

TELEVISION REVIEW

For a City Driven By a Dream



Dancing in the 1930's atop the Chanin Building, with the Chrysler Building's spire as backdrop, from Ric Burns's documentary "New York," on PBS. UPI/Corbis Bettmann

By CARYN JAMES

NEW YORK is a city defined by its chaos, its glittering promise that life here will never be dull. In recent decades alone, a visitor might have bumped into Holly Golightly, Travis Bickle, Jerry Seinfeld (or their prototypes). Such mind-spinning differences suggest that 10 hours might not be enough to cover more than 300 years of the city's unwieldy history.

For Ric Burns's elephantine "New York: A Documentary Film," 10 hours is too much. The word that best describes this series — becalmed — is the polite and orderly opposite of what New York has always stood for. Until the glorious fifth episode, which bursts on screen with all the slick energy of the Jazz Age, this series is often too

plodding and repetitious to capture the dynamism of the city.

The problems come from the series' languid pace and familiar style (developed in "The Civil War," for which Ric Burns was co-producer and co-writer, with his brother, Ken, as director). The archival black-and-white photographs, the nearly

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whispered voice-overs, the inspirational tone have become so commonplace that a scene popped up on televi-

sion the other day that seemed unmistakably to be a promo for the series: the camera panned over 1930's black-and-white photographs of men constructing a skyscraper, while a subdued voice lauded their integrity and spirit. It turned out to be a commercial for New York Life, the insurance company.

When the Burns style has penetrated that far into popular culture, it has lost its ability to sur-

prise, and rejuvenating the approach requires a fresher eye than this series usually displays. (Five episodes will be shown in two-hour installments, Sunday through Thursday on PBS, with two additional hours coming in the spring.)

What the series does share is New York's crazy ambition, and given those aspirations even partial success can be spectacular. Horrifying facts leap out: in 1741, 13 slaves were burned at the stake in New York because white men feared a rebellion. "New York" has period drawings to prove it.

Moving chronologically, the series picks up speed with each episode, as drawings give way to photographs and at long last movies. In Episode 5, film from the late 1920's shows a biplane doing a loop-the-loop over skyscrapers while a man balanced on top holds a movie camera. It is an entranc-

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Stately Rhapsody for New York, a City Driven by a Dream

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ing vision that soars with the excitement and boundless possibilities that have drawn so many people to the city. "New York" offers much to enjoy and just as much to slog through before that.

Despite its large doses of sentiment, the series comes with a valuable, hard-nosed thesis: unlike cities founded on ideals like religious freedom, New York has always been about money. Brendan Gill, one of the on-camera commentators, states this with refreshing bluntness at the start: "New York City was founded by the Dutch. The Dutch didn't give a damn about anything but making money." (Mr. Gill, the New Yorker writer, died two years ago, and his presence is a reminder that this series has been a seven-year project.)

"New York" is especially good at describing the ethnic and class tensions that beset the city from the start, when the Dutch merchants scorned the few Sephardic Jews who immigrated. And its consistent theme connects even the city's noblest ideas — social justice, artistic expression — with commerce. As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan says of New York's social expansiveness, "It is exactly that money-crazy, driving, commercial culture that made political democracy seem perfectly sensible."

The rich got richer, penniless immigrants flooded in, and the distance between them created urgent questions. As the narrator puts it, "Would it be possible to lose the gap between rich and poor in New York City and unite the dreams of capitalism and democracy?"

Especially in the early episodes, the voices expressing these ideas threaten to overwhelm the visuals, so it's good that their comments are so lucid and intriguing. The most astute commentators include the historian Kenneth T. Jackson, the architect Robert A. M. Stern and above all Mike Wallace, who must be tired of hearing himself identified as *not* the television reporter. The co-author of the history "Gotham," which won the Pulitzer Prize, this Mike Wallace provides lively descriptions of several centuries of the city's daily life. And he makes a case for New York as a place that came to believe "social justice is a commensurate good with the accumulation of private property." Though the series accepts that premise too breezily, it doesn't back away from showing the sickening conditions in which immigrants lived.

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A Documentary Film

PBS, Sunday night through Thursday night
(Channel 13, New York, at 9)

Directed by Ric Burns, produced by Lisa Ades and Mr. Burns, written by Mr. Burns and James Sanders. Episode 5 written by Mr. Burns, Mr. Sanders and Ron Blumer. Li-Shin Yu, Edward Barteski, David Hanser and Nina Schulman, editors; David Ogden Stiers, narrator; Buddy Squires and Allen Moore, cinematography. Steve Rivo and Ray Segal, associate producers for Episodes 1 through 4 and co-producers for Episode 5. Judy Crichton, executive producer for WGBH; Mr. Burns, executive producer. A special presentation of "The American Experience." A Steeplechase Films production in association with WGBH Boston, Thirteen/WNET in New York and the New-York Historical Society.

The series also has two guiding literary voices: Walt Whitman, with his optimistic vision of an all-inclusive nation of brothers, and the melancholy F. Scott Fitzgerald, who charted the rise and fall of the country's evanescent dreams. Whitman's writing is read by Spalding Gray, and for once the gentle tone that all Burns readers adopt seems a revelation, breathing new life into words usually declaimed with bombastic fervor.

The filmmakers were not so shrewd in choosing a series narrator. David Ogden Stiers's solemn, inflated manner makes every utterance sound biblical. That does compound damage when he is speaking the sometimes overripe prose. Of the draft riots that broke out in 1863, when men were first conscripted into the Army, Mr. Stiers says, "Marauding mobs of infuriated immigrants rampaged up and down the island." He goes on to note, giving absolutely equal weight to each, that the mob rampaged through "the Harlem Temperance Room, the Madgalen Asylum for aged prostitutes, Brooks Brothers on Fifth Avenue." (And just what was that rest home for aged prostitutes, a civilized proposition if ever one existed?)

Mr. Stiers even sounds self-important when the script calls for wit, as it does when he notes that historians disagree about whether the Indian name "Manna-hata" meant "Island of Hills" or "Place of General Inebriation."

But as he drones on, many gripping set pieces leap out, making the series a major argument in favor of fast-forwarding. In one quick sequence in Episode 3, about the Gilded Age, picture after picture of new public buildings accumulate: the 42nd Street Library, the American

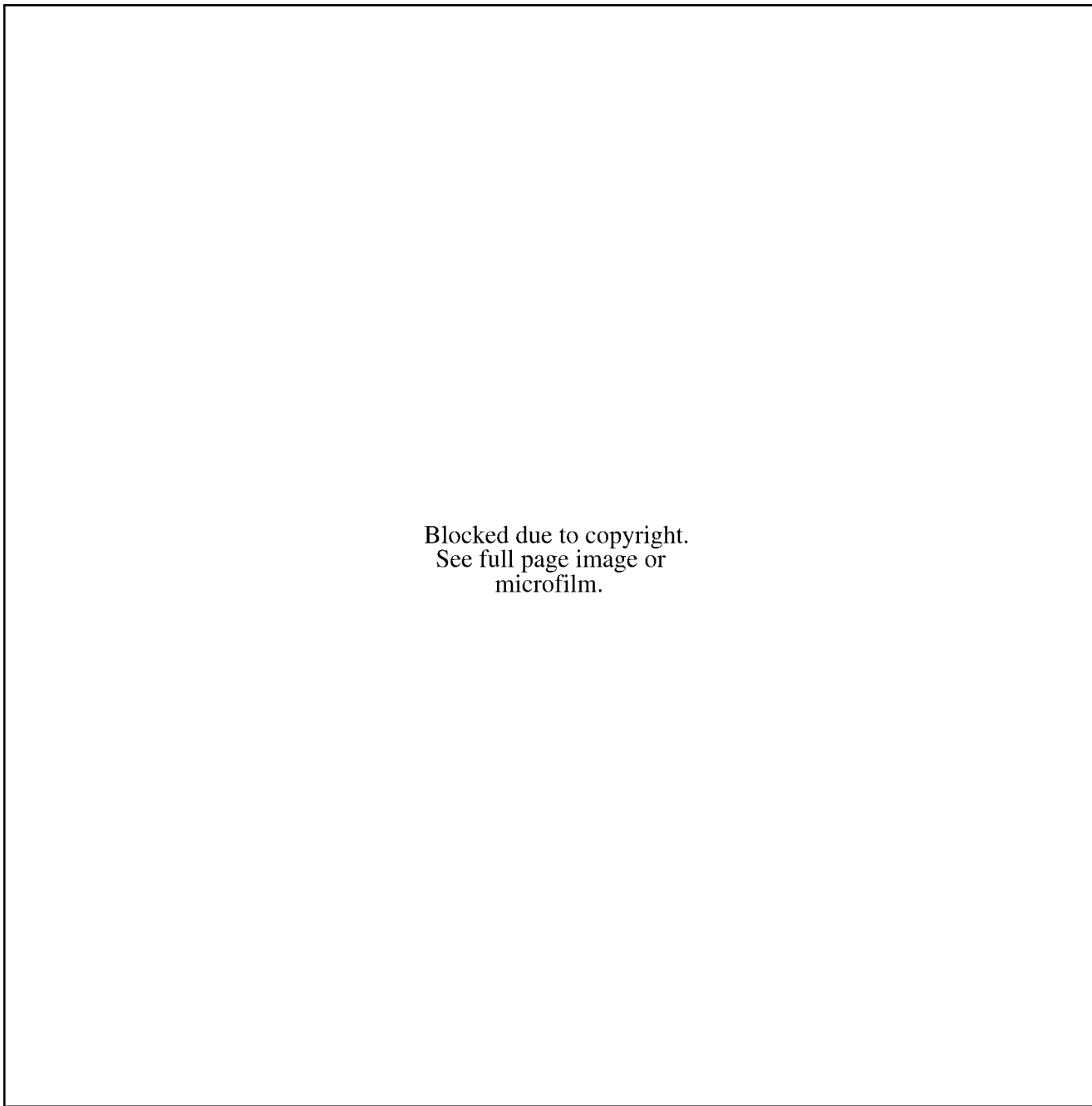
Museum of Natural History, Washington Square Arch, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The words of an anonymous curator help bring this inanimate stone to life: "The rage of Wall Street is to convert all baser things to gold, but ours is the higher ambition, to convert your useless gold into things of living beauty." With this visual litany the series briefly attains the Whitmanesque quality it aspires to. Something as simple as brisker editing would have provided more such moments.

The series is crammed with images of buildings going up and of twinkling aerial views of the city and skyline. Yet there are so many more buildings than personalities here that at times New York seems like a ghost town.

One exceptionally moving sequence concerns the 1911 fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory, in which 146 people died, mostly young female immigrants. The fire doors had been locked, reportedly to keep out labor organizers; the fire escape collapsed; women held hands and leaped to their deaths. The incredible photographs include one of corpses in open coffins lined up on a pier for identification. It is here, near the end of Episode 4, that the pace picks up, the visual sources become richer, the series begins to fulfill its promise.

Mr. Jackson, the historian, says that near the turn of the 20th century there were in New York "more Italians than in Naples, more Irish than in Dublin, more Greeks than in Athens." By the 1920's, Al Smith was an immigrant's dream, traveling from the Lower East Side and a near-total lack of education to become the Democratic candidate for president in 1928. The treasury of moving images and sound in Episode 5 makes an enormous difference. Here is first-hand evidence to support the idea that Smith's landslide loss to Herbert Hoover was partly because his New York personality seemed foreign to the rest of the country: we hear him pronouncing "world" as "woild." We also hear him singing his theme song, "The Sidewalks of New York," in a priceless clip.

Of course, by the 1920's American culture had become modern and easier for us to identify with, altered by advertising, radio, music. Here are glimpses of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington playing in Harlem in their youth. Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" is heard in the background. Though music only becomes central in this episode, throughout the series the choices are effective, especially the piercingly beautiful theme by Brian Keane called, appropriately,



The torch of the Statue of Liberty on display in Madison Square in the 1870's, from "New York," on PBS.

"City of Dreams."

In the end, Robert Sean Leonard reads Fitzgerald's words from "The Great Gatsby," connecting America's story with that of the Dutch sailors who first encountered New York, coming "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate with his capacity for wonder." The wonder of New York, this series argues, represents the wonder of America itself. The novel-

ist Caleb Carr points out that the cliché "Whatever happens in New York happens in the rest of the country 10 years later" has largely been true.

Yet today, in the age of instant information, the time lag is more likely to be 10 days or 10 minutes. Because this part of the series ends in 1931, the spring episode is left to question New York's role in the contemporary world.

Already the series has raised a sidelight question about the future of television, though, as it exposes a widening gulf between the styles of PBS and of the MTV generation. Stunning though "New York" often is, its indulgent length and pace tests the patience of even its most serious-minded viewers. It's as if the filmmakers failed to recognize that the days are long gone when a stately television style seemed like a virtue.

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