

Utility Expert

Ernie Kovacs, 38, is the one television comedian who finds most of his tee-hee in TV itself. He is a big (6 ft. 2 in., 200 lbs.), messy, cigar-frazzling buffoon who uses cameras, sets, sound effects to make rowdy electronic fun. He may duel and play poker with himself or shoot a hole through his head and blow smoke through it. Once he appeared to viewers inside a huge bottle, holding an umbrella to keep off the rain. He was slowly submerged, then he tapped the bottle with a hammer; and glass, water and Kovacs spilled onstage. Curling his lip over his mustache in a saucy *moue*, he may address himself to a golf ball and wham it squarely into the Cyclops eye of the camera. After a splintering crash, viewers duck, the screen goes dark, a voice purrs: "And let that teach all of you out there to pay attention."

A onetime \$18-a-week Trenton, N.J. disk jockey and son of a Hungarian saloon-keeper, Kovacs has been a sort of utility infielder for all three networks. He is not a refugee from other places, but that rare being, a home-grown product of TV—and one of the few fresh and lasting performers in the business. Yet his cultivated madness, often abetted by his wife, Singer Edie Adams, has been delighting and annoying audiences only irregularly and at odd hours since he first leered onscreen seven years ago. Neither Kovacs nor his employer, NBC, seems able to explain why there is still no niche for his comparatively languid, low-pressure talent in a business that constantly turns lesser comics into living-room idols. In a new effort to solve this puzzle, NBC last week handed Ernie his big challenge: a show following the widely ballyhooed Jerry Lewis solo.

Kovacs won the comparison test, hands down. He put together a half-hour quite different from his usual garrulous routines and his role as sometime host on NBC's *Tonight!* Instead, Producer-Writer Kovacs buttoned his lip tight and proved himself TV's most inventive master of pantomime, sight gags and sound effects. When he opened a copy of *Camille*, a female cough came out of it. He educed a knowing chuckle from the inscrutable Mona Lisa, and screwed up his rubbery face with Chaplinesque glee as Baby Doll rolled out of her famed crib. As Eugene the Clubman he was defied by gravity. The Nairobi Trio, composed of three derbied apes, played a hilarious composition for xylophone, mallet and finger bone. There was even a custard pie.

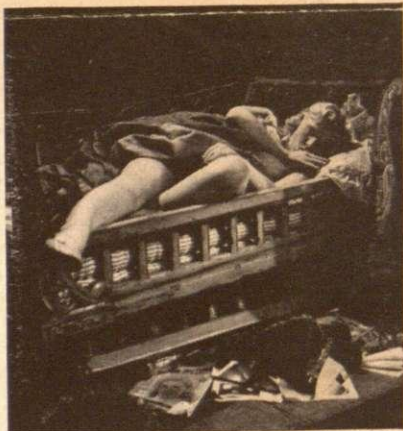
The show was, strangely enough, Kovacs' first chance at high season to show his stuff and his pulling power on NBC at a prime time. Program Chief Tom McAvity called it Ernie's "audition," explained: "If his rating is good, we hope to sell him as TV's big new comedy talent next fall."



KOVACS (CENTER) & NAIROBIANS



KOVACS AS "EUGENE"



Photos by Sy Friedman

KOVACS' "BABY DOLL"
Mona Lisa chuckled.