

"DRAGNET"—Crime Stories, New Style

DRAGNET, the Australian-produced version of America's most popular crime programme—now being featured in the late-night programmes from the ZB stations—set a new style in crime stories when it was first broadcast in the United States. It was new in that it was not a whodunit in the generally accepted meaning of the word. Both murder and the sound of gunfire are conspicuously absent from its self-contained 30-minute episodes, but that doesn't mean that the show contains chicken-livered, milk-and-water stuff, nor, on the other hand, that it makes particularly good listening for children (it is heard from the ZB stations at 10.30 p.m. on Mondays). *Dragnet* dramatises real cases from the Los Angeles police files, and it views its wayward human material with compassion rather than anger. Its dialogue may be laconic, but it isn't hard-boiled.

The story of the origins and development of *Dragnet* was told in a recent issue of the American magazine *Time*. The article claimed that the American public, which now tunes in on 16,332,000 television screens every week, had gained from *Dragnet* a new appreciation of "the underpaid, long-suffering ordinary policeman, and in many cases its first rudimentary understanding of real-life law enforcement." This is a considerable tribute to a show which sets out merely to entertain, in such a highly competitive and commercialised industry as American radio and television. The secret seems

to lie in the fact that nothing after all is so successful as the documentary or slice-of-life technique when it comes to showing the public their fictional selves. The programme's power to convince must lie in the thought behind the minds of American listeners to its criminal goings-on that "This might be you or me."

Dragnet's success story, according to *Time*, is largely the story of Jack Webb, who is director, story editor, casting chief and acting star in the American version. Eight years ago Webb was an unknown news announcer in a San Francisco radio station. Today his face and fictional character are better known than almost any other corresponding character in the radio and television entertainment world. He has made Sergeant Joe Friday, of the Los Angeles police (with his verbal trade-mark, "All we want are the facts, ma'am"), more famous in the States than Sherlock Holmes. His show has become something of an institution in contemporary American life. Its theme-tune is almost as well known as the "Star Spangled Banner" (a parody of it, played backward and titled *Tengard*, once made the hit parade). Gramophone companies have sold a million copies of records that mimic *Dragnet's* dead-pan dialogue in such stories as "St. George and the Dragonet" and "Little Blue Riding Hood."

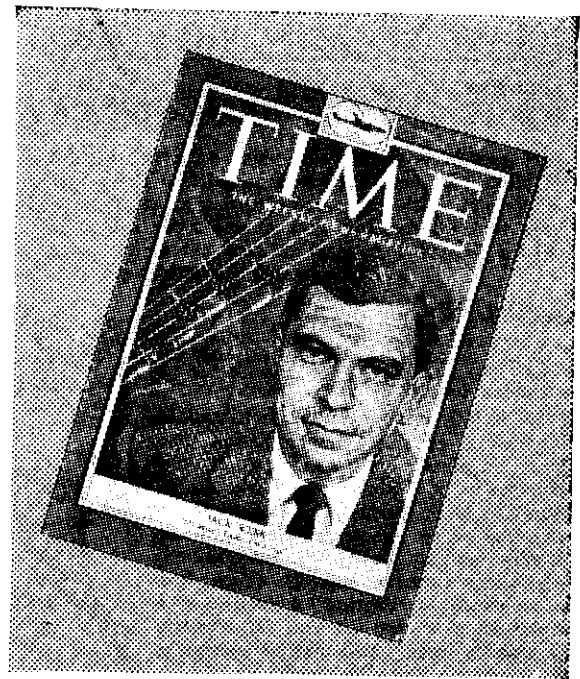
The first programme of *Dragnet*, which appeared originally in the radio form which listeners in this country hear, was broadcast on June 3, 1949. In two years it was the most popular show in American radio. Webb spent many nights in the back of a police

patrol-car listening to the police radio's matter-of-fact reports of crimes that were taking place about the city. He studied police methods and absorbed police jargon and slang.

When he planned the move from radio to television he decided to film his dramas as much as possible on the city's streets. The first scene of the first television programme of *Dragnet* showed Webb, in character as Sergeant Joe Friday walking across Spring Street in Los Angeles and up the steps of the city hall. Just out of camera range off-duty policemen were holding back the curious spectators.

When interior sets were needed, he built an exact replica of the Los Angeles police department headquarters. Telephones bore the correct extension numbers, even door-knobs and calendars were duplicated.

Realism has become one of *Dragnet's* trade-marks, in its use of actors as well as in script, plot, and stage props. In making his television films, Webb forbids make-up, disregards rehearsal-time, and relies largely on radio actors who have the knack of acting with their voices. The faces of the actors, and every possible other aspect of the particular story he is telling, are shot in close-up—and this has become another of the show's trade-marks.



"DRAGNET," in its TV version, "made" the front cover of a recent "Time"

But although *Dragnet* is said to play down the dramatics in its crime programmes, it cannot help emphasising by its very nature the sordid side of life. To quote again from *Time's* article: "The priests, con men, whining housewives, burglars, waitresses, children and bewildered ordinary citizens who people *Dragnet* seem as sorrowfully genuine as old pistols in a hockshop window . . . in the most low-keyed of his stories Webb still lures the viewer by making the television screen a sort of peephole into a grim new world." It is a world which always has, and always will, exert a strong fascination for those of us who merely sit and listen beside our comfortable winter fires in the role of spectator.

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masonry, in which Mozart was interested. For others the work has a deeper meaning, showing the struggle and victory of mankind over the powers of darkness.

The story of *The Magic Flute* in its barest form is this: The Queen of the Night, symbolising darkness and violence, is an enemy of Sarastro (high priest of Isis and Osiris), representing goodness and humanity. Sarastro holds the Queen's daughter Pamina captive to save her from the cruelty of her mother. The Queen sees in Tamino, a fourth character, an agent through whom she may regain her child. She sends Tamino, who has fallen in love with Pamina through seeing her portrait, into the domain of Sarastro. He is accompanied by a fifth character, the earthy Papageno, who is a kind of Sancho Panza. Although the Queen wins an ally in Sarastro's domain—the Moor Monostatos—her plan fails. Tamino falls under the benevolent spell of Sarastro, and agrees to undergo various ordeals so that he may become a member of Sarastro's circle. The opera ends with the successful outcome of these trials, with the union of the lovers, and with the defeat of the Queen.

The Magic Flute owes its existence to Emanuel Schikaneder, an actor,

producer and director of a theatre named Auf der Wieden, in Vienna. In 1791, Schikaneder fell upon hard times, and was on the verge of bankruptcy. He decided to stage a "magic opera," a form of entertainment then popular in Vienna, and forthwith wrote a libretto for such a work, basing it on a fairy drama by Wieland called *Lulu*, or *The Enchanted Flute*. Knowing that Mozart worked quickly and with ease, Schikaneder offered him the libretto, which delighted the composer. Schikaneder installed him in a tiny pavilion near the theatre, where he could keep an eye on the progress of the music.

Mozart began work on it in March, 1791, and it was performed on September 30, nine weeks before the composer's death. Schikaneder took the role of Papageno himself, and though the première met with a cold reception the opera was soon translated and performed all over Europe, and eventually made Schikaneder's fortune.



N.P.S. photograph



WINSTON MCCARTHY (left), who covered the All Black games in Britain for the NZBS, will be heard from ZB stations this week in the first of four discussions on the tour. With the former All Black, Jim Parker (right), who puts the questions, he will thrash out some of the problems met with overseas. From their discussion the pair will endeavour to point the way to new methods of play which may be useful when the All Blacks meet their old rivals, the Springboks, in 1956. In the first programme, the two experts discuss the effects of air travel and of the British flanking forwards on the All Blacks' game, and begin an inquiry into the comparative roles of the New Zealand forwards and backs.