

TV: Oscar Levant on Jack Paar Show

Pianist Flaunts Id With Much Humor

By JACK GOULD

OSCAR LEVANT, humorist and pianist, has been enlivening the West Coast video scene for some time with his well-publicized psyche. Very early yesterday morning on the Jack Paar show he put his neuroses and his wit on the National Broadcasting Company's network and by now his id is a coast-to-coast matter.

Messrs. Levant and Paar scored a singular if dubious accomplishment. They made a viewer both laugh heartily and feel immensely uncomfortable. On balance, it is to be questioned whether the good moments were quite worth the accompanying tasteless excursion into humor at the expense of the mentally and emotionally disturbed.

Let it be said instantly that the best of the Levant banter was most amusing. His outspokenness can be refreshing, and behind his devastating sallies there is a keen and observant mind. He said, for instance, that he had no desire to visit Disneyland because he had enough hallucinations of his own; he dismissed Zsa Zsa Gabor as doing social work among the rich.

But Mr. Levant was not invited to the program merely for such purposes of innocent levity. It was his personal problem that Mr. Paar found much more interesting and exploited for all it was worth. Mr. Levant has been institutionalized, and, indeed, made jokes about it on the air. The uncertainty of his behavior is common knowledge; so, too, are the complexities of his family life.

It is not for the average viewer to judge Mr. Levant's condition. But if he was able to go on the program, then Mr. Paar's calculated emphasis on the element of the pianist's unpredictability was unnecessary. If there was genuine doubt as to his appearance, then the prolonged

build-up was cheap and unkind.

What Mr. Paar did was play a public game of cat-and-mouse on the general subject of emotional instability. Would Mr. Levant make it or wouldn't he? Was the pianist merely putting on "an act" or was he genuinely upset? Mr. Paar in so many words was inviting the viewer audience to dabble in cliff-hanging psychiatry and derive some laughs from the pianist's dilemma.

It would not seem particularly pertinent that Mr. Levant appeared to relish his role — he openly smiled any number of times over his own quips—or that the experience might even be therapeutically beneficial for him. Rather it is a question of the propriety of coast-to-coast television trying to capitalize on an individual's personal disturbances, to condone jokes on the subject of people who are confined or must be accompanied by attendants upon going into the outside world. Mr. Levant's criteria on such matters can hardly be those of a mass medium.

Mr. Levant demonstrated that he could be very humorous on a wide variety of subjects. Let us hope he returns to TV on that basis and that Mr. Paar is sensible enough not to try to make a running gag of mental health. The laughs cannot outweigh the dangers.

Mr. Paar's other major guest of the evening was Evelyn Rudie, who appeared in the television version of "Eloise." The youngster's hair-do, studied vocabulary, prepared jokes and affected manner added up to a fascinating cameo of Hollywood precocity. Millions of parents undoubtedly heaved a tremendous sigh of relief that their children have nothing whatever to do with show business.

Apropos the Wednesday report hereabouts on election coverage, the radio division of the National Broadcasting Company wishes to note that it did pick up reports from

Question of Taste on Subject Raised

WTIC, Hartford. The record is herewith amended, albeit with one reservation: WTIC was off and running with a comprehensive account of the Democratic landslide in Connecticut long before N. B. C. cut in on its affiliates.