TV Families: *Mirror Images or Muddled Reality*

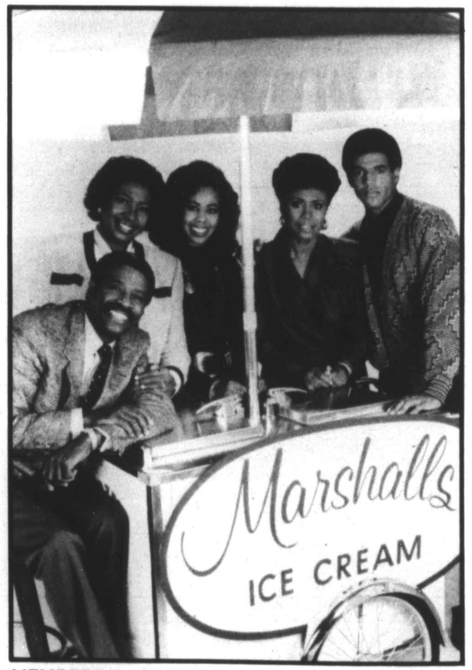
By Cynthia Franklin

Doreen is nervous. She wants everything to be perfect when the Marshalls, Ruth and Henry, arrive. The relationship between the Marshalls and the Jacksons is strained. To break the ice, Martin invites Ruth on a tour of his palatial home.

The evening climaxes when Martin challenges Henry to a game of billiards. Henry accepts and the two men walk off to the plush billiard room. The stakes: whether or not Henry's factory will be moved to the suburbs or remain on the southside of Chicago.

Before starting, Martin warns Henry he was captain of the Harvard Billiard Team. Henry, undaunted, hunches over the table and breaks the balls.

"Dynasty," you ask. No. "Generations" the ground breaking daytime soap opera which has as its focal points a white and an African-American family.



MEMBERS OF THE CAST of NBC's "Generations," the first daytime soap opera which has as its focal points, a white and an African American Family. NBC Photo.

The Colorization of Television

Since the phenomenal success of "The Cosby Show," there has been a reawakening among television executives of the potential existing in the African-American viewing audience.

While "The Cosby Show" has spawned a host of clones featuring black casts ' "227" and "Charlie & Company;" it also can be credited with the creation of several programs featuring whites such as "Growing Pains" and even the hit, "The Roseanne Barr Show."

Said L. Chester Grant, President of the African Resource Center of New York, an organization, which among other activists monitors the media's portrayal of blacks, "unlike 'Sanford and Son,' 'The Jeffersons,' and 'Good Times,' 'The Cosby Show' does not seek to make fun of its characters but to find humor in life. The most significant contribution 'Cos' has made is the restoring of dignity to the image of African-American families."

Fact or Fantasy

Not all opinions of "The Cosby Show" have been so favorable. The program has drawn harsh criticism from segments of the African-American community who feel it does not accurately depict life in black America.

"Generations," which first aired on NBC March 27 of this year, also has become subject to the same complaint. Is this criticism fair and valid?

"How many whites own Texas oil companies?" argues Grant. The point being television always has been larger than life. In fact, much of its entertainment value is in the escapism which it provides.

Programs such as "The Cosby Show" and "Generations" are airing at a time when we are seeing a rise in the number of middle and upper-middle class black families. Presently, a third of all black families earn between $25,000 and $50,000, as compared with only 13 percent two decades ago.

This is not to ignore the fact we also have witnessed the alarming simultaneous increase in the so-called "black underclass." At this point in our history, more than ever, we will find a household headed by two professionals, whether it be a doctor and a lawyer as depicted on "Cos." To say this program does not represent blacks is to assume the African-American community is monolithic and ignore the fact there is a growing, albeit small, middle and upper-middle class segment.

Cultural Messages

Although like most soap operas, the characters lead tangled lives involving greed, lust and deceit, "Generations" is by no means void of any positive messages and the African-American community. How many programs can boast a character who when making a business decision considers the ramifications it will have on his employees and the surrounding community?

The most highly acclaimed and most frequently criticized of the recent wave of black television programs is by far "The Cosby Show."

Said Grant, "I think these critics are missing the bigger picture when they jump on 'The Cosby Show.' Few American families, be they black or white, have a doctor and a lawyer as the heads of households. However, what is retained throughout the series is the cultural values of African peoples. Values many of us have lost as we have become increasingly accultured into this society."

Examples of the principles central to "The Cosby Show" which are characteristic pure African culture are such principles as:

1. Respect for elders
2. The elasticity of African families where even the children's friends are treated warmly and like one's own.
3. Strong sense of community
4. Group meetings to make family decisions
5. Family reigning over individual needs

Why the Change in Imagery?

During a time in which we see roll backs in civil rights legislation and the election of former Ku Klux Klan leaders to state office, the question arises why has there been an increase in positive African-American images on television?

The issue no longer is one of black and white but of green. Economically, it makes sense. A 1986 study by Nielsen Media Research found blacks watch 39 percent more television than other households, and this percentage is expected to increase.

"Blacks make up approximately 15 percent of the population yet they account for 20 percent of the viewing audience. That amounts to a lot of clout," said Grant.

The reasons why blacks make up disproportionately the viewing population is because they are less likely than whites to be able to afford cable, VCR's, and other leisure time activities.

To some, however, economics are not the only reason. Explains Grant, "unfortunately, this is an extremely racist society and attempts to portray African-Americans positively must be viewed with suspicion. Could it be that the resurgence in positive images are a way of placating or lulling the population into thinking we are doing all right when in fact our condition continues to be very serious."

Cynthia Franklin is a Long Island, New York based freelance writer.

WHAT, ME FORGET? — Clair, (Phylicia Rashad) reminds Cliff (Bill Cosby) of his annual check-up in a segment of the popular "Cosby Show" entitled "The Physical." NBC Photo.