



Steve Allen signed autographs Monday at Bookpeople in Orchard Mall. (Staff photo by Charlie Kidd)

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Steve Allen's concept probes great minds

By DIANE ABRAMS

Bringing together people of the past, so that Florence Nightingale could debate important questions with the likes of Plato, Voltaire and Martin Luther is a Steve Allen brainstorm brought to life on the PBS-TV network series, "Meeting of Minds."

The unique talk show concept is the recipient of several awards and was voted the best television writing of 1976-77 by TV critics. (The TV program is seen locally at 8 p.m. Saturdays on Channel 56.)

In his newly released book, "Meeting of Minds" second series, Allen includes the six scripts of the show's first season.

While autographing copies of his latest endeavor Monday night at Bookpeople in the Orchard Lake Mall, Allen talked about the unique TV series.

"Meeting of Minds" is the only thing I've done that has real social importance," Allen said. "It gets its impact from the significance of the people who are interviewed."

ALLEN PRESENTS these historical characters based on facts he turned up after extensive research. He deliberately matched figures with conflicting philosophies and viewpoints to heighten the conversations.

Each of his famed guests is garbed in the styles of that time. Although it would have been impossible for many of them to meet, the absurdity of the situations add to the creative content.

"When I was 10 years old the structural concept came to me," said Allen. "I wanted to bring a lot of macho characters together, like Tarzan and Popeye. The idea involved important people coming together."

Allen writes the scripts and appears as host on the shows. He strives to bring into focus the personalities, interesting anecdotes and public positions of each character. Instead of the traditional one-on-one interview, Allen gathers his guests around a table and encourages a free exchange of ideas.

What emerges is an intellectually stimulating discussion covering a wide

range of topics. Allen develops the conversation to include comments on morals, government, religion, values and other timely subjects. To do this, he has to familiarize himself with the characters well enough to guide the discussion.

"SO MUCH has been written about these historical figures. There's an enormous amount of research and information done," he said. "Many of the characters have written things of their own, which gives even further insight."

In one show, Marie Antoinette movingly describes the last night in the life of her husband, Louis XVI, before he went to the guillotine. She later followed.

Karl Marx tells of the bigotry of some Catholic monarchies and actress Jane Meadows, Allen's wife, portrays Cleopatra and Susan B. Anthony, as well as a host of other famous female figures.

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"We've finished 18 shows so far and will probably turn out more," Allen said.

HOWEVER, "Meeting of Minds" is just one of Allen's many accomplishments over the years. He is, perhaps, best known as a comedian and originator of the TV talk show format. When he began the "Tonight" show years ago, he introduced a number of upcoming stars to the television medium.

"The pace at which things change is more accelerated today than ever before," Allen said. "The situation comedy is better now, it's more constructive. But, that's not true of sketch comedy — that was better in the '50s."

Naming "Mork and Mindy" and "All in the Family" as some of his favorite situation comedies, Allen said he wasn't as impressed with the sketch format of "Saturday Night Live."

"The characters on Saturday Night Live" are very funny, but they generally have only one good sketch in 90

minutes of time," he said. "During the '50s every sketch was terrific, I don't know why writers can't do that now."

Allen got his start in radio as a staff announcer in 1943. Although he got involved with television as early as 1949, he doesn't consider himself a forerunner of the medium.

"I DON'T consider myself a pioneer," he said. "The reason I got into TV as soon as I did is because I was born first."

Allen's success story doesn't begin with the familiar big break that's written about in TV or movie magazines. He started out at a young age and worked hard and continues to do so to this day. His advice to upcoming comedians: "Keep coming up."

"There's no short cut to comedy. You have to be professionally funny. The average comedian is 35 years old when discovered. It doesn't happen overnight."

After taking time to answer questions, Allen looked up at the crowd gathering to have books personalized. He smiled warmly.

"I could have written another book by now," he said.

But nobody appeared to be in a hurry. Many Bookpeople customers just stared in awe at the man whose face crossed their television sets in a multitude of programs.

ALLEN'S TALENTS range from actor, writer and musician to comedian, composer and producer. However, he doesn't want to be singled out in any particular area.

"I'm just someone who does a dozen or so things for a living," he said. "He's stood the test of time, and Allen continues to captivate audiences with his sharp wit. Although he says he can't explain his longevity as a star, any of the gazing fans huddled around him at Bookpeople could attribute his popularity to a variety of factors."

"I don't think any of us know what we look like," Allen said.

"I guess it's up to other people to be the ultimate judge."

Students learn film-making to study mass media

Story: JULIE BROWN
Photos: DICK KELLEY

What can be accomplished with a \$2,000 grant, a healthy dose of creativity, and plenty of hard work?

A group of students at Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills is answering that question this summer. Student film makers, taking film classes as part of the Horizons-Upward Bound (HUB) compensatory education pro-

gram, are learning the ins and outs of the art.

The \$2,000 grant from the Michigan Council for the Arts has resulted in the hiring of John Prusak as film maker/artist-in residence for two weeks of the HUB program, according to Nadine Maynard, director of the film program.

The film classes will conclude on Saturday Aug. 11, with a private showing of all the student films.

"We try to expose them (the stu-

dents) to as many types of film expression as we can," Prusak said. "We're also helping them at the technical end. A lot of people probably think film is just fun and games. They don't see all the skills that go into it, such as writing and editing."

STUDENTS IN the Cranbrook HUB program are from schools in Detroit, Pontiac, Berkley and Highland Park, according to Mrs. Maynard. The Cranbrook program was begun in 1965 with a Ford Foundation grant, and has been coeducational for the last three years. It is now supported by a combination of private and public funds.

"A lot of these kids are in schools with 35 to a class," she said. "They aren't going to get as much individualized attention."

The HUB program is year-long, with participants spending a part of each summer at Cranbrook, Mrs. Maynard said.

"Starting in January, counselors in the middle schools recommend students who have ability and college potential," she said. "We do interviews with three or four staff members. They will have taken reading and math tests, and we'll have their last semester's grades."

"We always interview a couple hundred, and take 90," she said.

STUDENTS ACCEPTED into the program as eighth graders continue with it through high school, Mrs. Maynard said. During the summer portion, they take a full schedule of academic subjects and electives, such as the film class.

"I think it's important for students to learn about all aspects of film making," Prusak said. "The more you can understand about the whole process, the better your product is going to be."

"I think it's important for students in general to learn about film, not necessarily to become a film maker," he said. "Students should be able to understand mass media better, so they can become more discriminate viewers."

Twenty-seven students are enrolled in the two film classes, Mrs. Maynard said. There are about 250 students enrolled in the Cranbrook program. Film students have the opportunity to work on individual film projects, and also to

contribute to a group film, "Bridges."

"A lot of them have their own ideas, and I try to encourage them to try something original," Prusak said.

"I think another nice thing about film is that no one has failed at it. There's something about seeing your name, your friend's face on the screen. They know they have everyone's attention."

PRUSAK, a teacher in the Wayne-Westland school system, holds a bachelor's degree in visual arts from Northern Michigan University and a master's degree in communications from the University of Michigan.

"It wasn't until my sophomore year in college that I picked up a camera. I found I could really express myself with a camera. I'm more of an introvert, and film was my way of expressing myself."

Some of the cameras and other equipment have been donated to Cranbrook, Prusak said. Some of the equipment is his, and some belongs to Cranbrook.

"I prefer 16 mm film to Super 8, but I think it's important for any young film maker to learn to use Super 8," Prusak said. "It's much less expensive, and is available just about anywhere."

The students are also able to see a number of films ("Dirty Harry," "The Day of the Dolphin," "Let's Do It Again," "The Great White Hope," "Mahogany" and "Silver Streak") on the Cranbrook campus. These are shown evenings in the Cranbrook School Assembly Hall, Mrs. Maynard said.

"THERE ARE Upward Bound programs across the country, and this one is kind of unique because it has existed for so long," Mrs. Maynard said. She has taught in the HUB program for the past seven years, and will teach film production at Cranbrook and Kingswood schools in the fall.

"I've known a couple of these kids for four years," she said.

"John is president of the Detroit Area Film Teachers (DAFT), and I'm the secretary," Mrs. Maynard said. "It offers us a lot of resources, and sponsors a Michigan student film festival in the spring. Some of the films we make here will be entered."



Joe Simpson illustrates a radio commercial.



Cory Kirkland gets a better angle on his framing.