

'Skokie' misrepresents the people it portrays

It's an admirable undertaking by honorable people. It struggles to tell an important story. And the starring performance by Danny Kaye is first-rate, thoroughly credible and deeply humane.

But the program simply doesn't work. "Skokie," the 2½-hour CBS docudrama set for 7 p.m. Tuesday over WBBM-Channel 2, contains too little drama and not enough truth. The result is an utterly unsatisfying mishmash that flagrantly distorts large portions of what happened during 1977-78 when a sad-sack band of neo-Nazis threatened to march in the heavily Jewish north suburb of Skokie.



DANNY KAYE

Even though it's produced by the Outstanding company that brought us "The Missiles of October," "Pueblo," "The Deadliest Season" and the gut-wrenching "Holocaust" mini-series, this latest "reality-based" production paints a portrait of the Skokie clash that's neither very accurate nor terribly intriguing.

IN THE CBS version of "Skokie," recent history gets bent and sometimes broken-for the sake of television storytelling. In particular, some very fine persons associated with the Nazi-Skokie controversy are depicted as far-less decent human beings than they are.

"Skokie," of course, purports to reconstruct the legal, political and social battles that erupted when those several dozen Marquette Park-based Nazis declared their intention of wearing their uniforms and displaying the swastika in a demonstration outside the Skokie Village Hall.

The large Jewish population in Skokie, including many Survivors of the Holocaust in Europe, pressured village officials to block the march. Meanwhile, the American Civil Liberties Union, although outraged by the violent and racist credo of the Nazis, defended the group's First Amendment right to free speech.

You'd think that those basic ingredients-misanthropic Nazis, angry Jews and their many sympathizers, a beleaguered Skokie Village government and a group of ACLU officials grimly defending the Constitutional rights of such unspeakably loathesome clients-would be melodramatic enough for the producers of "Skokie."

GUESS AGAIN. For some reason, the producers decided that the Nazi-Skokie story wasn't sufficiently scintillating on its own. So they concocted some events that never happened, put words in people's mouths that never were spoken and altered countless other facts with self-righteous impunity. It's a "bum's stew" of reality and fantasy that creates a hybrid that can only be labeled "historical fiction."

Gary Deeb



TV / Radio critic

For instance, executive producer Herbert Brodtkin, producer Robert "Buzz" Berger and screenwriter Ernest Kinoy pepper "Skokie" with numerous fictitious characters. Chief among these is Max Feldman, a Holocaust survivor who helps lead the public outcry against the planned Nazi march.

Despite Kaye's magnificent, heartfelt portrayal of Feldman, the play falls flat. Time and again during "Skokie," we're force-fed scenes of Feldman's home life that are extremely implausible and obviously included only to add to the emotionalism of the story.

Furthermore, in order to provide extra conflict for the TV audience, the producers of "Skokie" have slurred the reputations of many persons, including Abbot Rosen, Midwest executive director of the Anti-Defamation League, who wisely had urged Skokie residents to ignore the Nazis, thus preventing the Nazis from gaining the widespread publicity they obviously were seeking.

But in "Skokie," Rosen (played by Carl Reiner) is depicted as being rather insensitive to the feelings of the Holocaust survivors. On several occasions, he's shown advising people to "quarantine" themselves from the Nazis-"quarantine" being a buzzword for the supplicant reaction of many European Jews to Nazi persecution in the 1930s and '40s.

"Some of the language attributed to me wasn't true," Rosen told this column, "The last word I'd use in front of an audience of survivors would be 'quarantine.' [The movie] doesn't convey the tremendous anguish we felt when we confronted the survivors"

SUN-TIMES REPORTER Robert Feder, who was a reporter for the Skokie Life during the tumultuous 15 months, also believes that the CBS movie plays fast and loose with its characterizations of many of the local figures involved.

"Al Smith, the mayor of Skokie [played by Ed Flanders], comes off in the movie as a bland, gentile politician whose only concern is to appease his large Jewish constituency," Feder declared. "In truth, Smith is a decent, humane fellow who's been extremely popular with Skokie's Jews for many

years. In fact, he was viewed as a real hero by the Holocaust survivors. He went out of his way to align himself with their cause, and he staked his reputation on keeping the Nazis out.

“As for Harvey Schwartz [the Skokie Village attorney played by Eli Wallach], the film makes him out to be a bumbling nebbish dominated by the mayor. But the fact is that Schwartz is a shrewd lawyer and a political mastermind who calls the shots behind the scenes. Schwartz was clever enough to keep the Nazis stalled in court for months, but he also was smart enough to know that the ACLU would win ultimately on First Amendment grounds.”

Feder continued: “Even the movie’s depiction of Frank Collin [the Chicago Nazi leader] is a farce. As played by George Dzundza, he’s a chunky fellow with a cherubic face and a kind of childlike innocence about him. The real Frank Collin is a scrawny runt with a violent temper and a Hitlerian demeanor.”

THE CBS MOVIE also wreaks a lot of damage on the ACLU. David Hamlin, at that time the executive director of the Illinois ACLU, is pictured as worrying excessively about the financial woes that could befall the ACLU as a consequence of its defense of the Nazis. In reality, Hamlin and his board of directors never blinked in their First Amendment battle, despite their knowledge that memberships and contributions would be adversely affected.

Furthermore, David Goldberger, then the Illinois ACLU’S legal director, is portrayed as being rather cold and aloof. He gets very gung ho and demonstrative about the legal issues

involved, but he’s never shown grieving about the sincere emotions and heartaches of the Jews who despise him for helping the Nazis. In reality, Goldberger was profoundly haunted by this dilemma—and he still is today.

The “Skokie” movie also sidesteps the media’s sometimes inflammatory role in the controversy. As Hamlin himself noted in his book *The Nazi-Skokie Conflict*, newspapers and TV often seemed more interested in exaggerating the Nazi “menace” than in explaining the ideological issues.

Finally, the film ignores the considerable backlash that occurred after the Nazi threat ended. Fearful that Skokie’s worldwide image as a heavily Jewish enclave would hurt housing sales and commerce, village officials dreamed up a harebrained public relations scheme to publicize the suburb’s “ethnic diversity.”

In summary, the producers of “Skokie” have taken a crucial subject, fashioned it into a TV movie that millions will watch, but in the process have given the horse-laugh to the term “docu-drama.” Rewriting recent history for expedient dramatic purposes is bad enough, but to misrepresent the beliefs and emotions of so many people is almost criminal.