

Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You

Producer-writer, all-around creator Norman Lear was an American media phenomenon of rare influence throughout the 1970's, a figure who dominated television by reimagining the standard situation comedy. Beginning with his landmark "All in the Family" (first aired in 1971), Lear built a TV legacy for CBS that has never been repeated. His career is traced in the rich new documentary "Norman Lear: Just another Version of You" which could prove a nostalgia trip, especially for folks born in the 1950's and 1960's.

The documentary, co-directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, covers Lear's story chronologically, with archive material enlivened by studio interviews with the venerable Lear himself, still twinkly and sharp at 93. The filming is linked in part to Lear's long-term project of writing his memoirs.

Lear was a New Haven kid whose father went to jail when Norman was nine and was raised by grandparents and relatives. He got into television in LA as a comedy writer for network variety shows in the 1950's and, from network TV, he moved into writing and directing for the movies, writing light-hearted domestic comedies, even earning an Academy Award nomination for the script for "Divorce, American Style."

By 1971, he signed with CBS and launched, improbably, the iconoclastic "All in the Family" featuring the singular curmudgeon Archie Bunker. After an uncertain opening, the show caught on, caught on so much that soon Lear is spinning off his "Family" characters ("Maude") and inventing others ("The Jeffersons") to ever-expanding audiences with tart dialogue and thematic material that regularly tested the network censors while displaying his own maxim of "human beings are just a little foolish."

His success in those days of three major networks is unimaginable today: at one point Lear had six of the top ten rated shows on the air. One massively-anticipated episode of "Maude" (the abortion show) alone attracted 65 million viewers. His sojourn into black-themed comedy with "Good Times" was a hit but also caused black resentment from audiences and lead performers like Esther Rolle who felt much of the material grated on her as black "buffoonery."

By the early 1980's, Lear, a liberal Jew, observed the rise of politically minded TV evangelists and deemed them dangerous to the republic. To counter them, he launched "People for the American Way," an attempt to give voice to his basically liberal and patriotic views. His aim was not to buttress a particular political party but to challenge the dogmas of the religious right, views he saw as perfidious. In a highlight of his life as an activist, Lear purchased an original copy of the Declaration of Independence and toured it across the U.S., including a stop at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah.

As his commitment to his cause increased, his hold on TV comedy faded. The last of his major series, "The Jeffersons," left the air in 1985, and nothing he produced after that attained national resonance. Though his first marriage crumbled and he was diagnosed as manic-depressive, Lear, comfortably rich, with his causes, a new wife and loving daughters, now has the leisure to contemplate his life with a film to document it.

That life is presented fully and poignantly in "Norman Lear." Maybe not a world-beater life, but a culturally significant one and one well lived by his own lights.

(Unrated, the film runs 91 minutes.)

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