

CECIL SMITH

Tangled Plot in NBC's 'Vanished'

I rather wish now that NBC and Universal had stuck to one of their earlier notions to do "Vanished" as a multipart film shown in a number of weekly installments, a la "The Forsyte Saga."

It would have been interesting to see how such an experiment would have fared on commercial television.

I have the feeling that by the time its final chapter arrived, the show would have attracted one of those astronomical, once-in-a-decade audiences, such as the one the last episode of *The Fugitive* drew when the identity of the one-armed man was revealed.

Not only the natural suspense in Fletcher Knebel's best-selling thriller of derring-do in high international political circles would have built such an audience but I imagine half the TV-watching public would have been talking about the show, swelling the audience still more, particularly as the networks these days offer so little that is of more than momentary interest.

And Knebel so complicated that immensely tangled plot, which opens like Chinese boxes, with new revelations, suspicions, innuendos and political implications at every turn, that it seemed to be ideal for a serialized novel on film.

Even though the 3½-hour, \$2.1-million movie, which NBC showed in two parts Monday and Tuesday nights,



Richard Widmark

'VANISHED'

A television movie produced by Universal and presented Monday and Tuesday nights on NBC. Teleplay by Dean Ruskoff from the best-selling novel by Fletcher Knebel. Director Buzz Kulik. Executive producer David Victor. Producer David O'Connell. Music Leonard Rosenman. Director of photography Lionel Lindon. Art director John J. Lloyd. Film editor Robert Wallis. Stars Richard Widmark and (alphabetically) Skye Aubrey, Tom Easley, James Farentino, Larry Hagman, Murray Hamilton, Arthur Hill, Robert Hooks, E. G. Marshall, Eleanor Parker, William Shatner, Robert Young. Also Chet Huntley, Betty White, Stephen McNally, Sherry North, Robert Lipston, Don Pedro Colby.

is easily the biggest thing of its kind ever attempted on television, I felt given even more time Dean Ruskoff's script might have probed deeper that huge and fascinating gallery of Washington characters Knebel created—from Butler Nygaard, the myopic, pot-smoking CIA informer, to Paul Roubush, President of the United States. Mostly what we had was surface skimming; unexplored acres lay beneath the skins.

Sense of Authenticity

What was very impressive about the production, directed with a fine tension by Buzz Kulik, was the sense of authenticity. From the moment the surf at Sea Island, Ga., disgorged the body of a Red Chinese sailor onto the white beach and the discovery so neatly coincided with the disappearance of a top presidential adviser from Washington's Burning Tree golf course, there was a feeling through top level intelligence meetings, presidential press conferences, FBI and CIA investigations, a jaunty opposition senator on the steps of the Capitol smilingly making insidious references to the "lavender" aspects of the case, there was the sense of this happening while we watched it, intensified inasmuch as we watched it on the instrument that is best when it deals with the real.

Further implementing this sense of happening was the presence of Chet Huntley and Betty White on the opening of the second part of the film Tuesday night summarizing what had gone before via a newscast on the case at hand—a very apt gimmick.

Moreover, I think the sense of reality was prompted to a great extent by the journalistic method of the writing of Knebel, a distinguished reporter before he turned to fiction and a stickler for facts, particularly on the Washington political front he knows so well. It was underscored by such details of the production as the use of Air Force 1 to carry President Roubush back to Washington from a rally at the Sugar Bowl, by the helicopter that met the plane at Andrews AFB, by the obvious attention to detail in the presidential offices and those of congressmen and various bureaucrats.

And perhaps most important of all, this feeling of watching actual happenings unfold extended, in part, to the highly distinguished cast.

Realistic Atmosphere

Particularly Richard Widmark as the pipe-smoking, shirt-sleeved president; he seemed to me a man working in that oval office at actually running the country with all the threats from abroad complicated by the disappearance of his most trusted adviser. Widmark has even been an actor to infuse an almost documentary feeling into a fictional work—remember "Panic in the Streets"? That was the ideal atmosphere for "Vanished."

James Farentino was the central figure in the tale as the President's press secretary and though I'll admit to finding his romance with his secretary Skye Aubrey a rather tiresome intrusion, it was not overly objectionable. Otherwise, the playing seemed faultless to me, particularly those two fine old character actors, E. G. Marshall and Robert Young, cunniving together against the President as, respectively, a thin-lipped CIA chief and a white-haired old senator rich in Dirksenian rotund phrases. Special note should be made of the practical young FBI agent of Robert Hooks and Sherry North's disrespectful prostitute.