

# POTATOES: Art of Zen TV Watching

## Continued from First Page

regular columns, among them the Station Break Gourmet With Chef Aldo and Advice to the Couch Potato by Dr. Davenport H. Spudd.

Dr. Spudd (Mingo) provides reassurance for those unable to rationalize that they like to spend 18 hours at a stretch in front of their TV sets. In the first issue, Spudd advises a Cleveland Potato that he doesn't think much of Qube, the two-way cable system that allows viewers to vote and talk back to the televisions on any type of issue. Writes Spudd, "Why watch TV if you have to think and respond? As far as I'm concerned, the main point of watching TV is that it lets you *avoid* having to do that. To put it another way, if you're going to have to respond to your TV, you might as well go out and cultivate friendships or read a book or something."

### 'Etiquette for Couch Potatoes'

Just as many advice columnists offer more tips to folks willing to pay for special pamphlets, Spudd promises that his \$1.49 "Etiquette for Couch Potatoes" will answer such questions as: "In a crowd, when is it permissible to change the channel? Who should go for beer if the host runs out? Is it ever proper to talk to others in the room except during commercials? What do well-dressed Couch Potatoes wear after dark, and in prime time?"

Also in the first issue of the Tuber's Voice are the results of the Couch Potato Elder's nationwide survey of the five all-time favorite television programs of their members: (1) "Star Trek" (2) "Leave It to Beaver" (3) "Twilight Zone" (4) "MASH" (5) "You'll Never Get Rich" (Sgt. Bilko). Runners-up include: "The Prisoner," "Amos 'n' Andy" (which the elders insist is less racist than "Sanford and Son"), "Gilligan's Island," "Topper" and early "Saturday Night Live."

All those choices are fairly reflective of the elders' preferences with the exception of "Star Trek," which apparently offends their sense of non-predictability.

Indeed, each member present at the retreat ticks off wildly differing choices for optimum viewing.

Kim Deitch, for instance, says his current preference is for a female prison soap opera made in Australia titled "Prisoner: Cell Block H." His old favorites are "You'll Never Get Rich," "Sid Caesar" and "I Married Joan."

Mingo, who indicates that he believes education has no place on television, nonetheless enjoys viewing "Sesame Street" and "Electric Co." back to back.

### Vintage Programs Preferred

But pleasure has little to do with his mainstream watching. "I don't sit down to watch TV because I like it," he says. "I like it because it's there. I'm viewing because I'm viewing."

"It's the Zen concept of television," explains elder Allan Dodge, who says he looks around for jobs when asked what he does to make money. (The other Potatoes later indicate that Dodge does everything from selling old records to painting helicopters to hauling trash.)

While many of the Potato elders prefer vintage TV programs to those presently being produced, Dodge

relishes relatively new shows. "I really liked 'Love Boat' for a long time—for its utopian image of the battle of the sexes, but the reruns are better. And I like specials with Lynda Carter or Suzanne Somers that kind of aggrandize these lifeless Hollywood females. I loved Lynda Carter as 'Wonder Woman.' And I like shows with cute kids, whether they have physiological problems that make them cute or not. And there was the Roy Rogers show. I was pretty fond of it. And I like 'Green Acres' with Eva Gabor."

While the Potatoes acknowledge they've witnessed some "Zenith envy" from the Tomatoes, they contend the ladies auxiliary gave up fetching and adjusting ever since they started wearing their own T-shirts, proclaiming "Get It Yourself, (expletive)."

"If they demand their equal space on the couch, so be it," sighs Armstrong. "We always have enough TVs for everybody. If they want to go to an earplug for one of their soaps or something, that's OK. We're not an elitist organization. We just believe there are males and females so what the heck."

Don Ault, who teaches classes on film, television and comics at Vanderbilt University and was in the Bay Area to attend a conference on William Blake, is a

Couch Potato elder whose approach to viewing is to watch one episode of one show, say "The Cisco Kid," 50 or 60 times.

Like many members, Armstrong is such a connoisseur of old television programs that not only can he remember and discuss specific episodes, he compares the relative values of various lineups.

"I remember lineups like Friday night 1961 with 'Rawhide,' 'Route 66,' 'Twilight Zone' and 'Eyewitness to History.'" Or Saturday night in the mid-'70s with Fred Silverman's CBS lineup: 'All in the Family,' 'MASH,' 'Mary Tyler Moore,' 'Bob Newhart' and 'Carol Burnett.' It would take you right up to 'Saturday Night Live.' I hated to leave the house on Saturday nights. People I considered my real friends would come over and share all this with me."

Though his home serves as mailing headquarters and retreat for the Potatoes, Armstrong insists he is not their leader. That title, say the Potatoes with marked reverence in their voices, belongs to Couch Potato No. 1, who must remain anonymous and who lives in Alabama.

"He was a role model for a lot of us who still had intellectual guilt about watching TV," says Armstrong. "He could stay in position on the couch for two days or more and he had such charisma that he could get people to do his errands for him and bring him food. He almost held court from the couch. He's beyond us all, a true televisionary."