

Two Partridges in a money tree

By ALJEAN HARMETZ
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HOLLYWOOD — "If we could only auction off his gallbladder," said a cynic, "we could make a fortune."

"Auction off the whole gallbladder, hell," said a more businesslike cynic, "We should sell each gallstone separately."

Although Screen Gems has turned down requests to bronze David Cassidy's gallstones—he was unexpectedly hospitalized in July—and to embed his hair clippings in plastic, they are doing a brisk sale in The Partridge Family coloring books, lunch boxes, paper dolls, comic books, wiggle postcards, children's dresses, paperback mystery novels, Patti Partridge dolls, and two record albums that have sold over a million copies each. During April and May of 1971, Screen Gems' royalties from Partridge Family bubble gum alone were \$59,000.

A year ago The Partridge Family was simply one of 23 new prime-time television shows hoping to make it through the year—a situation comedy about a widow (Shirley Jones) with five children (including her real stepson, David Cassidy) who is forced to become a permanent member of her children's rock group when their girl singer gets the mumps. It was, at a quick glance, neither more nor less artificial than the situation comedies that surrounded it or opposed it.

Since adults rarely chew bubble gum, it might be easy to dismiss The Partridge Family as another in the series of children's hours from Davy Crockett to The Monkees that have their hot season in the sun and then melt, leaving something of a chocolate mess behind. One survey did indeed call The Partridge Family the highest rated TV program among children 6 to 11. But the audience breakdown also showed that, although 38 per cent of The Partridge Family viewers are children, 28 per cent are women over the age of 19 and 19 per cent are grown men.

The Partridge Family started as Family Business in the typewriter of Bernie Slade in August, 1969. Slade had already created The Flying Nun, Love on a Rooftop, and Mr. Deeds Goes to Town.

The day the script was out of Slade's typewriter, it was sent to Shirley Jones. "I thought it had the best chance of success of any pilot script I'd ever read," says Shirley. "For a situation comedy, it was written honestly; and the Partridges weren't a fairy-tale, candy-box family."

Executive producer Bob Claver now had to find five children. There would be a male teen-ager to attract teen-age girls to the show, a female teen-ager, and three more-or-less little children. Although the Partridge children were supposed to sing or play musical instruments, Claver did not look for children with musical talent. "If we were to have looked for five kids who could act and sing, we'd have been looking for five years." As it was, Claver interviewed 850 chil-

dren before deciding to test 10—two for each role. They were tested and chosen "in relationship to each other—for the chemistry."

Success in television comes from small accidents. Lucky as producer Claver was with David Cassidy's ambience and singing ability, he was equally lucky with 11-year-old Danny Bonaduce's ability to make anything he says sound funny.

A random sampling of children in West Los Angeles shows that almost all children under the age of 12—male and female—turn on The Partridge Family not for David Cassidy but for Danny Bonaduce. In fact, for young children, David Cassidy runs a poor third to Shirley Jones.

What ingredient or combination of ingredients caused The Partridge Family to rise like a helium balloon above its competitors while so many seemingly similar television shows huddle forlornly in the Nielsen doldrums, unable to franchise even one coloring book or paper doll?

"A lot of kids would like to in that family. It seems like fun. I'd like to be in that family if I were a kid," says Claver.

"You can't just say the music is responsible," says David Cassidy. "It's the chemistry between the actors. The show's positive. We're not trying to bring anyone down."

"Let's face it," says one

of Cassidy's agent-managers. "David Cassidy is the Partridge Family phenomenon."

Cassidy is a frail, courteous, 21-year-old boy with hair the color of bronze. As his car leaves the studio, he crouches in the passenger seat, pretending to be asleep. The teen-age girls waiting at the gate squeal and point, but the car is going too fast for them to approach him. "It's strange," Cassidy says. "They wait all day to see you. There's pleasure in that."

His gallbladder was removed at 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 13. By dinnertime his fans were hiding in the diet elevator of Los Angeles' Mount Sinai Hospital, perhaps

in the hope "of seeing me with the intravenous still in my arms." Says Cassidy's manager, Ruth Aarons, "I did not know whether to hire round-the-clock nurses or Pinkerton guards." During his two-week stay in hospital, he received 5,000 get-well cards and several hundred presents, including a large number of candles, incense, love beads and "more stuffed partridges than I ever knew existed."

Of his own success, Cassidy—who opens doors for ladies, seems spotlessly wholesome, and speaks the King's English only occasionally spiced, with "I thought it was really out of sight," or "I know when somebody's shucking me"—muses, "Who can say why one person is singled out? Maybe because of the way I talk or look. Possibly because I'm uncomplicated, clean. There's no threat involved."

Yet there is still the question of how much of The Partridge Family's success is due to David Cassidy and how much of David Cassidy is due to the show's success.

"It's Shirley Jones who makes it all happen," says writer Bernie Slade. "Kids loved The Monkees but their parents hated it and the result was no more Monkees. Shirley is our adult point of view, a parent figure who appeals to adults for her beauty and her warmth and her brains."

From the beginning Shirley Jones has felt the success of the show depended on "the honesty of the characters and the rapport we have as a family."

On the big, cool stage at the Columbia Ranch in the San Fernando Valley, the rapport is apparent. For one occasion, the burden of the script centres around "the little ones." In the hierarchy of the show, "the little ones" are Danny, Chris (played this year by 10-year-old Mark Forster) and Tracy (8-year-old Suzanne Crough). The big ones are Keith (David Cassidy) and Laurie (Susan Dey). For script purposes, 21-year-old Cassidy and 18-year-old Miss Dey will "stay in high school forever, like Little Orphan Annie."