977, ABC had knocked off CBS to take the number-one spot. NBC, battered by the schedules Silverman created for its competitors, hired him away in 1978. With no more executive suites to conquer, Silverman became an independent producer, responsible for such hit dramas as *Matlock*, *Diagnosis: Murder*, and *In the Heat of the Night*.

Among the luminaries on hand at the Newhouse School to offer Silverman praise and gratitude, and to share personal recollections with the overflow crowds at Joyce Herganhan Auditorium were Edward Bleier '51, a longtime Warner Bros. executive whose gift endowed SU's Bleier center; Marcy Carsey, co-producer of such celebrated sitcoms as *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne*; and George Schlatter, creator of *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in*. Pining for the Silverman era, Schlatter described contemporary reality programming as "an excuse not to pay writers." Others, including producer Norman Lear (*All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*) and writer Larry Gelbart (*Caesar's Hour*, *M*A*S*H*) participated live via

satellite from Los Angeles. "I remember reading Norman Lear's script for *All in the Family*, and thinking it would never get on the air," said director John Rich, who believed the sitcom was too controversial to pass muster with television executives in 1971. Lear credits Silverman for seeing beyond conventional wisdom to give the series a chance; it became the highest rated show on television for five consecutive seasons.

In a highlight event, Steve Kroft '67 of *60 Minutes* engaged Silverman, one-on-one, in a provocative discussion of television's future. Silverman predicted a merger of the medium with the Internet, believing that web sites already maintained by TV channels are likely to become more potent distribution portals than broadcast signals. Asked by Kroft to account for the shrinking appeal of scripted series, Silverman decried the declining quality of prime-time drama, tying it to a lack of courage on the part of network executives. "People aren't taking a chance," he said. "If you want to make a hit, you have to take a chance."