

# 'Skokie' not fiction or reality

By DIANE DUBEY  
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IN TRYING to please all of the people all of the time, makers of "Skokie," the CBS-TV docudrama scheduled to air Tuesday, Nov. 17, have ended up without the emotional



impact that should be evoked by a retelling of a neo-Nazi group's attempt to demonstrate in Skokie a few years ago.

Perhaps it is the designation "docudrama"

**DUBEY** that results in a film that looks at the Nazi issue from all perspectives - those of the village, the Holocaust survivors, the American Civil Liberties Union and even neo-Nazi leader Frank Collin. But if the docudrama technique mandates evenhandedness in presenting the viewpoints of all the characters involved, then this technique also prevents the viewer from relating deeply to any one character and from feeling the frenzy that gripped an entire village.

**TO HIS CREDIT**, it must be said that "Skokie" producer Robert "Buzz" Berger, while shooting the movie, said he was uncomfortable with the docudrama format that forced him to have actors portray real people in what almost becomes a documentary. At that time, Berger said he preferred making a film based on "dramatic truth, not historic truth."

Unfortunately, CBS officials had

(Continued on page 3)



IF you want no violence, keep the Nazis out: That is the message of Max Feldman (played by Danny Kaye), a 'Skokie' character drawn from several real Holocaust survivors in the village.

# 'Skokie' screens out the emotion

(Continued from page 1)

the last word, and "Skokie" turned out to be neither fish nor fowl, neither gripping drama nor pointed documentary. What remains is a made-for-TV chronicle, a didactic 2½-hour film that may lose many viewers along the way, while annoying those familiar enough with the real thing to know where the docudrama departs from the reality it purports to present.

There is a certain thrill in seeing parts of Skokie and other local sights on film, but the authenticity of the setting supposedly sets the stage for authenticity of characterization, dialogue and events, too. A fictionalized account wouldn't be faulted for departing from the history books, but "Skokie" will.

**SO, WHILE** outsiders may be bored by some of the legal technicalities conscientiously included to mark the progress of the ACLU vs. Skokie courtroom battles, those who know Skokie will pick up on the demeanor of actor Ed Flanders, playing "Mayor Smith," but coming across without the concerned, soft-spoken warmth of the real Al Smith. The village attorney, played by Eli Wallach, isn't called Harvey Schwartz, but we all know he's supposed to be Harvey Schwartz. Why, then, hasn't he incorporated the quiet, humorous manner of the real Harvey Schwartz? And why doesn't the Flanders-Wallach combination try to approximate the interaction

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that is integral to what Skokie buffs refer to as the "Mayor and Harvey Show"?

Individually, the deviations from reality are trivial; taken together, they add up to 2½ hours of cognitive dissonance for the local resident who spent 1977-78 watching the drama unfold. Why is Nazi Frank Collin, a small, dark rat-faced man with a bad complexion, played by George Dzundza, a hefty, round-faced blond who looks like he'd be more comfortable sitting in front of the TV with a can of beer than driving to Skokie for an afternoon of violence?

**MOREOVER, WHY** is Collin cast as such a bland character that a viewer can almost feel sorry for him when he and his storm-troopers are turned back by police enforcing a temporary injunction of the demonstration? Why is a significant scene between Holocaust survivor Max Feldman (played by Danny Kaye) and his teen-age daughter based on the premise that he'd miss an anti-Nazi rally if he had to drive her "all the way to Lincoln-

wood"?

Some of the more believable scenes are those involving ACLU director David Hamlin (James Sutorius) and ACLU attorney David Goldberger (John Rubenstein), accurately portraying the dilemma of those who love the First Amendment but hate Nazis. Interesting, although perhaps overdramatized, is the reaction of Feldman's wife, Bertha (played by Kim Hunter), a Holocaust survivor who takes threats of a Nazi march in Skokie as proof that "it can happen here."

**"I WANT TO GO,"** a hysterical Bertha Feldman tells her husband. But she has nowhere to go, and Max replies, "We stay, let them go. This time is different."

Admittedly, "Skokie" has several such touching moments, but it is an overly ambitious project, and thus suffers from lack of focus. Though offering a star-studded cast, the film's lack of perspective plays these personalities off against one another, minimizing their individual effectiveness.

## Comment

Both the docu-drama technique and its resulting balanced approach left "Skokie" with less impact than the Lou Grant episode that was based-very loosely-on the attempted Nazi demonstration in Skokie. If the writers director and producer of "Skokie" had chosen to make a statement, rather than film with reporter-like objectivity, their docu-drama could have been a very powerful TV movie. Certainly, they had an obligation to be fair to all sides, but they weren't required to abide by the equal-time doctrine. Unfortunately, they did.

Speculation has focused on whether the Skokie-Nazi affair ultimately will be remembered in the real or film versions. That concern no longer is viable.

"Skokie" will provide an evening of fun for area residents eager to nitpick, and will offer generally accurate information to those interested in learning the sequence of events surrounding the march that never was.

But for all its general historic accuracy, "Skokie" is devoid of the emotional pitch that ran so high for almost two years. Orchestrated crowd scenes and corny shots of Jewish Defense League members dancing the "hora" don't reflect the unpredictable spontaneity that prevailed throughout the entire episode.

"Skokie" isn't Skokie.