

REVIEW AND COMMENT - DVDs & FILM

A Face in the Crowd

(DVD, Warner Video, 2005)

Added material includes critical commentary on the director and film; original theatrical preview trailers and subtitles in English, French and Spanish.

First theatrical release: *A Face in the Crowd* directed by Elia Kazan (Warner Bros., 1957).

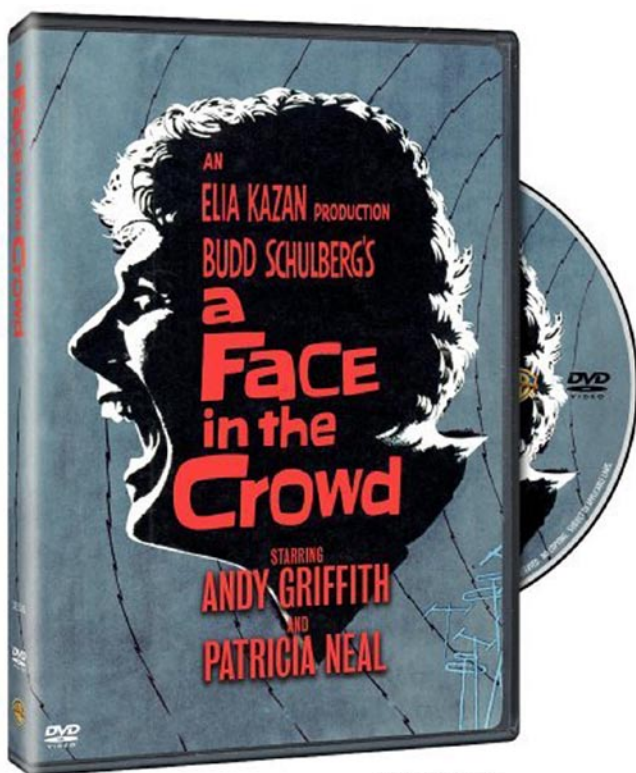
(126 minutes, \$19.95)

By David Marc

Anyone with even a passing interest in the effect that television has had on American electoral politics during the last half century ought to have strong opinions, pro or con, about director Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957). In truth, the screen adaptation of Budd Schulberg's story about the rise and fall of a telegenic small-town conman is hardly known to anybody. Some of the factors contributing to its obscurity are familiar. The film is shot in black-and-white; its monaural soundtrack is unremixed; and the editing is unmercifully optimistic in its assumptions about viewer attention span. There is nary a wrecked car

or pool of blood to gawk at during the entire two hours. As if these deficiencies in the techno-slickness department are not enough, *A Face in the Crowd* bears the mark of Kazan, whose pointedly liberal politics are anathema to the intellectual Right, and whose friendly testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee long ago scared off what is left in the political spectrum.

In spite of it all, this cautionary tale of democracy in the age of television, now available in DVD from Warner Brothers, seems more prescient than ever, and the virtuoso performances of its unlikely love triangle—Andy Griffith, Patricia Neal and Walter Matthau—remain compelling. Even



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if the film did not predict the thorough integration of mass-market corporate star-making and politics—and it does that with astonishing accuracy—*A Face in the Crowd* could stand as a period piece in the history of broadcasting, capturing the twilight of mom-and-pop radio during the post-war television boom.

Neal plays Marcia Jeffries, an idealistic Sarah Lawrence graduate working at her uncle's 500-watt station in Pickett, Arkansas. No 1950s "career girl," she is determined to something meaningful with her life and, in between hawking spots to the local feed stores, she produces a man-on-the-street interview show, a radio forerunner of reality TV. One hot July 4th, she goes into the county lock-up to cast about the drunk tank for a gritty "common man" to perk up the show. She quite literally awakens the beast when, microphone-in-hand, she trips over Lonesome Rhodes (Griffith), a smooth-talking, guitar-playing drifter who doesn't mind speaking the truth, if he senses some advantage in it. Marcia suspects that Lonesome's down-home charm might be put to better use than chatting up ladies for drinking money, and she offers him the daily mid-morning spot on her radio schedule. In for a penny; in for a pound. When he hears there's a salary in it, he says, "I'll talk on your radio for you."

Kazan's understanding of "The Media" (a term coined by Marshall McLuhan a few years later) shapes the film's narrative trajectory. We see Marcia shlepp Lonesome up the pyramid of media success that 21st-Century college communications

majors dream about: from small-town radio in Pickett to regional television in Memphis to a Madison Avenue agency and a spokesperson deal with an over-the-counter pep-pill company, landing Lonesome his own network prime-time slot. Among the film's memorable scenes is Marcia's presentation of her unschooled backwoods communicator to a reluctant group of Ivy League agency boys. Imagine if Rod Serling had written an episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies* as a script for *Playhouse 90*. To illustrate Lonesome's fifteen minutes of fame (a phrase not yet coined by Warhol), Kazan abruptly abandons the film's naturalistic style for an hysterical montage of television styles, complete with animated sequences and segments best described as music videos.

If D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is the first Hollywood film to openly attack the policies of the Republican Party, *A Face in the Crowd* is the second, and it does so much more frankly. General Haynesworth (played by Percy Waram), head of Vitajex (the pep-pill company) is a G.O.P. bigwig who is as hip to the emerging media environment as he is contemptuous of the New Deal socialists who are destroying the economic and moral fiber of his America. Having just lived through 20 years of FDR and Truman, he says, "My analysis of history tells me that the mass has always needed a strong hand to guide it. With television, we have the most powerful tool yet devised to influence public opinion." Not visionary enough to back an actual performer for the presidency, the General instead asks Lonesome to coach his hand-picked candidate for the

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Republican presidential nomination, Senator Worthington Fuller (Marshall Neilan), in the ways of television. "Isn't Fuller the one they call, 'last of the old-line isolationists?'" asks Marcia, with some alarm. "Oh I suspect so—in those leftwing New York City newspapers," says the General. The coaching scene contains a trenchant confrontation between old-line political conservatives, concerned with ethics and personal honor, and neo-conservatives who are convinced that the future of political success is tied to media savvy. After watching a film of Fuller making a stump speech, Lonesome tells him, "What we got to get you is a whole new personality!" When the senator agrees, a stalwart Republican newspaper editor who is a long-time Fuller supporter, walks out.

The film's love story suffers from a case of too little, too late. Kazan probably included it to reassure his backers. The triangle only becomes a functional part of the narrative during the last quarter of the film. While in Memphis, Marcia takes on a writer for Lonesome, Mel Miller (Matthau), a pasty-faced bespectacled Vanderbilt graduate, who advances to New York as part of the team. He is the obvious rational choice for Marcia, sharing her idealism and her belief that, as E.B. White put it in a 1948 *New Yorker* article, "television... will be the test of democracy." Like the public, however, Marcia is utterly seduced by Lonesome, even though it has become obvious to her that love is not among his capacities. A first Mrs. Lonesome Rhodes shows up with no memory of a divorce. After that is settled, Lonesome promises to marry

Marcia, but instead ties the knot with a high-school cheerleader (Lee Remick in her screen debut) during a personal appearance in Texas. Angered, hurt, and yet in some ways relieved, Marcia is compensated by Lonesome's agreement to make her CEO of Lonesome Rhodes Inc.

It takes an attack on Social Security to get Marcia to destroy the Frankenstein she has created. The balding Sen. Fuller, now known as "Curly" to Lonesome and a group of friends ordered from central casting, appears as a guest on Lonesome's show to launch his new personality. The two talk politics while looking at footage of their recent duck-hunting trip. When Lonesome inquires as to the senator's views on Social Security, Curly replies, "Daniel Boone didn't need Social Security, did he?" Enough said; the camel's back is broken. During the credits crawl, with mikes down and music up, Lonesome, whose bad case of hubris is growing worse, expounds on his ability to control the ignorant public. With Patricia Neal's darkly maniacal expression plastered on her face, Marcia bursts into the control room and turns on Lonesome's mike. Two hefty sound technicians cannot unloose her grip. Lonesome (big smile, full-face close-up) comes up over the music "...this whole country's just like my flock of sheep! Hillbillies! Hausfraus! Everybody that's got to jump when someone else blows a whistle! They're all mine! Good night—you bunch of stupid idiots." Gen. Haynesworth calls the network to invoke the morals clause in Lonesome's contract before the employee is out of the building.

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Marcia and Mel rush to Lonesome's apartment for the final confrontation. On the second floor of his duplex penthouse, posed like Mussolini on the balcony, Lonesome is addressing an army of uniformed butlers while his old road pal, Beanie (played by Grand Ole Opry star Rod Brasfield), greets each nonsensical assertion with a louder response from an applause machine. Satisfied that democracy and the social safety net (for Kazan, they are indistinguishable) have survived this latest threat, Marcia and Mel grab a taxi and ride off into the night, a giant flashing Coca-Cola sign lighting the way.

David Marc is a writer and editor who teaches at Syracuse University. He is the co-author, with Robert J. Thompson, of *Television in the Antenna Age: A Concise History* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

Scenes from a Marriage

By Ingmar Bergman
The Criterion Collection #229
Three Discs, \$49.95

Fanny and Alexander

By Ingmar Bergman
The Criterion Collection #261
Special Edition Five Discs, \$59.95

By Ron Simon

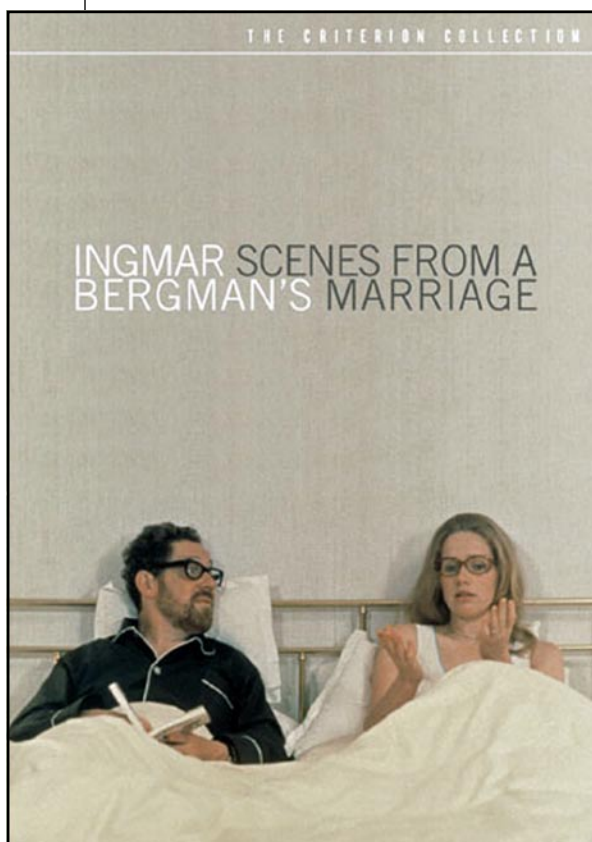
The explosion of DVD sales offers not only a second look at movies and television shows that we know but also a first look at artistic works we thought we knew. Many projects, especially international ones, straddle both the film and television worlds, with different incarnations for each, and it has been difficult for an American audience to make informed judgments single works with multiple personalities. No better illustration is the work of Ingmar Bergman. The Swedish director freely journeys from theater to film to television, imprinting his unique artistic signature on each art form. But two of his major statements, *Scenes from a Marriage* and *Fanny and Alexander*, which were seen in America as feature films, were originally made for Swedish television as mini-series. There have been few opportunities for American fans of Bergman to experience these masterworks as both a film and television, until now. Criterion has been committed to releasing DVDs of the highest quality and, with these two box sets, has produced the ultimate treasure, revealing the vision and mastery of Bergman in both media.

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Bergman used television to redefine himself as an artist and a mass communicator. In the early seventies he was having trouble raising money for feature films. Surprisingly, his movies did not attract a large and loyal following in his native Sweden, unlike the lines that greeted his latest project in New York or Paris. Using 16mm. equipment and a small crew, Bergman conceived *Scenes from a Marriage* as a six-part investigation into the pains and pleasures of contemporary relationships. With searing close-ups, he chronicled the emotional upheavals of two successful professionals, Marianne (Liv Ullmann) and Johan (Erland Josephson), whose ostensibly perfect marriage crumbles into bitterness and divorce. Their love disintegrates when Johan leaves his wife for another woman, and Bergman examines how their wounds eventually heal after many years of doubt and new entanglements. When the series was broadcast to Scandinavian audiences over a six-week period in 1973, *Scenes* resonated with a middle-class audience, many embracing Bergman for the first time. Comparing themselves to the characters on screen that seemed so real, Swedish couples reassessed their own emotional involvements after each hour episode aired; divorce rates in Denmark actually rose as Bergman's unremitting examination of marital unhappiness cut to the bone. The Swedish director previously known for such intellectual works as *The Seventh Seal* and

Persona had now achieved a mainstream popularity without sacrificing his art.

Bergman was persuaded to re-cut *Scenes from a Marriage* into a feature film for the rest of the world, discarding almost half of the original content. The National Society of Film Critics in America recognized *Scenes* as the Best Film of 1974. Several years later, PBS tried to present the television version, but made a major mistake: by dubbing the actor's voices into English, the production sounded artificial, thereby distancing audience identification, exactly the opposite of what the director intended. The Criterion Collection presents both versions subtitled in English with an improved translation, digitally



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transferred with restored picture and sound. For aficionados who only know the movie incarnation, the television original is a revelation. The film played as a series of stark dramatic confrontations; the television series gives the characters more depth, with longer uninterrupted scenes that approach the negotiations and arguments of real life. We see in the first episode the couple debate Marianne's pregnancy, resulting in an abortion. This plot line, missing from the movie, adds a layer of emotional texture that colors every subsequent encounter between the straying husband and his struggling wife. In fact, *Scenes* feels like a soap opera, but one of great depth and clarity; Bergman transmutes the lowly genre into his personal arena of anguish and redemption.

After several years in exile over a tax dispute, Bergman returned to Sweden in the early eighties to conceive his most elaborate and autobiographical production, *Fanny and Alexander*. Formatted as a four-part television series, *Fanny and Alexander* was not the typical Bergman chamber drama; this project featured 60 speaking parts, supplemented by 1,200 extras, and was shot over six months. Bergman journeyed back to the provincial town of his childhood at the turn of the 20th century where the lives of two siblings, the names of the title, are transformed when their father, an actor/manager of an exuberant theater company, dies suddenly during a rehearsal of *Hamlet*. Their mother then remarries a strict and forbidding

parson, who sucks the gaiety out of the family home. The boy Alexander, perhaps the young Bergman himself, retreats into his imagination to gain control of his diminished environment. With a rich canvas Bergman conveyed the emotional state of the family through a striking mise-en-scene; for him the film is "a huge tapestry filled with masses of color and people, homes and forests, mysterious haunts of caves and grottoes, secrets and night skies."

Just like *Scenes from a Marriage*, the international audience experienced *Fanny and Alexander* as a feature film in 1983, drastically cut from the original TV length of more than five hours. The Criterion special box set preserves



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both the television and film versions on three DVDs, accompanied by two discs of supporting material. Bergman's preferred version is the television series, which he says is "the sum total of my life as a filmmaker." The high-definition transfer emphasizes the hues and tones of Bergman's palette that make the TV version such a visual poem. The first episode is an old-fashioned Christmas celebration of an extended theatrical family. Diluted in the film version, this holiday pageantry is conveyed with festive color and sound, which speaks to the joyous possibilities of happiness and kinship. But the philosophical Bergman knows that life is not all brightness, and the film take a dramatic turn midway. How much darker, almost prison-like, the last two episodes become (much more unsettling than the film) when the new Calvinistic father takes charge, the perfect metaphor for Bergman's view of adolescence: "the prerogative of childhood is to move unhindered between magic and oatmeal porridge, between boundless terror and explosive joy." Watching the complete *Fanny and Alexander*, the viewer is swept away with high-spirited comedy and then confronted by the harrowing tragedy. The yin and yang of Bergman.

Both sets are loaded with a wealth of extras that help put the respective films into a historical and cultural context. *Scenes from a Marriage* features a 1986 interview with Bergman about the effect of the miniseries on his career as well as contemporary musings by actors Ullmann and Josephson on bringing such a demanding script to life. *Fanny and Alexander* is a virtual smorgasbord of illuminating goodies. The most revealing

is a 90-minute documentary, directed by Bergman himself, which shows the visionary artist at work. We see Bergman directing on the streets of Uppsala, where he walked as a child; gaily orchestrating a pillow fight among the young actors, so atypical of our stern image of him; and debating the process of shot composition with his master cinematographer Sven Nykvist. We also learn about Bergman's working methods with actors in another documentary as well as in the expert audio commentary by film scholar Peter Cowie. Every element of *Fanny and Alexander* has a meaning, and these extras help to unlock the mysteries.

It is astonishing that such a master of the theater and film understood the rhythms of television so well. These exemplary DVD sets allow an American Bergmanophile to appreciate the director on an entirely new level. Instead of an intense two-hour cinematic viewing, these individual episodes must be seen and savored, with time for reflection between each part, just the way television should be. Bergman certainly recognized the power of the medium because most of his work over the past twenty years has been for television. In fact, his most recent production, *Saraband*, explored what happened when the Marianne of *Scenes from a Marriage* decided to renew an acquaintance with her ex-husband Johan. For Bergman, the medium and his message have become one.

Ron Simon has organized several Ingmar Bergman retrospectives at The Museum of Television & Radio in New York, where he serves as curator of television and radio.

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Good Night, and Good Luck

(Warner Independent Pictures, 2005)

By Greg Vitiello

George Clooney's "Good Night, and Good Luck" is an elegant, riveting film that succeeds on at least three levels: as a moral tale pitting investigative journalist Edward R. Murrow against Red-baiting Senator Joseph McCarthy; as an insider's view of the workings of television news broadcasting, specifically as practiced by Murrow and his colleagues at CBS's *See It Now* in the early 1950s; and as a cautionary study of the free press' vulnerability in the face of political manipulation, then and now.

By shooting the film in black and white, Clooney's team captures the period aura of New York — from its smoky jazz clubs to its often grainy television images. It also enables the filmmakers to move seamlessly from new footage to archival material — most impressively when David Strathairn as Murrow delivers one of his eloquent introductions, before cutting to a news clip of McCarthy inveighing against the reporter. Through this technique, the filmmakers achieve a casting coup by having McCarthy and his attorney Roy Cohn play themselves.

The device of intercutting new and vintage footage adds to the

movie's compactness. "Good Night, and Good Luck" is a sparsely told film that uses Murrow's famous 1958 speech at the annual meeting of the Radio-Television News Directors Association as its framing device. Cutting away from that speech, the film flashes back to 1953 and moves quickly into the control rooms and offices where Murrow, executive producer Fred Friendly (played by Clooney himself) and their "See It Now" team work. Virtually all of "Good Night, and Good Luck" occurs in these tight settings, as Murrow and Friendly act on their decision to take on Joseph McCarthy and his demagogic methods. In this and subsequent tense moments, they



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have the full support of their reporting team, led by Joe and Shirley Wershba (effectively played by Robert Downey Jr. and Patricia Clarkson).

Readers of this publication will be familiar with the film's major events, which surround three actual broadcasts in late 1953 and early 1954: "The Case Against Milo Radulovich, A0589839," "Report on Senator McCarthy," and McCarthy's ensuing rebuttal. The first involved a former Air Force meteorologist who was about to lose his commission as a lieutenant in the Reserves and be forced to resign from the Air Force because he had been declared a "security risk." His breach against security? Having close associations with "Communists or Communist sympathizers" — his father and sister. The second broadcast was a half-hour show devoted solely to McCarthy — in his own words — framed by Murrow's memorable introductory and closing remarks. Finally, in his half-hour rebuttal, McCarthy launched an ugly, rambling counterattack on Murrow as the Red Threat incarnate.

The three broadcasts are the central events of Clooney's film and yet, they don't define its substance. This is, after all, a feature film, not a documentary. The camera doesn't merely capture Murrow on air, but watches him as he agonizes over whether to go forward with the Radulovich and McCarthy broadcasts. A charismatic reporter who became legendary for his wartime reports from London's rooftops, Murrow is the rare journalist with enough stature to take on McCarthy when the obstreperous Senator is at his zenith. Even so, Murrow knows the

risk he is taking, for McCarthy's Red-baiting is capable of destroying careers and bringing down institutions. In fact, McCarthy throws down the gauntlet following the Radulovich broadcast when his chief investigator Don Surine tells *See It Now* reporter Joe Wershba that Murrow "was on the Soviet payroll in 1934." As assistant director of the Institute of International Education, Murrow had worked on an exchange program involving the University of Moscow and, Surine adds, "I'm not saying Murrow is a Commie himself. But he's one of those goddamn anti-anti-Communists, and they're just as dangerous. And let's face it. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then, goddamnit, it is a duck."

After hearing of Surine's words, Murrow hesitates briefly before deciding to engage McCarthy directly. In a career-defining performance, Straithairn recreates Murrow's intense, eloquent reporting style and the anxiety that lies beneath the surface. We see Straithairn, cigarette poised, eyes narrowing, face clenched in momentary indecision just before the camera focuses on him and he delivers his lines in an uncanny rendering of Murrow's timbre-filled voice. Straithairn gives perfect weight to those lines, such as when Murrow concludes the Radulovich broadcast by saying: "We believe that 'the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father,' even though that iniquity be proved; and in this case it was not."

Radulovich is vindicated when the Air Force retracts its accusations. McCarthy is exposed as an intemperate name-caller whose browbeating and allegations lack substance. And yet

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George Clooney (left) as Fred Friendly and as Edward R. Murrow in *Good Night, and Good Luck*.

Murrow and Friendly have little time to savor their victories, for they live in a climate of fear. This becomes most clear when Murrow and Friendly are upbraided by CBS Chairman William S. Paley (played with a subtle blend of charm and hauteur by Frank Langella). Paley, a wary supporter of *See It Now* until the McCarthy broadcast, has switched to a more cautious, advertiser-appealing course. In future, there will be more personality interviews, such as the one with Liberace excerpted in “Good Night, and Good Luck,” and far fewer investigative reports.

Paley’s loss of journalistic nerve is one of the moments when we are reminded that “Good Night, and Good Luck” is not a mere historical recounting. Clooney and his co-writer and producer Grant Heslov are drawing

inferences for any time when the press might compromise its reportorial duties for fear of retribution. The filmmakers present a more tragic case of the wages of fear in the person of Don Hollenbeck (played by Ray Wise), a news anchor who cracks under the strain of being baited by right-wing columnist Jack O’Brien. The son of a former television newscaster, Clooney is well acquainted with the danger of abridged press freedom. And yet he doesn’t overstate his case by dragging in parallels to the present moment. A couple of writers (including one for *The New York Times*) take the film to task for “making [its] points by indirection.” Would Arthur Miller be faulted for “indirection” in writing of the Salem witch trials when his oblique target in *The Crucible* was the same Senator McCarthy? Of course

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not. "Good Night, and Good Luck" succeeds partly because it doesn't strain to make connections to today. And yet the behavior of McCarthy and his cohorts is cautionary message enough.

On the evening I attended "Good Night, and Good Luck" at a theater on New York's Upper West Side, the audience burst into applause when Murrow read his final speech in "The Report on Senator McCarthy," which ends: "The actions of the junior senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad and given considerable comfort to our enemies, and whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it, and rather successfully. Cassius was right: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves..."

After a short beat while he stares into the camera, Murrow delivers his classic broadcast coda: "Good Night, and Good Luck." And, we might add, "Good job."

A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Greg Vitiello is a New York-based writer and editor whose books include *Eisenstaedt: Germany, Spoleto Viva, Twenty Seasons of Masterpiece Theatre* and *Joyce Images*. From 1966 to 1972 he wrote for National Educational Television and the Children's Television Workshop.