

6C

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

SUNDAY, APRIL 29, 1990

ERIC MINK

Sex, Scams, Scandals, Sweeps

SEX, drugs, scams and scandals. Welcome to the May findings sweeps. The networks have a double dose of all the best available at 8 o'clock Sunday nights when NBC and ABC are scheduled to head-to-head with competing made-for-TV films on Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and the rise and fall of the Beach Boys.

NBC's "Fall From Grace" was made with the cooperation and input from the Bakkers. ABC's "The Story of the Beach Boys Summer Dreams" emphasizes that it was based on "Heroes and Villains," a book written without authorization of any of the Beach Boys.

The difference is apparent. In "Fall From Grace," the Bakkers come across as honest, sincere people guilty only of colossal bad judgment; their own inflated hopes and dreams, psychological frailty and trust in people who betrayed them.

Almost as an afterthought, the film ends with a notation that Jim Bakker was housed guilty of 23 counts of wire and mail fraud and sentenced to 45 years in prison. (He's appealing the conviction.)

Watching the Beach Boys film, on the other hand, is like looking at a California car wreck. Violence, fighting, mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction, sexual orgies (mentioned but not shown), possible suicide and a dalliance with Charles Manson make up the meat of the piece, with Beach Boys songs and West Coast ambience included as accessories.

Their different approaches aside, neither film is particularly satisfying, and neither offers real insight into their principal characters. In choosing between the two, I lean toward the Beach Boys story, which at least takes viewers behind the squeaky-clean image of the group. Ironically, the picture that emerges of their lives is considerably closer to the characterization that our wacky former secretary of the interior, James Watt, once inaccurately used to describe their music.

In the performance category, Arlen Dean Snyder is wonderfully despicable as Marty Wilson, the clowd-mimicked autistic father of the principal Beach Boys. When the going really gets tough for sons Brian and Dennis, Marty explains the situation and counts his sons out of the true value of their songs. Greg Kean is partially successful in capturing the rawest-highest ability of Brian Wilson, but Bruce Greenwood is only mildly convincing as Dennis Wilson, the talented free spirit of the family.

"Fall From Grace" starts appropriately enough, with Jim Bakker's fall from grace: his infamous assignment with Jessica Hahn. The incident is depicted in an impressionistic, however, that it completely avoids dealing with allegations that the woman may have been drugged and raped.

The movie then sails through Bakker's confession to a ministerial sin, his reconciliation with Tammy, the rapid growth of their television operations, the beginnings of their inner-party plans and the slow crumbling of their psyches and their empire.

Kevin Spacey, an inventive stage and screen actor, gives the character of Jim Bakker a strange combination of obsession and incompetence but never really gets inside the guy.

Bernadette Peters is a flaky but smarter-than-she-seems Tammy Faye, although all the makeup in a Revlon factory can't make Peters look as earnestly tacky as the real item.



Spacey and Peters in "Fall From Grace."

Quality and technology. "Symbiotic Voyage" also sounds good, as befits its subject, although it would have sounded even better if Channel 4 could broadcast in stereo — as Channels 5, 9, 11 and 31 have done for years. Thank NBC, too, for that audio quality, which Channel 4 said came as part of the purchase of the video footage of the performances.

What lowers this program to the level of average is the gaudy amateurism of its narration. Channel 4 hired John Gresswell, a fine local actor and director, to voice the piece, but his talents are entirely wasted. His delivery is constantly laced with fake enthusiasm, and the lines themselves are alternately simplistic and pretentious. And the narration describing Tokyo might generally be described as tourism-commission jargon.

The interview segments with Leonard Statkin, another main part of the show, are somewhat interesting but far short of revealing.

Channel 4 general manager Allan Cohen said he hoped "Symbiotic Voyage" would reach people who don't know about and don't normally attend St. Louis Symphony performances and expose them "to the magic of the symphony." Don't hold your breath.

Still, in spite of the show's defects, the magic is there, and it's exactly where you'd expect to be in the music: The sequences of the symphony performing Gerstein's "An American in Paris" and Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings" hit the heart, the mind and the gut, as well as the eyes and ears.

For maximum "magic," then, I'd suggest cranking the volume as high as possible, short of distortion, during the musical sequences and turning the sound off completely at the first vibration of the narrator's voice.

Channel 4 producer Alan Frank deserves credit for a nice job of production on "Symbiotic Voyage," but he also gets the blame for writing the show's narration.

CROSSWORD ANSWER

Answer to Puzzle, April 29 Crossword: **HE TRIED TO KEEP AWAY FROM THE OTHER, BUT HE WOULD KNOW HE WOULD NEVER FIND HIS HAD A HAIR BACK THEN.**

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