

TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

# Preacher without a sense of proportion

in Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Max von Sydow's curmudgeonly character relates one of his sporadic television-viewing experiences: "Flipping through the channels, you can see the whole culture before you]. Deodorant salesmen, wrestling, the holocaust."

This seeming non-differentiation between heavy and light issues is something we simply accept, yet we recognise there is something inhuman about it. NBC, for example, allows only one sponsor during its broadcasts of *Schindler's List*, and even then, the ads are serious and topical.

One of the chief mixers of the sacred and profane are talk shows, and one of the most unwitting of these alchemists is Oprah Winfrey, who is being paid homage in an A&E *Biography* (A&E: Sunday, January 16 at 8pm ET/9pm PT).

Oprah's detractors accuse her of being too preachy in the subtitle of her A&E profile is "Preacher Woman"), but I don't see this as a flaw. It's her show, after all, and she has a right to put her stamp on it. The problem is that she doesn't exhibit a sense of proportion. Postmodernism is one thing, but can she be serious when she says an addiction to macaroni is as serious as heroin addiction? Or when she's in the middle of a meaningful programme about child sexual abuse and announces that tomorrow's programme going to be on thinner

thighs? When sued for libel by the beef lobby two years ago, she insisted she was not a journalist, so it's unclear why she feels her show topics have to be all over the map. At least with Jerry Springer, you know what you're going to get.

I don't know quite what to make of Oprah's Book Club, a monthly feature on her show in which she hosts a round-table discussion on a book she has assigned earlier in the month. Even her friend Maya Angelou says in this programme: "Sometimes I question her [Book Club] choices." Like my least favourite teachers, she insists on picking books that she thinks are relevant to people's lives, but she is completely limited to literal interpretations. She assumes, for example, that a person with an alcoholic father is best served by reading a book about a person with an alcoholic father. She suffers from the disease Lee Siegel described in his controversial Harper's article on the decline of aesthetic judgment (October 1999): "Our official arbiters of culture have lost the gift of being able to comprehend a work of art that does not reflect their immediate experience."

I feel terribly guilty writing this because, as she discusses in the A&E profile, she had a miserable childhood fraught with abuse, poverty and racial discrimination. She has been able to rise above her circumstances in the worldly and material sense.

But, as with most people who talk for talk's sake, she is stuck on the idea that an unexpressed thought is not worth having.

□ Until the early 1980s, television specials featuring the likes of Doug Henning and David Copperfield were among the highest-rated of any given year. That they lasted so long at all is a mystery: why weren't audiences more suspicious as to whether they were witnessing sleight of camera rather than sleight of hand?

## Talk shows are one of the chief mixers of the sacred and the profane

When television special effects improved – not to mention the advent of *Star Wars* – magicians seemed embarrassingly provincial by comparison. By the early 1980s, the time the illusionist David Copperfield made the Statue of Liberty disappear for his television special, everyone assumed he had used a blue screen.

Perhaps this is why *Magic's Greatest Illusions*, a documentary on magic airing on The Learning Channel, proves less fun

than it sounds (TLC: Friday, January 21 at 9pm ET).

The programme surveys different types of classic magic tricks, but all the footage has a Las Vegas feel to it. Its most valuable offering is an interview with Doug Henning, his first in 20 years. Resembling a cross between the Maharishi Mahash Yogi and Andy Gibb, Henning was one of the great showmen of the 1970s. On one television special, he pretended that his stunt had gone awry and that he was drowning, then appeared on stage as his own rescuer. Says a fellow magician in the documentary of Henning: "Before Doug Henning, magic was thought of as a bad birthday party clown."

After Henning, magic regained some of that old birthday clown feeling. The TV magician's demise was partly at the hand of James "The Amazing" Randi, himself a magician, who made a living out of debunking "spoon-bender" Uri Geller with a Javert-like vengeance. To twist the knife (or spoon) even more, Randi chose Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* on which to humiliate the alleged telekinetic. Was there to be no place on television for an entertaining fraud?

Meanwhile, the television magic special has been replaced by the likes of *Breaking the Magician's Code: Magic's Biggest Secrets Revealed*, in which an incognito magician squealed on his colleagues' secrets. The programme elicited angry viewer mail, as well as one of Fox's biggest viewing audiences of 1997.

It's heartbreaking that modern magicians can only have a television career by turning the profession into a sight gag, or by exposing one another's tricks as a con – I guess you could call them disillusionists.

## TREASURY OF THE

A COLLECTION

A Public Exhibition

Christie's, 8 King Street

13th January –

BROWN SHIPLEY  
&  
HENRY COOKE

TICKETS  
0990 344

www.t

and selected Waitros

Group booking

For information about C

THE BEST GALLERY WEBSITE 19th & 20th Century PAINTINGS

[www.burlington.co.uk](http://www.burlington.co.uk)