ON THURSDAY NIGHTS the white brick facade of “Alden General Hospital” flashes on millions of television screens, heralding another episode of the much-discussed series, “The Nurses.” Meanwhile, nurses throughout the country sit tensely in front of their screens, waiting to see whether this week’s episode will make them feel embarrassed, defensive, proud, angry, entertained, resentful, flattered, or maligned.

Nurses are sensitive to the influence of the current rash of medical shows on the public’s image of nurses and nursing. The show they have been most vocal about is, of course, “The Nurses.” Their letters to the network, to sponsors, to the producers, to the American Nurses’ Association have been preponderantly critical, chiefly of the inept student, sometimes of the soap-opera situations in which nurses are depicted. They are dismayed, also, by the subject matter of many of the shows. Why, they ask, are nurses portrayed as alcoholic, luetic, unmarried and pregnant, Nazi, or neurotic? Many agree vehemently with the critic who wrote off an early show with the comment, “These nurses should never have been registered.”

Herbert Brodkin, the show’s executive producer, disagrees with those who believe that nursing is projected unfavorably. “But,” he hastens to point out, “our purpose is entertainment. We respect nurses here, and our intention is honest. We mean to give a good picture but our first loyalty is to the public. Our job is to entertain.”

Another criticism leveled at “The Nurses” is that it is overly dramatic, distorting the picture of hospital life and giving a false impression of a nurse’s part in it. Brodkin concedes that this point may be well taken. “A nurse’s job is to prevent dramatic episodes from happening so the climactic situations are in a sense artifi-

This article was prepared by Thelma Schorr, senior editor of the Journal.

Nursing’s TV Image

Television’s nurses face a critical audience in their real-life counterparts.
happened. If it’s honest. If it’s possible. When she admits that it could conceivably happen, then we feel justifiable. When she admits that it could conceivably have occurred. “Ever see a dog worry a bone? That’s Florence when she thinks something is wrong. She comes back to it again and again, long after you think the point’s been settled.”

What does Miss McManus herself feel about the problems she runs into in trying to assure nursing realism? “Problems!” she exclaims. “That’s a small word to describe what I’ve been through. But now, after many months of beating at people, I find the going easier because the writers and Earl, our story editor, have absorbed so many nursing concepts themselves.”

How does she feel about the critical letters she has received from other nurses? “Terrible, about the ones that contain valid criticism. Some I can ignore, but others criticize the very point I’ve been trying to change for weeks.” For example, she has been vociferously but unsuccessfully asking that a clinical instructor be added to the cast, who would be shown guiding Gail through the vicissitudes she stumbles on or sets up herself. Miss McManus says her frustration increases when she reads letters which ask, “Why doesn’t the technical consultant represent nursing education realistically?”

The show is filmed in a huge loft building on New York’s upper East Side. In a maze of cameras, lights, hospital beds, intercoms, “dollies,” dressing carts, and microphones, the second member of the nurse team, Sandra Pascual, is depended upon to bring clinical order out of the chaos. A 1958 graduate of St. Peter’s Hospital School of Nursing, Albany, New York, Miss Pascual works part time...
as technical consultant to "The Nurses" and part time on the intensive care unit at Roosevelt Hospital.

When the show first started—it premiered on September 27, 1962—Miss McManus worked both with the scripts and at the filmings, supervising all the technical setups, arranging props, patients, and "professional" personnel. But work at the filming studio begins at 8:00 A.M. and continues until 7:00 P.M. or later, six days a week. While the nurse does not have to be on the set all this time, Miss McManus found that shooting sessions left her little time to work on scripts. Early in 1963, the producers decided that she should devote all her time to advance script work and Miss Pascual was hired to be technical adviser on the set.

Miss Pascual receives a script a week to 10 days before the shooting on it begins. She breaks it down for the "prop" department and orders any special equipment that will be needed. A lot of research is required for each show, she says. "Even though I have the script in advance, a new question may be tossed at me during the shooting and I'll have half a second to answer. They may ask me to name a medication a certain patient might be taking and I have to be able to give the generic name and teach the actors to pronounce it. I try to anticipate all I'll need to know. I talk to other nurses and doctors. I keep my nursing textbooks handy, and several procedure books and a *Merck Manual.*"

How does she feel about letters from nurses condemning what they believe to be the "unrealistic image of nursing" the program projects? "For people in the profession, you don't need to create an image—they have one," she points out. "In many aspects the show is completely realistic but, of course, there is dramatic license. Having the nurse go out to see the family of a hospitalized patient and become so involved with them isn't very realistic, although it does happen, you know. It happens more often on "The Nurses" than in real life, of course, but we have to remember that this is a dramatic show. I have learned to recognize the director's problems and sometimes I just have to adjust to them. For example, even when the patient should be flat in bed, the head of the bed will have to be raised a little for a good camera angle. I realize now that many of the things I criticized when I watched the show myself, before I came to work here, involve dramatic or camera requirements."

The actresses who play the leading roles—Shirl Conway who portrays head nurse Liz Thorpe and Zina Bethune who plays the student Gail Lucas—have often sought out the nurse consultants. "In the beginning, especially, I would come to Florence to check on how much emotional reaction would be appropriate," Miss Conway recalls. "Can I treat such and such a situation lightly, I would ask. Would a wink or a smile be appropriate? It was Florence who helped me lighten the character a little."

Miss Conway is not the only one who deplores the lack of humor in the series. Here, too, many nurses feel that the facts of hospital life succumb to too much fiction and their letters point out that the constant, unrelieved tension at Alden General would hardly make nursing seem attractive to prospective applicants. "We try for humor," says story editor Booth, "but when the scripts have to be cut, as they inevitably do, it is generally the humor, as little as it may be, that we find ourselves sacrificing. Besides, in the treatment of a serious subject, attempts at humor are too apt to be offensive."

In a show planned for the future, Liz Thorpe will be shown serving as a technical adviser on a television show. To make it honest, producer Brodkin intends to talk the writer into including in the script the criticism which Mrs. Thorpe herself would make of "The Nurses" if she were to leave Alden General early enough some Thursday night to be able to watch it.

The question of whether the show serves nursing's image well or ill continues to be a hot subject for Friday morning coffee breaks. Herbert Brodkin believes that the program is good for the nurse's image. "We respect nurses and I think we are helping to create a good picture of nursing. But this is not our objective—our objective is entertainment. Anything else is a by-product."

Yet the criticism he receives is not lost to Brodkin nor does he himself remain dispassionate about the characters he's created. "I know Liz is always into everyone's business," he admits wryly. "Sometimes I sit in the projection room and say, 'Liz, will you stop butting in!' But if she did, there wouldn't be a story."