

Image Union: The importance of unpredictability

Eliot Wald

Television, the pronouncements of network presidents aside, thrives on utter predictability. Plots, punchlines and characters may change, but audience loyalty is based on finding the same configuration each week. Even Saturday Night Live has a format, and John Belushi would no more give a detailed talk on nuclear power than Alistair Cooke introduce Masterpiece Theater in a strapless evening gown.

All of which makes it hard to capsule Image Union. About as rigorous as you can get about Channel 11's weekly showing of works by local video and film artists is to say that it's independent. Extremely.

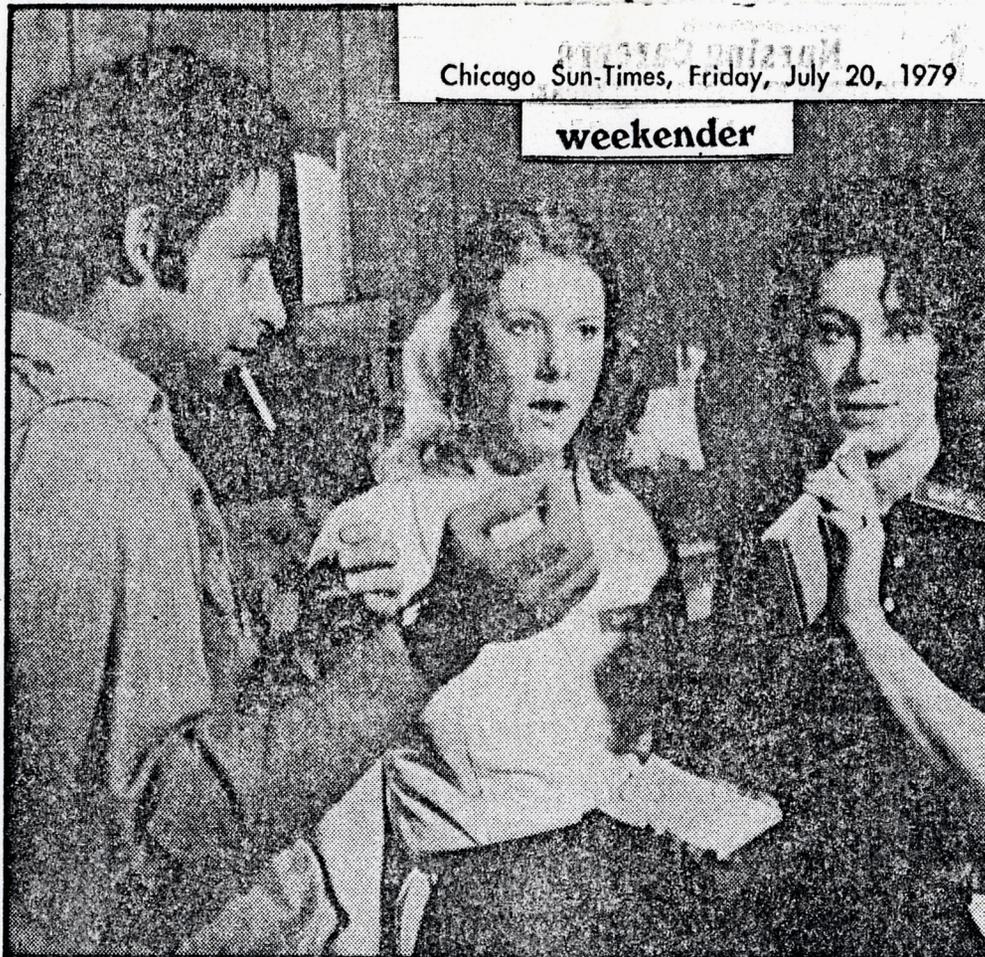
"I think there's something attractive about unpredictability," says the show's co-ordinating producer, video veteran Tom Weinberg. "It's important to be unpredictable. But you can't sacrifice quality. We're trying to make good TV, not unpredictable TV."

NEVERTHELESS, THE SHOW'S content is about as consistent as Idi Amin's temperament. It can be a video collage on nuclear power, a whimsical visit to a spare rib sale on Memorial Day weekend, or an at-your-elbow portrait of Jane Byrne on election night. It might be a film on gang warfare made by students at Roberto Clemente High School or, like this week's show, a personal, poignant, dramatic film by a Chicago filmmaker.

The first principle, in Weinberg's words, is, "Things you don't usually see on TV. Things that are close to the edge. Television is geared to perpetuate mediocrity. But the public is much more ready for new things than the gatekeepers who decide what goes on the air."

When WTTW's gatekeepers charged Weinberg with creating Image Union last year, they were getting what passes for a grizzled pro in the infant world of video. In 1972, Weinberg and three friends created TVTV (Top Value Television), and, gathering what friends and equipment they could, set out for Miami to shoot a documentary on the Republican and Democratic conventions.

The offbeat, refreshing look at quadrennial political madness was a surprise hit on public television. In the next four years, TVTV produced half a dozen tapes, including



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Marc Lief, writer, producer and director of "A Steady Rain," this week's Image Union presentation, instructs two of his stars, Trisha Dunn (left) and Kinnaird Fox.

a look at the disciples of the Guru Maharaj Ji meeting in Houston's Astrodome and a clever study of advertising called Adland.

AFTER TVTV'S founders went their separate ways, Weinberg joined Channel 11, producing intimate, hand-held video portraits of Vito Marzullo and WBBM-AM's crime-and-violence expert, Joe Cummings.

"By the time WTTW was ready to try Image Union, they'd seen that I was reliable, that I did good work and knew how to meet a deadline," Weinberg said. "I was a credible figure to them. The show was started with two purposes. One was to repair the bad feelings between the community of indepen-

dent artists and Channel 11. I was credible to that group because I was one of them. So that, we've done. The other goal was to create great television. We're getting closer to that."

Among other things, Weinberg asked for the 10 p.m. Saturday time slot, in hopes of catching the "pre-Saturday Night Live audience." Then, he contacted friends in video about submitting work.

"I know that sounds elitist," he says now, "but I didn't want to do what PBS usually does: put out a blanket call for submissions, reject 95 per cent of what comes in, and lose half the tapes. Now that we've been around

for nine months, we're getting things from all over. But in the beginning, I only wanted to deal with people whose work I knew."

ALTHOUGH IMAGE UNION reached its height of public notice for "Too Late For Me," the Clemente gang documentary (several of the students lost family members to gang warfare shortly after the show), Weinberg is still fondest of oddball offerings with a Chicago twist.

"One of my favorites was the Jane Byrne on Election Night tape that Lily Ollinger and Cindy Neal did. It aired just nine days after the election. We also had a wonderful piece, about three minutes long, on chairs in parking spaces during the big snow: no narration, just music. I showed it to people in New York, and they couldn't figure out what the hell it was about. They thought the chairs were conceptual art."

Another genre is represented by this week's film, Marc Lief's "A Steady Rain." Lief, who solely wrote, directed and financed the affecting 23-minute tale of violence seen through a child's eyes, says no artist has a tougher time getting money and exposure than the maker of short, fictional films, and he wound up bringing the film to Weinberg twice.

"The first time," says Weinberg, "I wasn't sure we should run the whole thing. Our early shows were all short pieces. When he brought it back, Marc persuaded me that narrative films represent a real group of artists and a body of work in Chicago."

DESPITE Image Union's success, Weinberg is uncomfortable with the role of poobah to the film and video community. Screening all films and tapes himself ("After a while, it's like being an Andy Frain usher"), he also makes the follow-up calls, edits the shows, writes the copy and does what promotion he can, a grind that, frankly, won't last much longer.

"At this point, I think we're making good television. Not great, not perfect, but better than almost anything else on the air," he says. "I want Image Union to be around for a long time, so I won't leave until its future is assured. But I always have the feeling that it's not as good as it would be if I did it myself. And that's why I won't be there much longer."