

1957

TV-RADIO

This Is No Gag

Ernie Kovacs, outstanding member of that most miserable of all fraternities, the TV comedians, this week delivered a few brief lines and gags on Producers' Showcase's "Festival of Magic" and joined the growing ranks of his unemployed brethren.

Last week, with the end already vividly in sight ("I have absolutely no TV contract or commitments"), Kovacs, unlike his confreres who have been squawking and flapping their clipped or broken wings, was happy as a pigeon comfortably nested in an eighteenth-floor, seventeen-room duplex eyrie overlooking Central Park. In black velveteen Gaucho shirt, corduroy slacks, and dirty reversed-calf moccasins, Kovacs teetered behind an eighteenth-century boule desk and conferred over an Execuphone (no hands) with his book publisher about his upcoming novel, "Zoomar." ("It's taken them longer to decide on the jacket than it did for me to write the whole book."*)

He then carried a half grapefruit past his collection of antique firearms out onto one of three terraces, lit a cigar, and stripped to the waist for the sun.

Godfrey Loser: It hadn't always been so. "With two or three jobs going for me for a solid eight years, I've been into TV so high that I was being ducked every time the motorboats went by. I worked a seven-day week. If I was lucky, every once in awhile I could come out here at 4 a.m. and take three or four gulps of air—the drunks in the park and I were the only ones awake—then go back to work. I sat so long at my typewriter [a man of parts, Kovacs writes, directs, and produces his own material] my hips actually went out of joint. I was walking around like an Arthur Godfrey loser.

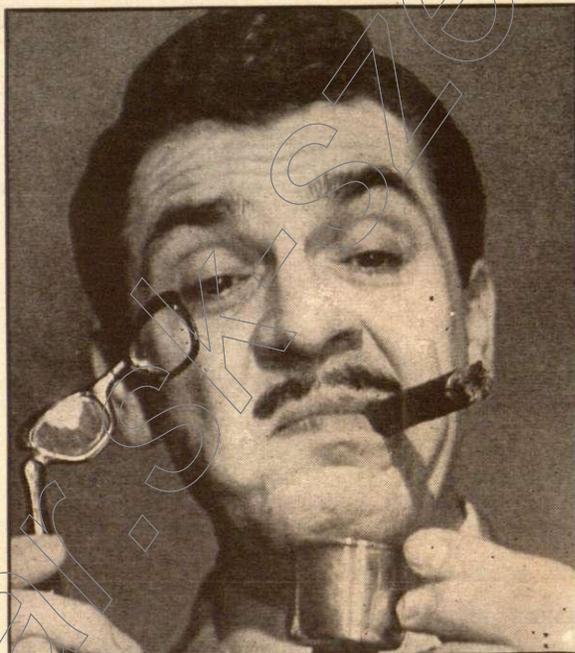
"Now I can go out bicycling with Edie [his wife, actress Edith Adams] and the kids. I can play jacks when my daughters [aged 8 and 10] ask me to. I can play poker without getting guilt feelings and go to a movie without worrying about how I'm going to satirize it on the air. I'm going to become a health fanatic; lots of exercise, maybe even yoghurt. There's a lot of satisfaction in doing nothing at all."

Kovacs could qualify, if he wished, for the title of TV's most frustrated comic. Over the years, his wacky wit has brightened the off-hours of three TV

*Kovacs' record: The completed work, 550 pages, in two weeks.

networks (and numerous radio stations), earned him critical huzzahs and his share of honors—the Sylvania Award and three Emmy nominations last season. But he has never been able to stabilize himself in the prime evening spot that is the just reward of every first-string comic. A lot of Kovacs' innovations, including teaser openings, lavish use of electronic tricks (including showing himself upside down on screen), and an exaggeratedly off-hand approach to the TV audience, have been taken over by others.

Like others before him, Kovacs has had long, intense discussions with NBC about possible series. He finally bowed out from the most recent when they refused to give him the "below-the-line" (for costumes, scenery, props, etc.) budget that he demanded. "I've gotten



Kovacs: Three or four gulps

to the point" he says with some pride, "where I have to deliver a certain amount of quality. When you build a set at a 15-degree angle [a recent and notably hilarious Kovacs gimmick] it costs money. If I back an elephant onto the set, I want it to be a real elephant and not just a papier-mâché fake."

Despite the leisure which has been forced on him and other TV comedians, Kovacs is sanguine about the future of television comedy. "Nowadays everyone looks at a comic, any comic, and says he can't last. It's fashionable. If you tune in someone and shake your head sadly and say, 'poor guy he's finished,' no matter how funny he is you're not going to laugh at him. It's dreadful what they've done to Caesar. But it's just a fad, like mah-jongg or miniature golf."

When the anti-comic fad is over,

Kovacs, who meanwhile plans to spend his time with stage and screen assignments, envisions his own return to TV on a more relaxed basis. "I'd like to write, direct, and produce five or six programs a season. I don't care if I appear in them or not. After the gags are set up and timed, it doesn't matter who delivers them. What I do before a show is more important than what I do while I'm on."

The Guest—Khrushchev

In 1955 the CBS panel show "Face the Nation" suffered one of the biggest disappointments ever experienced in TV. Russian Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov agreed to be the first Soviet bigwig to submit to an unrehearsed, uncensored television interview, then backed down at the last moment.

"We hold open our invitation for any key representative of the Soviet Government to participate in such a discussion," CBS officials said wistfully, and then went back to the periodic phone calls and letters of invitation to the Russian Embassy that had almost landed Molotov.

Acceptance: Two weeks ago, after nearly two years of discouraging silence, CBS's Washington office received a tentative acceptance by phone. The key representative of the Soviet Government offering to participate on "Face the Nation" was none other than the big Russian boss himself, Communist Party secretary Nikita S. Khrushchev.

Last week, the acceptance was confirmed. Six CBS staff members were given visas. If all went well they would film the hour-long interview with Khrushchev the beginning of

this week in Moscow.

According to CBS Public Affairs Chief Irving Gitlin, questions by panel members recruited from U.S. newsmen in Moscow would pull no punches, "cover everything from Khrushchev's personal life to Russian activities in the Mideast, disarmament, atomic agreement, the possible return of the Geneva spirit."

If Khrushchev doesn't back out like Molotov, the undeveloped, uncensored films and tapes will be immediately flown back for presentation on the CBS-TV and radio networks Sunday, June 2, another major beat for their enterprising Public Affairs department.

"I don't see how they can back out this time," says Gitlin. "They know exactly what the conditions are. Besides it would give them an awful lot of extremely bad publicity."