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Home Video

Peter M. Nichols

■ PBS programs (and reasonable facsimiles) are inching into home libraries ■ A star's early effort.

A Tangled Tale

Viewers of "Marsalis on Music," the acclaimed children's series on Channel 13 each Monday night this month, will notice that, as with many programs shown on the Public Broadcasting Service, an 800 telephone number is posted for home-video orders. But beyond such offers lies a tangle of arrangements to sell PBS videos in stores and by mail order.

This year PBS Home Video has increased efforts to offer more titles. One catch, though, is that the service often doesn't own the rights for videos of programs shown on PBS. For example, the Wynton Marsalis series, four music-appreciation programs conceived by the trumpeter and composer and filmed at Tanglewood, is produced by Sony Classical Film and Video.

Sony, in fact, went its own way by releasing the series in video stores on Sept. 19, three weeks before the first installment was shown on television.

Many other public-television shows are owned by independent distributors, producers or individual PBS member stations like WGBH in

Boston. To be sure, PBS shares video proceeds from highly profitable properties like the two Ken Burns series "The Civil War" and "Baseball," both of which are controlled by others. To secure rights solely for itself, PBS has to compete with other distributors.

"We buy product the same way anybody else does," said Eric Sass, PBS's senior vice president for learning media. "It's very competitive bidding."

Sometimes PBS is unable to secure the rights but offers the videos anyway, by buying copies and selling them like any other mail order operator. In April, PBS Home Video issued the first in a series of monthly catalogues, listing 28 titles that are owned by the service and dozens of other programs that have appeared on PBS stations but whose video rights are owned by others. Two prominent examples include "The Jewel in the Crown" and "Upstairs/Downstairs," both owned by the cable channel A&E.

"In a way, we're recollecting our own programs," Mr. Sass said.

Some programs in the catalogue have no connection at all to PBS. "They're public television-like pro-



Frank Stewart

Wynton Marsalis, the host of "Marsalis on Music." The four-part series is currently on PBS, which is also selling cassettes of the program.

grams we thought people would like," Mr. Sass said. "The Trials of Life," produced by Time-Life, is one example ("It's a lot like our Nature series," he said), as is "Watergate," a three-cassette documentary owned by the Discovery Channel.

The catalogue is free and can be ordered by writing to PBS Home Video Catalogue, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, Va. 22314-1698.

A Star's Résumé Entry

Yes, that's Alicia Silverstone, the star of the summer hit "Clueless,"

peering somewhat smoldering from the box of "The Babysitter," which was released on Tuesday in video stores without having played so much as one day in movie theaters. Theaterless openings aren't supposed to happen to movies by hot young stars, but Ms. Silverstone made "The Babysitter" before making "Clueless."

The earlier film, a forlorn little tale in which the mere thought of her makes all the males around act a little crazy, received no interest from theatrical distributors.