An Interview with Albert Ruben

Introduction by Steve Neale

Albert G. Ruben was an important contributor to many left-liberal TV shows in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. He began his TV career as a script editor and occasional writer for *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1955–9), *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* (1956–7), *The Buccaneers* (1956–7) and *Sword of Freedom* (1958) in the UK in the 1950s. As detailed in the interview below, he was a key figure in the network of communication linking Hannah Weinstein and Sapphire Films, both based in London, and Ring Lardner Jr., Ian McLellan Hunter and the other blacklistees, most of them based in the US, who wrote scripts for these shows. On leaving the UK in the 1958, Ruben worked as story editor on *Richard Diamond, Private Detective* (1957–63), as story editor, associate producer and occasional screenwriter on *Have Gun, Will Travel* (1957–63), as a writer on *The Nurses* (1962–5) and *Espionage* (1963), as a staff writer on *The Defenders* (1961–5), as a writer on *For the People* (1965), *NYPD* (1967–9) and *Streets of San Francisco* (1972–7), and as writer and producer on *Kojak* (1973–8). He currently lives in New York. This interview with Ruben was conducted by David Marc in 1998. It is one of a series of interviews in the Steven H. Scheuer Television History Collection at Syracuse University. A set of endnotes has been added. Edits, amendment and additions are marked by the use of square brackets; spellings in the original transcription have been altered where necessary to conform to the *Film Studies* house style. Our thanks go to David Marc and Syracuse University for permission to publish the interview and to Paul Buhle for drawing it to our attention.

Interview by David Marc, 9 March 1998, New York City

David Marc: Tell us a little about your childhood and upbringing.

Albert G. Ruben: I was brought up in Santa Monica, California. Attended Santa Monica public schools. Not very exciting or interesting. [ ] Santa Monica at that time was largely dominated demographically by people who had moved out from the Midwest. The main industry in the city was Douglas Aircraft.

DM: What years are we talking about?

AR: ’35 until I went into the army in ’44.

DM: Was the community hit hard by the Depression? Did Douglas, for example, operate during the Depression?

AR: I don’t really know. I think it did. It was during those years, the very early Depression years, that a lot of people were drawn out there from the Midwest. A number of the dust bowl refugees settled in that area. [ ] There was also a sizable Japanese population–truck farmers up and down the coast. I went to school with quite a number of Japanese kids. They were all rounded up at the outbreak of World War II and sent off to internment camps.

DM: Was there social integration? Did you have friends of all kinds? Or did people stay with ‘their own kind?’

AR: I think the integration socially was no better, and perhaps not as good as it is now. I had Japanese friends. There were quite a few black kids in the school, but they were segregated pretty much. It was a *de facto* segregation, along racial lines. To this day, I regret that I wasn’t more adventurous in going across those lines.

DM: How about the movies? What role did the movies play in your life?

AR: I was a fan of the movies. I did as most kids did at that time– go to the Saturday matinees. Then, as I became a little older, as I got into high

school age, movies were a kind of dating process. You'd set up a date with a girl to go to a movie. So movies certainly played a role.

DM: Did you have some aspirations that you wanted to do something like this?

AR: Not at all.

DM: What were you interested in becoming, as a kid?

AR: I didn't have the slightest idea what I wanted to do. So when I got into this business, it was completely fortuitous and not in any way prepared for.

DM: You did start out as a journalist, as a writer.

AR: Right.

DM: Can you draw a path between your education and the beginning of your career with Hearst at INS?

AR: The way that came about was that I went into the army Air Corps during the war.

DM: At about what age?

AR: I was eighteen. I was sent to England as part of the Eighth Air Force. Seeing what I saw of England, and in flying over Europe, for some reason, the whole exposure to the fact that there was this whole other continent, a whole other culture, just thrilled me–despite the conditions of seeing it not as a tourist but as an invading warrior.

DM: Had you seen the East [Coast] as a child at all? Did your parents travel with you?

AR: Actually, I was born in Minnesota and spent the first six years of my life in New York. So I don't know whether you'd say I had seen the East or not, but at an early age at least I was [there] . . .

DM: What I was getting at is that you're describing the kind of thrill one gets in seeing that the world was much larger than one thought it was. I was interested if you were coming out of California into Europe, or you had some context that the world was a little larger?

AR: I had a very minimal context. I traveled across the country with my mother and brother in 1939.

DM: By train?

AR: No, by car. We drove from Los Angeles to New York to see the World's Fair in Flushing.

DM: I have to ask you a World's Fair question: Did you see the RCA television exhibit at the '39 World's Fair?

AR: Yes, I did–small screen.

[ ]

DM: So you went off to the war at eighteen. Had you finished high school at that time?

AR: Yes, I had finished high school. I guess I was in the process of explaining how my exposure to Europe from the war determined me to get back. So I returned from the war and went to college.

DM: Where did you go to school?

AR: I went for two years to Stanford and then I transferred to Columbia and took my degree at Columbia. The day after my last final examination, I got on a freighter and went back to Europe. So this exposure from the war had sort of been germinating. It's hard for me to really understand why it was such a powerful draw, but I had to get back there and see it.

DM: Was it a sense of history–falling in love with these old things and buildings?

AR: I think that was part of it, yes. Anyway, I went to Hoboken and got on a freighter and, nineteen days later, I was in Belgium. I spent almost two years looking around Europe and finally ran out of money. I was financing that whole thing because, when you were in the army, you had to buy war bonds. So I cashed in my bonds and that's what I was traveling on.

DM: Was Europe in a kind of shambles?

AR: Yes.

DM: The dollar must have taken you pretty far.

AR: The dollar could take you a long way. The East End of London was still [operating as were] a lot of places. This was '51-'52, but there were still plenty of signs of destruction. In any event, I really was very happy over there and reluctant to return, but as I said, I had no way of making a living. All my efforts to find a way to make a living had been unsuccessful. So I knew I had to come back to the States and get a job. My goal in getting a job was to find something that would take me back to Europe. Journalism seemed to be the way to do that. That's exactly what happened. I got a job with International News Service, started in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and then they brought me to New York.

DM: What was your beat in Harrisburg – state politics in Pennsylvania?
AR: Yes
DM: Was that exciting at all?
AR: No, I couldn't call it very exciting, but what was kind of exciting was just the mechanics of working in a news bureau.
DM: And you were putting your stuff in print.
AR: Yes. In a wire service bureau, it's all plugged into teletype machines, so I got to learn to use a teletype machine. That was exciting and kind of nerve-wracking at first until you really felt confident that you could do it.
DM: Another question I have to ask you about that: Today, if students want to go into journalism, they practically need a master's degree in journalism. You were able to just walk in and show you could write and get a job?
AR: Yes, I got a letter of introduction to an executive at INS. The only thing I remember his asking me was, 'Can you live on forty-five dollars a week?' I had just returned from Europe, so I didn't really know what it took to live. I said, 'If other people can do it, I can do it.' So he said, 'We have an opening in Harrisburg.' I said, 'Let's go!' I guess he looked at my academic credentials, but otherwise . . .
DM: He saw Stanford and Columbia. That meant you were a solid guy.
AR: That I was educated. I was probably a lot more educated than two-thirds of the people that worked at news agencies [ ]. They brought me to New York, which was the headquarters of the wire service.
DM: Was it at 57th and 8th Avenue
AR: 51st.
DM: There was a Hearst building up that way
AR: Yes, but those were just executive offices. [INS] was at 51st Street on the East Side, in the [*New York*] *Mirror* building.
DM: The Mirror *was a Hearst paper?*
AR: Yes.
DM: I remember the Mirror. *It wasn't as good as* The Daily News.
AR: Right. The *Mirror* and the *Journal-American* were the two Hearst papers in New York at that time. So, as soon as I was brought up here, I started a campaign to get sent to Europe, which was the object of the whole exercise to begin with. They put me on the cable desk. I worked there for a while and then the Coronation approached.
DM: Elizabeth II?
AR: Yes. The London bureau needed more manpower, so that was my big break. They sent me over. I worked for a couple of years at the INS office in London. Then, at that point, INS's fortunes really were dwindling and they were absorbed by United Press, which became UPI [United Press International]. That meant that the INS office in London was closed. I did see that I was going to be stranded. I had met socially during my time there a woman named Hannah Weinstein. She's a big part of the television story.
DM: Tell me
AR: Hannah Weinstein was, in a sense, a refugee from McCarthy–things that were going on in this country. She had been a publicist. Partly as a publicist and also out of political conviction, she had helped stage a big rally in Madison Square Garden for U.S.-Soviet friendship and had become involved with the Committee on the Arts, Sciences, and Professions.
DM: Was she, in fact, a Communist?
AR: I don't know the answer to that definitely. I think probably not, but she may have been. I doubt it. Certainly her sympathies were. At any rate, as the atmosphere in this country soured, she found it more and more difficult to make a living. She had three young daughters. She was a remarkable woman. She was about five feet tall. She went to Europe. First, she went to Paris, I believe, and made a television series. God knows how she put it together and got the financing for it! Then, with Boris Karloff, she made something called *Colonel March of Scotland Yard*, which was a television series.
DM: So French TV was off the ground by then?
AR: She was making this in English, doing it in France.
DM: She was using what amounted to this cheap place to make a movie at that moment?
AR: Yes. Also the fact that there were [other] refugees from McCarthy who were available to her. That, in fact, became her source of success.
DM: Was there a community of these refugees?

AR: Yes, in Paris and London

DM: They were artistic people?

AR: Yes.

DM: Were they bitter? Did they want to get back to America? What was the general mood of that group?

AR: I don't know that there was such a thing as a general mood. I guess sentiments were varied, depending on the person. Generally, I think, people wanted to get back to the States and pick up their normal lives. Some of them were managing to live comfortably and others were struggling. In any event, I met Hannah through mutual friends in London when I was working at INS. She said a remarkable thing to me: that she was going to make a television series based on the Robin Hood stories, and why didn't I fall in with her and become, in effect, her story department? I remember very clearly saying, 'I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. I don't know anything about television movies. I'm quite content doing what I'm doing.' So that was the end of that – until we get to this time when INS started to go out of business and I had to really start to think about how I was going to support my wife and two small children, and how I was going to get them back to the States, if I was suddenly and abruptly let go in London, which seemed to be what was going to happen. So I went to Hannah and said, 'Do you remember that conversation we had?' She said, 'Sure.' I said, 'Is it still something that's going to happen?' She said yes. As a matter of fact, she was buying a motion picture studio outside of London to make this series. I said, 'If the job offer is still there, I'm your guy.'

DM: Was that Sapphire Productions?

AR: Yes.

DM: So the idea was to make this TV series in English language for whoever would buy it?

AR: She had financing from some Brits, but also from a company in the States called Official Films, which was a distributor.

DM: I remember their symbol with the blue ribbon that used to be on cartoons I watched as a kid.

AR: They were a distribution company. There was a guy named Hal Hackett who was its CEO. She persuaded him to put up some money. I am not sure about the process, but I think she probably, before she even got into production, had made a sale to Young & Rubicam. Those were the days when advertisers bought television shows, rather than just time.

DM: This was a legacy from radio, wasn't it?

AR: Right, I guess so, like the *Texaco Star Theater*. There was this close identification between the sponsor and the program.

DM: Which gave the sponsor and its agency tremendous editorial controls.

AR: Exactly. Young & Rubicam was the agency of record in this deal for *Robin Hood*, and CBS was the network.[1] It was all in place when production began. So I went to work for Hannah as the story editor on this series. What that meant primarily for me was–and here we get back to this whole thing of McCarthy and the blacklist. I haven't mentioned the blacklist, but that was what really was Hannah's strength. She had access to blacklisted writers.

DM: She was in the center of this community and knew where there was unused talent?

AR: Exactly. She was actually acquainted with a lot of these guys. Now, some of them were very successful screenwriters who could no longer work in Hollywood. Here they were being offered an opportunity to work in television – an opportunity they probably would not have welcomed, had conditions been normal.

DM: You mean, they would have had some attitude about TV?

AR: Exactly.

DM: But, for the moment, beggars couldn't be choosers?

AR: Exactly. So they were very happy to have employment–not as dishwashers or salesmen, but using their skills and craft.

DM: Was it risky in any way for Hackett to put money into this?

AR: You are asking a very interesting question, because how much Hackett knew about this set-up, I don't know.

DM: But, if he knew Hannah Weinstein, surely he knew what she was about?

AR: I don't know how much he knew about her political background. He may have known

something or nothing. It's very possible he knew nothing about it – just that she came to him with this proposal and said, 'Here's my track record.' She may have presented him with a written proposal and said she had some funding. Lew Grade was behind it, who subsequently became Lord Grade, but at that time he was just plain Lew Grade. He had put some money in it. So it's like all those things: if there's money from one person, it makes it more attractive.

DM: Everybody loves a winner.

AR: In any event, I don't really know how much Hal knew about her politics, but the provenance of these scripts from blacklisted writers was a very closely-held secret.

DM: Were pseudonyms used?

AR: Yes, all pseudonyms. Hannah and I were closely enough acquainted that she was able to tell me who these people were, but she insisted that I never reveal to the people I was dealing with that I knew who they were. So it was very strange.

DM: Who were some of these people? Any interesting real names?

AR: The main team who were producing scripts for *Robin Hood* in the beginning were Ring Lardner, Jr. and Ian Hunter. They worked as a team. Ian had written *Roman Holiday* [1953] and Ring had written *Woman of the Year* [1942]. They were big Hollywood writers. Now they were working as a team. They couldn't come [to Europe] from Hollywood because they couldn't get passports. At that time, part of the whole process of oppressing the Left was to deny them the right to travel.

DM: . . . [It's] what they did to Chaplin–not letting him back into the country.

AR: So I had to work with these people trans-Atlantic. Of course, that was long before E-mail or Fax.

DM: You had been involved with [teletype] cable and you were a little more used to that than other people.

AR: That kind of technology would have been too expensive. In other words, we couldn't communicate at the great length that was necessary by going to a cable company and sending our stuff that way. It was just prohibitively expensive.

DM: So it was the meetings that were really the problem? They could work on the script, but it was the editing?

AR: Exactly. The way it worked was that Hannah and Sid Cole, who was her producer, and I would meet in London when we'd get an outline, let's say, for an episode. My job was primarily to take copious notes as Hannah and Sid discussed the problems. It was a regular story conference, except that the writers weren't there. Then, immediately after the conclusion of the meeting, I would go to my office and sit down at my typewriter and write a letter to the writers with all of the material that had come out of the story conference.

DM: Was there any paranoia on your part that mail would be tampered with and you would be found out to be dealing with these people?

AR: No, I never had a fear of mail tampering. I wouldn't call it paranoia, but there was genuine anxiety. After the show became a success and was getting good ratings, Young & Rubicam organized a junket. It was like going out to the colonies to visit one of your more successful operations.

DM: Who did you deal with there? David Levy?

AR: I don't remember

DM: He was somebody I interviewed a while ago. He was head of a TV shop in the early TV period.

AR: I have no recollection of the names, but this group scheduled a visit to London. They wanted to come and see the studio and meet Richard Greene, who was the star. It was a normal kind of visit of the sponsors and their sponsoring agency with the production company.

DM: Was the show fully sponsored in the sense of a single. . .

AR: It may have been a holding company with several products.

DM: The only reason I ask is that I wonder if there was, either actually or potentially, a company that might have been embarrassed by all this?

AR: Absolutely! It would have been scandalous, if the truth had emerged that this very popular, very benign television series, aimed mostly at young people, was in fact a hothouse of Red activity.

DM: There was a kind of anti-irony in this also, in that, of all the subjects, the Left mythology around Robin Hood!

AR: Don't think that wasn't exploited! [laughs] Anyway, you were asking about paranoia and I was just giving an example of how there was a genuine danger occasionally of exposure. My one really vivid recollection is when this group from the companies and from the ad agency come on a visit. It was my responsibility to make sure that questions about the writers somehow got finessed, deflected. It was very nerve-wracking.

DM: Were there questions about the writers?

AR: Of course!

DM: What did they ask? And what did you do?

AR: 'Can we meet some of the writers? These shows are so wonderfully written.'

DM: Did you think of hiring a couple of actors to come over?

AR: No, I don't remember. I just somehow managed to point to something that I thought would be interesting.

DM: Most of my personal vision of this is from the Woody Allen-Martin Ritt film, The Front [1976]. In terms of teaching, it is the most effective way to show this to kids. Otherwise, it comes out as very dry stuff.

AR: It wasn't dry! It was very serious. There was a lot of anxiety. Here was this strange operation, where its success was based on the fact that Hannah Weinstein was getting a quality of writing that she could not possibly have gotten under other circumstances. It was very high quality. It was the best.

DM: You at least were able to sort of finesse them with the idea that these were British writers?

AR: Well, I think they knew that some of them were American. There were just very difficult moments in this whole period when the threat of exposure was real. You had to be terribly careful. In any event, I go back to the process where I dealt with these writers at long distance, trans-Atlantic, by airmail. It seems now so incredible.

DM: They call it 'snail mail.'

AR: Right. It seems like a whole other. . . It cannot comprehended within one person's lifetime.

DM: You were in horse-and-buggy

AR: I would write these long letters, because everything that she would say in a story conference had to be translated into the letter and be as clear and concise as possible. These letters then would go off and they then would do a rewrite and send back their rewrite, again by airmail. That was the way we produced a successful television series. Looking back on it and knowing what I know about how series are produced today–the pressure and the chaos–it just doesn't seem possible that it actually happened.

DM: You were making thirty-nine episodes?[2]

AR: Yes.

DM: Did you have outdoor shooting?

AR: Yes.

DM: I remember watching the show, but I can't remember whether it was indoors or real outdoors shooting.

AR: We had a lot of standing sets indoors, but I remember a man named Peter Proud, who was the art director of the series. He was very skillful and he built a number of stock pieces, made sets sort of modular so that he could use them as various portions of a castle or a moat.

DM: Like the office of the Sheriff of Nottingham? There was a kind of forest image, I remember, with Little John.

AR: We did shooting outside of London. He set up a lot of these pieces so that they could be used as exteriors. For example, if there was an approach to a walled city, he would have these wall pieces that were all on rollers and they'd just be positioned.

DM: But you also had some castles to shoot out there in England.

AR: I don't know that we actually did any on-site, location shooting.

DM: The budget didn't justify that?

AR: No.

DM: Do you remember what an episode budget might have been?

AR: I probably knew at one time.

DM: What kind of ratings did the show get?

AR: It got very good ratings. It ran for three or four years.

DM: In prime time on CBS?

AR: Yes. Then Hannah parlayed that success into other series. She made *Sir Lancelot*, *The Buccaneer*[*s*], and something called *Sword of Freedom* with Edmond Purdom, which was in Renaissance Italy. They were all historic.
DM: Were these also sold to British TV at that time?
AR: Yes.
DM: Was ITV in existence yet?
AR: Yes, that's where Lew Grade was involved. He was getting product for ITV.
DM: Was the studio Twickenham?
AR: *The Buccaneer*[*s*] was made at Twickenham. The studio he bought was the oldest film studio in England. Quite small. It was out along the river, south of London.
DM: This must have been a godsend for the British film industry?
AR: Yes, she put a lot of people to work. She used a lot of British directors.
DM: Did you ever actually run into trouble based on your little secret about your writing talent?
AR: No, we got away with it, I guess. The whole thing kind of cleared up before anybody [found us out].
DM: How did it clear up?
AR: How did the blacklist clear up? [ ] *Spartacus* [1960] was a movie where the producer [Kirk Douglas] decided, with studio approval, to use a blacklisted writer. The whole thing started to crumble, once it was seen that it could happen without people coming out and rioting in the streets.
DM: Or boycotting grocery stores
AR: Yes, the American Legion organizing boycotts or whatever.
DM: A little later I'll ask you about The Defenders *episode with Jack Klugman which I think was the only mention of the blacklist that actually occurred on television for many years after it happened.*[3] *But how did you get from working in London to Hollywood?*
AR: My wife and I just decided to return to the States. We had been in England five years and she was getting a little anxious to go where we were going to settle.
DM: Wanted some central heating?
AR: Right, I guess. So we decided to move back to this country. By this time, I decided that I really liked doing what I was doing for Hannah. The place to do it most readily was Los Angeles. Also my father still lived out there.
DM: This was late Fifties?
AR: Fifty-eight (1958)
DM: Your first Hollywood job was with Richard Diamond*, [*Private Eye*]?*
AR: Yes, I think *Richard Diamond* was my first job.
DM: What was the set-up there? What was the production company and so forth?
AR: It was made at Four Star.
[ ]
DM: This was a filmed series. Was there any money for outdoor shooting?
AR: Yes, we did some location. I remember Joe Biroc was the cameraman. Good old Hollywood hand. He was able to get us around town and get some locations.
[ ]
DM: Four Star was a big power in early TV.
AR: It was a successful, smaller studio
DM: Four Star was with Dick Powell and Fran Allison?
AR: Powell, [Charles] Boyer, Ida Lupino, and
[ ]
DM: Can you tell me a little about the company? There were very few what could be called TV studios at this point. Desilu was one of them. Did TV production companies seem to be the wave of the future at that time?
AR: I think that Four Star was somewhat unique. Both Desilu and Four Star capitalized on the fact that they had sources of financing. In other words, when these four people, who were all successful Hollywood people, came together, they could bring not only some funding to the table but also a lot of clout. They knew the community.
DM: You are not talking about their own money [I presume] They could go to bankers and make bankers listen?
AR: Exactly, and they had powerful agencies. The William Morris Agency, for example, was the agency of record on *Richard Diamond*. What that meant in those days was that ten percent off the top of the budget went to the agency. They were

the packager. It was right around that time, for example, that MCA was being broken up and Lew Wasserman saw that television production was going to be big business. So he opted to take MCA into production and leave the agency business [completely]. It was right around that period that TV production was really taking off as a big business. These four actors must have been very smart people and realized that there was a fortune to be made. They got in on the ground floor.

DM: It seems that Dick Powell especially, was a brilliant businessman, in combination with the fact that people liked him and liked working for him.

AR: Yes, that's absolutely right. He was much the most hands-on of the four. As a matter of fact, he's the only one during my period that I met. We had some meetings at his house.

DM: Did you ever do anything for Four Star Theater*, their anthology vehicle?*

AR: At any rate, that wasn't a very successful show. I think it lasted two seasons. Then I went on to another show.

[ ]

DM: Can we talk about Have Gun, Will Travel*? The Western was tremendously popular at the turn of the decade from the Fifties to the Sixties:* Wagon Train *[1957–65]* Gunsmoke *[1955–75],* Have Gun, Will Travel*. The top five shows could be Westerns in a season. What happened to the Western–the complete collapse of the genre in a matter of a couple of years?*

AR: I don't know that anyone knows the answer to that question. It became formulaic and old-fashioned. The desire for something new is always there. Westerns stopped being able to meet that requirement to seem new. No one ever came up with a new formula.

DM: Have Gun, Will Travel *was what they called an "adult" Western. You didn't depend on the shootouts.*

AR: Right. I think that was the closest that Westerns got to meeting the requirements of the Sixties.

DM: What about the theory that TV gobbles things up? The Western has been around as prose fiction, movie, radio for more than a hundred years. You go back to James Fenimore Cooper for Westerns in Western Massachusetts. Then TV picks it up, the adaptations begin, and in a matter of ten years it's gone. Does it have something to do with overexposure?

AR: I don't think so. The reason I don't think so is because there are enough examples of other genres that have survived, the obvious one being courtroom drama and medical shows. They keep going. Why Westerns? I really have to believe that the other types of show can somehow find new ways of presenting material, can update themselves. Because Westerns start out as being a costume drama, they are limited in how much updating they can do.

DM: Have Gun, Will Travel *seemed to me more like a kind of Samurai [tale].*

AR: Yes, it was Samurai and it was private eye. The wonderful thing about *Have Gun* was that, within the format, there was such flexibility. I'll give an example of what I mean. We had an episode where Alfred Nobel came to the Old West. The episode was about transporting a wagonload of TNT. It ended with an explosion of a wagonload of TNT. The way we set it up was from an extreme long shot, with the wagon that was exploding actually behind a hill, so you didn't see it. All you saw was a mushroom-shaped cloud rise up from this. That was the final image of the episode.[4]

DM: It all begins with gunpowder.

AR: Sure. We did that with great malice aforethought. It was a marvelous example of how, with that particular format of *Have Gun*, you could shoehorn an awful lot of contemporary ideas.

DM: 'Shoehorn' is right. With a twenty-three-minute form, to come up with a satisfying story is remarkable. Writing students look at it today and they can't believe that you can actually have a narrative and bring it to a resolution. They are thinking twenty-three minutes of montage for a video. But that [short] form was a form that you were conscious of creating? A kind of short story form?

AR: Oh, sure! You had to do it in three short acts. Actually, in television terms, in two acts. You started off and had a teaser and then you had a first act and then you had a commercial.

DM: The teaser was when we saw only the gun holster and the back-and-forth between Paladin [and the villain].
AR: There might be a little scene–the hiring scene, for example.
DM: Was it also very much a vehicle for Richard Boone? You were writing this for him, and he was carrying this?
AR: I didn't come on board until the third season, so he was already an icon and completely in control of the show. It was a good circumstance in some ways, because he was good at what he did. I never thought he was much of an actor, but he knew exactly what the requirements of that role were and how to make it successful, what would work and what wouldn't work. That was useful to me as a young writer coming on board.
DM: Did he have production credit?
AR: No.
DM: But was he a kind of de facto auteur?
AR: 'Auteur' in the sense that he was the dominant figure in the production. For example, we didn't go to him with story ideas or anything like that. He didn't know anything about what was being prepared in the way of a script until he got the draft of the script. But all other aspects of the production were pretty much dominated by him. I think my credit was either story editor or associate producer, but I was in charge of the scripts. Frank Pearson was the producer. At one point, we decided to go to Bend, Oregon. We prepared three or four scripts in advance, all of which had exteriors that could be shot at a location in Oregon. So we moved the company up there and Frank said to me, 'Let's split this up. We're going to be up there for three weeks (or whatever it was). You take the first period up there and I'll take the second period.' So I went up with the company and I found a very strange thing happening the first day of shooting. Everybody was–figuratively certainly, but sometimes literally–turning their back on me. I was unable to make contact with people. I didn't know what was going on. Finally, somebody that I was close to in the company said to me, 'Look, Al, this is a difficult situation. It's embarrassing, but what's happened is that Dick [Boone] thinks that Frank [Pearson] should be here, and not you. So he's let the word out that you're to be frozen out.' So that's the kind of control.
DM: You're smiling, now, but you couldn't have felt too good about this at the time.
AR: It was very difficult. It made doing my job almost impossible.
DM: You said you came on the second year [sic; fourth season], but do you know who designed or came up with the idea of the Have Gun, Will Travel *card? It's become so much a part of the language now.*
AR: Sam Rolf.
DM: Is he someone who's still around?
AR: No, Sam died. He was a good writer. That was his baby.
DM: The music was also interesting. It sort of walked a tightrope between melodrama–in the Greek sense of a drama with music–and being very avant-garde in some ways. Whenever the card would come out, da-da-da-dum. On the one hand, it was so corny; but, on the other hand, it was completely effective and it worked.
AR: In retrospect, it is corny, but at the time I think it was very effective.
DM: Tell me what you can about The Defenders*. To this day, I'm struck by the fact that (a) it was one of the most literate series that was ever on television, and (b) with ninety-nine cable channels, I can't find it in reruns.*
AR: I don't know how it would look, if it would look very dated. Some of the issues certainly are still with us. My own connection with *The Defenders* came about because it was produced by a man named Herb Brodkin at Plautus Productions, located here in New York.
DM: That was unusual at this point. Everything was going out West.
AR: Very unusual. I don't know if you've looked into Herb's background, but he came out of art direction. He started to produce a second series, called *The Nurses* [1962–5].
DM: [With] Zena Bethune. I remember that one.
AR: He sent a story editor to Los Angeles at the beginning of getting that show organized to line up some writers. I was a member of a group who attended a screening of the pilot. I went back home and created a story for it and sent it

to them and sold the story and wrote the script. They liked what I had done well enough to offer me a staff job. It was not because it involved me, but it was a brilliant idea that Herb had. He now was going to have two series in production – *The Defenders* and *The Nurses* – and wouldn't it be useful to have a staff writer on board? The idea of a staff writer at that time was totally revolutionary. All writing was done by freelance writers outside the shop. So he offered me a deal which was a guaranteed annual stipend and then, against that salary, I would get the top of the show for whatever I wrote. In other words, if I wrote an original, I would get the top of the show for an original teleplay. That would be set against my guarantee. When I exceeded my guarantee, I would continue to earn.

DM: In a sense, he was offering you the best of both worlds?

AR: Yes. If I did a revision on a screenplay, if he had hired a writer to come in and write the revision, he would pay me instead. In other words, it would be a bookkeeping entry for me that I had earned that rewrite fee on that episode, and it would carry against my guarantee.

DM: This was very creative financing.

AR: Tremendously creative! What it gave him was someone who was in the shop, in the office, and able to attend story conferences and go immediately from a story conference. . . If the writer was considered to have taken it as far as he could, they would turn to me and say, 'Okay, you execute the notes that were taken in that conference.' I'd go back to my office. Then any writing that came up around the production. If there was a call from the set saying, 'We've got an actor who can't say the line,' or 'This isn't working,' or whatever, I'd rush over to the set and hear what was going on and then go to a typewriter. . .

DM: In a sense, he's setting up a kind of classical movie studio?

AR: I don't know about a classical movie studio, but almost all episodic writing now is in-house. He was the originator of that and I may have been the first one to be hired to do that. I always thought that was a particular genius of Brodkin's. His other great quality. . . He was very tight-fisted, wouldn't spend money, except on writing. Somehow, he had an instinct that the key to success was in the script. If you had a good script, he could command good directors and actors. That proved to be true. People wanted to work for him. If you go back and look at some of those *Defenders*, it's amazing some of the actors who worked on it, who otherwise wouldn't work on serious television. They did it because of the quality of the show.

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DM: I don't know that much about Brodkin. Was he involved in television in the anthology period? When you said "art direction," did he come from movie work?

AR: I think through theatre and television.

DM: So he comes out of what I think of as the Fred Coe period.

AR: Maybe, yes.

DM: The other connection, of course, is Reginald Rose, who was one of the star writers of that period.

AR: Reggie wrote the pilot for *The Defenders*. For a couple of years, he was in charge of the scripts. That was the other thing that Herb did which was unusual in that kind of production. He put someone in charge of the scripts and paid them very well. He gave them a lot of autonomy. So he would say, 'You hire the writer, you work with the writer on developing the story. When you're all done and have a finished screenplay, bring it to me.' He really set up an independent story department.

DM: Was he the one who shepherded some of these controversial scripts through difficult waters?

AR: Absolutely! Another quality of Herb's was that he was a man of few words, but he was very tough. He wasn't somebody who got along with studio executives, with network executives, happily. So when they would come to him and say, 'Herb, you're going over the line here,' he would just draw into a kind of shell and say, 'No, this is what we're doing.' He wasn't somebody they could intimidate, as they did most people.

DM: Were there any examples of sponsors pulling out or any of that kind of thing? Surely

the abortion episode must have ruffled a few feathers. I don't think you could show that episode today.

AR: I don't know about sponsors, but I know that one place where he had problems with a sponsor–and I think this is famous–was when he did *Judgment at Nuremberg*.

DM: Yes. The sponsor was the American Association of Public Utilities and didn't want 'gas' mentioned in a negative context in Judgment at Nuremberg*.*

AR: Right.

DM: I'm talking about The Defenders*. You had blacklist, you had abortion, you had euthanasia – every possible red flag that there is.*

AR: By that time, sponsors weren't sponsors in the sense that we've been talking about earlier; they were just time-buyers.

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DM: I am just surprised that there aren't memories of some battles over these things. Maybe the reason the series is not shown today is that it's too bombastic. Can you imagine being picketed today for that abortion episode–completely sympathetic to the doctor?

AR: One recollection I have doesn't involve a sponsor, but it certainly involved a network. After *The Nurses*, Herb started a show called *For the People*, with Bill Shatner as a district attorney. I wrote a show which was a two-parter. . . . What it was about was the impact of perceived violence–televised, theatrical violence–on an impressionable young person. The point was that he had committed a violent crime and had he been induced, in effect, into doing that by his exposure to violence in the media? The network just was very unhappy. I remember, a whole delegation came over. They didn't send for us, because Herb's position vis-a-vis CBS was such that they came to him. So they sent these executives marching in for emphasis.

DM: Was the tenor of their message to refute what was being shown, or to tell you, 'Don't say this; it's damaging'?

AR: The tenor of their message was that the connection had never been established definitively: the tobacco company defense.

DM: If you look at a show like Law and Order *[1990–]or* The Defenders*, both of which are crime shows, [both are] particularly good shows, [and] both [were] made in New York. Even in a genre like the sitcom you get* The Cosby Show *[1984–92] which is pretty high quality. What is it about New York that seems to yield better work for TV?*

AR: I think that question begs a larger question, which is: Does it in fact yield higher quality? I think in sitcoms, whether they are shot in New York or L.A., it's immaterial, because I think they are all interior and it doesn't really matter.

DM: You think it's a debased form, not capable of much?

AR: No, I think there are very high quality sitcoms, but I just don't think that it matters where they are produced. I don't think there is any New York advantage. Years ago, I used to benefit from something known as 'the New York writer syndrome,' which was simply that, because a production had moved primarily or largely to L.A., and a few of us had remained here, we were objects of some admiration, I think, that maybe we didn't deserve. The idea being: what do they know that we don't know?

DM: It's like French film directors.

AR: So there was a kind of mystique that surrounded the few of us who remained and did our work out of New York. I say that somewhat flippantly, but I do think there were good writers also who lived in New York and didn't have to move because they were good enough that they didn't have to make the move. A lot of people had to make the move reluctantly. *The Defenders* benefited from its New York locale for the reasons that I was saying before; that is, it attracted agroup of actors–not necessarily the stars we were talking about, but the smaller-part players–who came out of theatrical experience and were working in the theater and were very solidly grounded actors.

DM: So there had been this pool of talent left behind–Broadway–and you could exploit that?

AR: Exactly. I think the result was that, at that time, there were better actors available to a television production here than probably were available out there on a long-term basis. If you picked any given episode of a series shot in L.A.,

certainly you could populate it with good actors. But if you had to do it week after week after week, the pool here, I think, probably was higher quality.

DM: To some degree, with Broadway compared to Hollywood, they're a little hungrier for the money.

AR: Yes, they were certainly available, happy to get a job. Now, when you move to the present day, when shows like *Law and Order* are here, I think what value accrues to them by being here is their exteriors. If they were all studio-produced, I don't think that it would matter where they were shot. But they use the city. *NYPD Blue* [ ]is shot largely in L.A., but it still does a lot of location work here and gets a lot of mileage out of what they shoot outside here.

DM: Abby Mann attempted to do the exteriors for Kojak *in Los Angeles. But by the second season, he had given up on that and come to New York. So New York is the star of some of these?*

AR: It's a star, certainly. It would be foolish, I think, to shoot a show here and not use what's available as exteriors.

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DM: Having worked in both series television and feature films, can you talk a little about the difference between the two jobs?

AR: I've done a lot of production executive work in television, where I've worked as a story editor and associate producer and producer, but just as a writer, the forms just have the obvious differences. There is no great mystery about it. With television writing, you have to be cognizant of a smaller budget and you have to focus perhaps more on character than on special effects and backgrounds and so on. So you develop your drama out of character more intensely in television than you do in motion pictures.

DM: So does TV share something with the theatre that makes them both different? You usually think of TV as closer to cinema, but in this way is TV closer to the theatre?

AR: Perhaps in this way only, but certainly television films are much more closely allied to theatrical films than they are to theatre.

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Notes

1. Johnson & Johnson also sponsored *The Adventures of Robin Hood* in the USA.
2. The first three seasons of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* each consisted of 39 episodes, which was the standard number of episodes per season at this time.
3. This episode was entitled 'Blacklist' and was initially broadcast on 18 January 1964. Jack Klugman and writer Ernest Kinoy both received Emmys for their work on this episode.
4. This episode was entitled 'Hobson's Choice'. It was scripted by Robert E. Thompson and initially broadcast on 7 April 1962.