

Roots Captivates Millions Of T-Viewers

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By DON ROJAS

For 12 hours last week millions of Americans were literally captivated by the television adaptation of "Roots," Alex Haley's seminal work on the saga of one Black slave family's persistent struggle for freedom, dignity and respect.

Before this intensive collective experience was over television audience records were shattered and the American Broadcasting Company took credit for what many considered the most significant television production of our time.

Now in the wake of this monumental event in the history of popular culture Americans of all colors are reflecting on just what this amazing phenomenon meant, what impact it will have on shaping a new American mass consciousness and just how it will influence the future of race relations in this country.

In a way, "Roots" was one long overdue American history lesson delivered with the kind of perspective rarely depicted in conventional history books.

Although not without its shortcomings, this television production, featuring some fine acting, particularly by the Black cast, and some inspired directing by a number of Black and white directors, unfolds the story of Kunta Kinte's family, a story that testifies to the resiliency of the Black spirit in the face of crushing adversity.

Kunta Kinte's family held fast to a dream of freedom. Undoubtedly, there were other families like Kunta Kinte's in the slave society of the Confederacy who survived in spite of systematic psychological brutality.

That the majority of Blacks could endure such terrible dehumanization; that they could overcome shattered hopes and deferred dreams without succumbing to mass psychosis is the most triumphant story of America's bicentennial.

"Roots" reminds us vividly that even though instances of benevolence by "massa" towards his slaves existed, even though there were moments of camaraderie between slave and slaveowner, in the final analysis the slave was still the master's property, his capital investment.

And just as machines need to be well-oiled and maintained to prevent depreciation slaves were to be well fed, clothed and housed so that they, too, could be kept in good working order. This concept of human beings as property to be bought and sold at will is indeed the ultimate ignominy, the final affront to human dignity.

To be sure, slavery conditioned many blacks to love their oppression but Kunta Kinte's family were mag-



The impact of the ABC-TV presentation of "Roots" reached City Hall, and here Mayor Abraham Beame is shown handing the book's author Alex Haley a proclamation declaring "Roots Week" in the City, January 23 to January 30. On hand for the occasion were (l.r.): Robert Johnson, Councilwoman Mary Pinkett, Deputy Mayor

Lucille Rose; Joan Maynard, executive director of Weeksville Society; Dr. Vernal Cave, Tony Phomopoulos, vice president of ABC-TV; Audrey Phillips, president of Weeksville Society; Roahl Aarons, executive director, empire State Medical Association and Joe Cox, Jr.

nificent exceptions. This family learned to live with oppression but never to accept it, to endure the oppressor's vicious caprices, his broken promises, his betrayals, but always to avoid reckless reaction, to keep on living at all costs — in short, to respect that very first of human imperatives: survival.

Kunta Kinte implanted not only the dream of freedom in his family but also the knowledge of their glorious African heritage. They knew where they came from and perhaps because of that they knew instinctively where they wanted to go.

Among other things, "Roots" gave us an insight into the inherent ambivalence of white attitudes towards Blacks: regarding Blacks as savages yet unhesitatingly bedding female slaves; treating Blacks with civility yet never abandoning feelings of superiority.

The sad reality of our time is that these white attitudes still exist. It's well over 100 years since Chicken George took his family to Tennessee to seek peace and freedom after the Civil War, a war that put an end to chattel slavery. Yet today Blacks are still on the move searching for a

peaceful place to rest their load, still waiting to collect on the promise of a mule and 40 acres.

Capitalists Call the Shots

Chattel slavery has given way to wage slavery, a system less overtly brutal but one that, nevertheless, perpetuates Black dependency on white power. Black destiny is still determined by white hegemony. The property-owning capitalist of today calls the shots, North and South, East and West.

There is a curious irony to the historical timing of Roots, coming in the wake of Jimmy Carter's ascendency to the presidency (aided by the overwhelming support of Blacks) and appearing only a few months after the television showing of "Gone With The Wind," that other epic film dealing with race relations in the Civil War South.

ABC must feel justifiably proud of having the vision to air Roots, a show unprecedented in the history of American television. However, it is lamentable that commercial television chooses as its normal fare the kind of programming that is directly antithetical to "Roots." "Roots" is the exception to T.V.'s norms.

Effect on Blacks and Whites

Unquestionably, "Roots" will spawn a number of interesting speculations and developments. Whites have already (and somewhat amusingly) begun to search for their roots. But how will a knowledge of their ancestors' venality affect their future attitudes towards Blacks and, indeed, towards themselves?

And what about Roots' effect on Blacks, on their self-awareness, their sense of history, their pride, their self-confidence?

Such are the questions that will tantalize students of society for months to come.



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