

Oliver At Large

BLN OLIVER SAMUELS

Starring Oliver Samuels as himself, our first homegrown comedy has been a tremendous hit ... and Oliver, the island's first bona fide television star.

By GAYLE YOUNG

IT WAS only a few hours before the scheduled taping of the hit comedy 'Oliver At Large' and workmen were still painting the set, electricians were trying to light it and the star of the series was on the telephone begging a nurse's uniform from a friend.

Producer Calvin Butler, who had arrived at the JBC studio at 6 a.m., rubbed his eyes with his hand and said ruefully, "Sometimes I think -- this is how not to do a television show."

Mr. Butler is from Canada and Great Britain where television production is slick and well planned. But, he says, it can't compare with the sense of triumph he and his co-workers feel each week after turning out another episode of Jamaica's first homegrown television comedy using part-time actors, slapdash costumes and quickly assembled sets. "Sometimes it's quite mind-boggling," he said.

● Tapes smuggled out

'Oliver At Large,' starring Oliver Samuels as himself, will soon tape its 10th episode and has been a tremendous hit since it first aired late last year.

Tapes of the show have reportedly been smuggled out of the country to Jamaicans in the United States and Canada who are starved for a taste of home.

And Mr. Samuels, a well-known actor before the show, has become the island's first bona fide television star. Wherever he goes, Jamaicans approach him for his autograph, to shake his hand or slap him on the back.

"It's important to them because they can identify with the situations and they can identify with the people," Mr. Samuels said, slipping out of his trademark patois to speak standard English.

He said doing the show in Jamaica's native dialect gives Jamaicans a sense of pride, especially since all other shows on the JBC are in standard English.

"They understand it better," Mr. Samuels says of the dialect. "It's very colourful and it's the way people speak here."

● Butler's brain child

The idea for 'Oliver At Large' formed in Mr. Butler's brain well over a year ago, seemed at first so far-fetched as to be impossible.

Like most small, emerging countries, Jamaica did not appear to have the resources to fund its own locally produced situation comedy. Some television experts estimate it is 10 times more expensive to produce a show in Jamaica than it is to buy a canned television programme like *Dallas* from the United States.

Mr. Butler said he wanted to build the show around Mr. Samuels, a play director and actor in Kingston.

"Everywhere the man goes, people laugh," said Mr. Butler. "I thought, we've got to do something with this."

Mr. Butler said he did not want a 'standard' situation comedy with Mr. Samuels trapped in a house with a wife and kids.



SAMUELS. *Wherever he goes, he is approached for his autograph, to shake his hands or slap his back. Below, it's the usual high jinks.*



"We called it 'at large' because we wanted Oliver to pop up anywhere, from upper, upper St. Andrew to lower, lower ghetto," Mr. Butler said. "We wanted to expose him to an entire cross-section of Jamaican society because he's the type of person who can show up anywhere and fit in."

● Sponsors nervous

The JBC did not have the funds to produce the show and potential sponsors in the private sector were nervous about its estimated \$40,000 per episode price tag.

But, the JBC did agree to help the two men produce

several five-minute-long comic vignettes which they aired last year. The tremendously popular spots attracted two sponsors, Island Bottler's Ltd. and Kentucky Fried Chicken, and the show was off and running.

'Oliver At Large' is taped on Sundays in the JBC studio in Kingston.

"People think we film on location because our sets are so good," said Mr. Butler.

Don Bucknor, who coordinates the show's production each week, said the sets are put up late Saturday night and early Sunday morning and usually consist of furniture and props found around the JBC studio or borrowed from workers' homes.

"We did a Chinese restaurant which was very complex and an airport waiting room once," he said. "On location is just too expensive. We really don't have a budget at all."

Costumes are the casts' own clothing or what they can borrow from friends, such as the nurse's uniform procured by Mr. Samuels that day.

● Professionals

The cast are almost all professional actors, but they must rehearse in the evenings because they hold full-time jobs. Mr. Samuels is the only actor on the show who has been successful enough to make a full-time living in his chosen profession.

Starting early Sunday morning, Mr. Butler has the cast conduct their first rehearsal on the finished sets. He does a second run-through with the cameras turned on, but not recording on tape.

From their vantage point in a control room, Mr. Butler, Mr. Bucknor and their associates can determine the best camera angles and the best places on the set for the actors to move.

Finally, when all is ready, the studio becomes quiet and the cameras roll. When an actor or actress messes up their lines, the tape is rewound and the scene shot again.

On the set recently, made up to look like a hospital waiting room, Mr. Samuels and actress Rosemary Murray, who plays Oliver's sometimes girlfriend Marie, broke down in giggles over one of Mr. Samuels's lines.

"Sometimes it is hard because he is so funny," Miss Murray said later.

The episode, in which Oliver goes to the hospital and his friends eat his fruit basket while he is recuperating in his room, is based on Mr. Samuels's own experiences with a hernia operation.

His time in hospital halted production of the show after only four episodes and led to a number of rumours about the star's health.

"We wanted to make light of the situation," Mr. Butler said of the episode, the first to be shown when the show returned to Friday nights on the JBC in March.

Television experts said they believe the public would like to see more television shows produced in Jamaica and the Caribbean Broadcasting and Publishing Association recently issued a report calling for more local programming to offset shows from the United States that have nothing of regional culture, values or tradition.

But all agree it will be difficult to find the sponsors needed to fund other programmes like 'Oliver At Large' on an island of 2.3 million people.

"In a lot of ways, that we are even here at all is miraculous," Mr. Butler says of the show, which will run indefinitely. "I don't think there are many more like it in countries of our size."