

# Kids just wanna have fun

**A**fter one year on the air, and with a record of steadily improving programming, YTV's Rob Burton gets a perverse pleasure from boasting about "being thrown out of the best boardrooms in the country."

The children's network's vice-president for programming and general manager of their production studios is talking about the dark and difficult days when he and his partners went looking for capital to establish YTV.

When Burton and his colleague, YTV president Kevin Shea, presented their proposal for the new network to the CRTC, the federal regulatory body wanted assurances they would reach at least half of the 6.5 million Canadian homes that are connected to cable service. The network began broadcasting on September 1, 1988 with 2.8 million cable subscribers and promises, from the cable companies, that the rest would sign up. Within a year, subscriptions doubled to 5.6 million potential viewers.

"The traditional approach to CRTC meetings is to try and tell them what your channel will be like," explains Shea. "We decided not to do that. We phoned our friends across the country and asked them to shoot footage at random in schools, asking kids what they want. The dreadful thing was that only three out of 120 kids mentioned any Canadian shows."

The reason for that imbalance, say both Burton and Shea, is simply that no one ever bothered to really ask the kids, and then no one was prepared to spend any money in Canada for children's programs.

"We turned that around. In our first year, 4,100 hours of the total of 6,750 hours on the air were Canadian programs"

They had their biggest one-time success when they brought actor Jan Rubes into the studio as Santa Claus, for a week-long live phone-in for kids under eight. Shea laughs aloud, recal-



Photo: Shane Harvey

## *You Can't Do That On Television*

ling the consternation from the phone companies. As Shea tells the story, the long-distance lines run by BC Tel burnt up in one night, and Bell told them they logged 400,000 incoming calls to the studio on one night.

But their favorite show is the Ottawa-produced *You Can't Do That On Television*. How do we know it's right, they ask rhetorically. Because, with glee — these two men are like kids, and they do like them too — "parents hate it." They even get complaining letters and phone calls from adults. But, says Burton, "it's the one show, more than all the rest, that brings out the kids' sense that they own the channel, and it's because that show makes fun of adults, it says things the kids already think."

All this might be fun, but it's also a serious business; running a network takes more than a bit of mockery. And success is measured, always, by the dreaded ratings. YTV seems to be doing well on that front too, with a steady rise in ratings over the first year of operation. The trick is to decide what children actually want to watch, as opposed to what adults think they should watch. Rob Burton calls it the difference between children-friendly TV and eat-your-greens TV.

Apart from ratings, the programmers at YTV rely on another industry

stand-by: focus group testing. Sit a group of kids in front of a program and find out what they like and dislike about it. Then there's "the front line, the kitchen testing where we get a lot of real feedback from our own kids, and our neighbors' kids."

When they throw in their experience — both Shea and Burton have as much as 10 years in children's programs as producers — plus instinct and "creative juices," they still have a problem.

As Kevin Shea explains, "our audience is really fragmented. Six and 10 and 15 year-olds all want different things. For instance, six year-olds just won't watch anything in black and white, and the younger teenagers want lots of personality stuff, background about their rock and roll stars, teenybopper *People* magazine stuff."

At the beginning of November, the network hosted the first annual YTV Achievement Awards, telecast live from the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, honoring winners in 15 categories, from bravery to invention, dance to writing. The winners ranged in age from 10 to 18, and came from every region of the country.

Unsolicited, the YTV driving forces offer a slogan and an explanation for their success: "Kids have just as much right to be entertained as adults."