

CBS' 'Sinatra': Behind Ol' Blue Eyes

Miniseries peopled with Kennedys and kingpins

By Dan Rice

The two-part miniseries *Sinatra*, airing Sunday, Nov. 8, and Tuesday, Nov. 10, on CBS, translates 50 years of the entertainer's life into five hours of engaging prime-time fare.

Tina Sinatra, Frank's oldest child, was named by her father as executive producer of the project. She stresses that her father was very much involved in the telling of his story. "The words, the scenes that put together this picture are all his recollections and remembrances."

Still, *Sinatra* is not the glowing tribute one might expect, thanks to the influence of director James Sadwith (*Baby M*).

"I read the script and told Tina that if I was going to make this," Sadwith recalls, "it was not going to be an ode to Frank Sinatra, it was not going to be *The Al Jolson Story*. I would make something much more akin to *Raging Bull*, that I wasn't a fan of Frank's, and I was going to play the drama and not the sentiment."

There is no shortage of drama in Sinatra's life: his humble begin-

nings, his obsessive climb to stardom, his failed marriages and his connections to powerful figures—all make for intriguing viewing. Of particular interest is his middleman relationship between the Kennedys and organized crime; according to the movie, his intercessions with union leadership helped put JFK in the White House.

The casting process was extensive. "We would go for people who embodied the essence of the character, but we wouldn't necessarily go for exact look-alikes," Sadwith says.

The little role was filled at nearly the last minute by Philip Casnoff (*Hands of a Stranger*), who refused to be intimidated by the fame of his character.

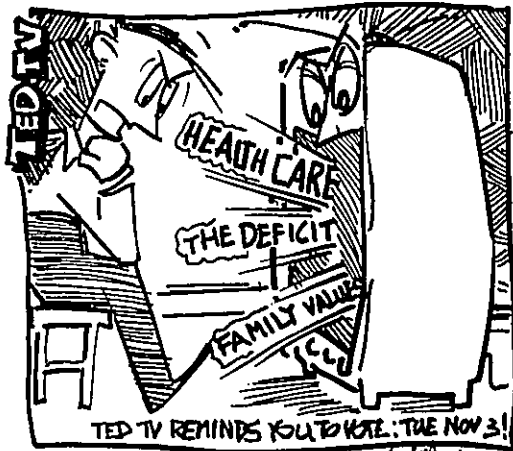
"I basically ignored the fact that he was a famous person," Casnoff says. "I think if I had been intimidated I would have been dead in the water."

Casnoff, who claims he grew up on "Motown, the Beatles and heavy metal," says he gained a new understanding of Sinatra and his music through this project.

"I knew he was very ambitious, but beyond that, one of the things that really struck me was...he was very vulnerable and private when he was on stage," Casnoff says. "I think something happened to him on stage that didn't happen anywhere else in his life. He was very moving when he sang. I think the girls responded to his vulnerability. It's almost like Michael Jackson in a way. There was almost an androgynous quality to Frank when he was very young, when he was so gaunt and frail up there on stage."

Casnoff is surrounded by a fine supporting cast. Most memorable is Olympia Dukakis as Sinatra's saloon-keeper/abortifacient mother, Dolly. Also noteworthy are Joe Santos as his ex-boxer father, Gina Ger-shon as Nancy Barbato Sinatra, Marcia Gay Harden as Ava Gardner, Joris Stuyck as Peter Lawford, Nina Siemaszko as Mia Farrow and Rod Stiger as mob boss Sam Giancana.

Sinatra is all the more worthwhile for the glimpses of famous personalities from show-business history and for the music. As with any biography of a living person, the miniseries has the problem of where it should end. The producers have opted to close with a Madison Square Garden concert in 1974 at the height of Sinatra's success. It appears a conscious decision was made to leave the "Chairman of the Board" on top.



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