

**THE BLOG****Watch Mr. Wizard**

By Marty Kaplan

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What Woodward and Bernstein's *All the President's Men* was to journalism, Don Herbert's *Watch Mr. Wizard* was to science. As a kid in Newark, I was one of those 7- to 12-year-olds who tried never to miss my Saturday morning appointment with his NBC show, and it's a safe bet that the curiosity about the natural world he encouraged, as well as the respect for evidence and analysis he modeled, were what set me on a path to a college degree in molecular biology. True, I lapsed, but in Don Herbert's *New York Times* obituary it says that during the 1960s and '70s, "about half the applicants to Rockefeller University in New York, where students work toward doctorates in science and medicine, cited Mr. Wizard when asked how they first became interested in science." A National Science Foundation official quoted in his *Los Angeles Times* obituary said in 1989 that "Don has been personally responsible for more people going into the sciences than any other single person in this country."

It's almost unimaginable how primitive his show was. The set was barely more sophisticated than a kitchen. An 11ish boy or girl would come by for a visit, and Mr. Wizard would demonstrate some experiment — getting a milk bottle to suck an egg in through its narrow mouth, or combining two clear liquids to make a colored one. Then Timmy or Polly would be gently, Socratically guided into figuring out how it worked, and by the end of the program, I usually had learned how to perform and understand some scientific magic in my own kitchen, to the amazement of my friends, unless of course they decided — in an adolescent ritual as old as time — to punch me out as the geek I plainly was.

There were no ADD-inducing rapid-fire camera-cuts on *Watch Mr. Wizard*, no puppets, no jingles, no dancing atoms. But that doesn't mean that the show was devoid of show business. Don Herbert was a performer at heart. Early in his career, he worked as an actor and stagehand in a Minnesota theater group; he acted in summer stock opposite Nancy Davis, the future Nancy Reagan. He had no compunctions about wanting people to gape in amazement at how the world really works, or to use mystery and suspense as a tool of teaching, or to deploy the most primitive, venerable techniques of storytelling — kid visits a wise elder, kid sees magic, kids learns something, kid leaves — as a way to keep us watching.

It's a pity that scientists today, including those who owe their career starts to him, are so often snobbish about show biz. That mandarin condescension toward the masses is why Carl Sagan, one of Don Herbert's television successors, was dismissed as a vulgar popularizer by many of his peers. Entertainment, as Herbert knew, is the art of capturing attention. Scientists depend on public funding, and therefore on the theater of persuasion. Scientists, like it or not, have become hostages to culture warriors, and their ranking in the public's hierarchy of epistemologies, like it or not,

depends on the sympathies of citizen audiences. Evidence and proof, conjecture and refutation, theory and argument: these may be defined by scientists with reference to a community of their peers, but if they have any hope of staving off a new Dark Age, it's their non-peers to whom they must also communicate — the *Idol*- and *Oprah*-watchers, the climate-change know-nothings, the “I didn't descend from a primate” pols and their constituents.

Looking back, I'm amazed that *Watch Mr. Wizard* had such a long run on NBC, from 1951 to 1965. It was a time before news and children's programming — and everything else on television — had to be a profit center, as it does now. It was an era when media executives and social commentators could talk about television's educational mission, and not mean only the ghetto of “educational television.” In 1938, at the birth of the medium, E.B. White famously said, “I believe that television is going to be the test of the modern world and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace or a saving radiance in the sky. We shall stand or fall by television, of that I am quite sure.” *Watch Mr. Wizard* — like Ed Murrow's work, like *Playhouse 90* — was once a big reason to believe that saving radiances would tip the balance. Today, not so much.

A couple of years ago, when Don Herbert's company issued a DVD set of his old shows, I seized the chance to interview him for a show I was then hosting on Air America. He couldn't have been warmer. As he indulged my reminiscing about watching him when I was a kid — “*I wanted to be Timmy!*” — he made me feel as though I were the first person who made him endure my nostalgia, and not the umpteenth. Best of all, it gave me the chance to say something in person to him, something that I'd been wanting to say for a very long time: Thank you, Mr. Wizard. For me, for all of us, thanks for what you did for us.

To which I now have to add, alas, Rest in peace.

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