

Grownups Dig That Zany Kid Stuff

By CECIL SMITH

HOLLYWOOD — There's a bitter rumor running around town that NBC plans to order no more editions of I.L.I. Pufnstuf but to stuff more reruns of the 17 shows made last year down the kids' throats on the fall schedule. I protest.

Not on the part of the kids. They can do their own protesting. Since Sesame Street, they've become so smart it's hard to keep up with them, and coming next fall they've got Hot Dog on Saturday mornings which means that pretty soon parents will be asking kids those "why" questions.

Nope. I protest on the part of a parent who wants to share his offspring's activities, though why any kid would want a 40-year-old pal around beats the heck out of me. And Saturday morning, waiting for the ball game to begin, is not a bad time for sharing. Except for cartoons.

I sometimes think the guy

who invented the animated drawing on film is right up there with Judas Iscariot, Attila the Hun and Myra Breckinridge archvillains. Don't give me Mickey Mouse. He led to Archie and his Friends, which week after week makes Chinese water torture seem like a dip in a forest pool.

But Pufnstuf was something else again. I will not say that grotesque figures dashing about "mid talking trees and sneezing houses and galloping mushrooms was exactly "The Tempest" or "Alice in Wonderland."

The show, to begin with, was not a cartoon; it was produced by puppeteers Sid and Marty Krofft, but was not a puppet show, its grotesque heads were midgets and acrobats encased in grotesque costumes, wildly imaginative. It had Jack Wild, the Artful Dodger of "Oliver" It has musical numbers and a talking flute and a jet-propelled broom.

But, most of all, it had Witchepoo.

Witchepoo was the parents' friend. Witchepoo said lines, mostly concocted by Len Wiener, that delighted grown-ups.

Witchepoo would tell her dungeon door, "Open, Sesame" and the door would complain, "My name's Irving," and Witchepoo would snarl, "Nobody likes a smart door," and kick it.

Witchepoo would wave her wand and windows would crack and she'd look at the wand and shake it and murmur, "I got to get the fine tuning adjusted on this."

Witchepoo had a castle and creatures who hated her. She used to ask the castle: "Castle, castle, I hate to boast, but who's the witch that sends you the most?" And the castle would roar: "Not you, you old fossil."

But what made the TV moguls seem even dumber than I'd always believed they were was that the kids, and I mean the little kids, 5 and 6, dug those adult lines more than the kid jokes.

I looked up Witchepoo the other day to ask about the situation. She's Billie Hayes and she's a handsome cookie, sleek and bubbly without that witch nose and make-up. You would doubt she was Witchepoo except we needed a waiter and she screeched and got us a dozen.

She said that after the 17 shows were finished for NBC, she and Jack Wilds and the crew did the movie version, "Pufnstuf," which is released nationally by Universal this month, and expected, inasmuch as the show is slotted on NBC's fall schedule, to be doing new ones now. But they're not. Wild is in England and contracts are running out.

The Kroffts are doing another kiddie show for NBC, the Buzaloes, which involves Martha Raye as a rock witch who lives in a jukebox. But Marty Krofft said the other day he believes orders will come in for a new batch of Pufnstufs.

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