B1

Hats Off to the Stars

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"A Chorus Line" rehearsing for the gala, top; honorees, above, clockwise from top left, Richard Rodgers in 1953, Fred Astaire in 1936, George Balanchine in 1978, Marian Anderson in 1951 and Arthur Rubinstein in 1959; below, Rubinstein at the White House with the Carters, and at the Kennedy Center. bottom foreground, honorees Astaire, Anderson and Rodgers.

B-7

'Honors': Superstars and Simple Fluffs

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HONORS, From B1

have been the Ed Sullivan Show all over again—sans Ed of course.

The ostensible point of the project is to pay tribute to five American superstars in the performing arts, all of whom were present last night: Marian Anderson, Fred Astaire, George Balanchine, Richard Rodgers and Arthur Rubinstein.

But the show, taped for airing, in edited form, Tuesday night on the CBS television network, really was sounding the opening trumpet in the Kennedy Center's bid to become a force in American commercial television and thus more of a national cultural center.

It was, said a thick printed program, "a production of Kennedy Center Television Productions Inc.," supervised by George Stevens Jr., on temporary leave as director of the American Film Institute, and Nick Vanoff of "Hollywood Palace" fame and "Hee Haw" notoriety.

Opening, like a baseball game, with the Star-Spangled Banner—a sure way to get the audience on its feet—the show did have its highlights. These included a show-stopping rendition of "I Cried for You" by 82-year-old blues dowager Alberta Hunter and a fairly exquisite pas de deux by Suzanne Farrell and Peter Martins of the New York City Ballet. But the evening was plagued with the haphazard jitters of something quickly assembled and under rehearsed.

There were a number of simple fluffs. A descending curtain nearly bopped Farrell on the head as she took her bow. Singer Florence Henderson barely defeated the orchestra in a battle of tempos; she crossed herself apologetically as she went off-stage. Mary Martin got the wrong cue cards and made a premature introduction, and Stevens himself trotted on stage to summon from the audience Sen. Charles Percy (R-Ill.) who apparently had dozed off and missed his cue. Percy's job was to introduce Hunter.

But beyond mere goofs, the program was conceptually disheveled — another smorgasbord approach to the arts that offered a little of everything and not enough of anything. Also one got the feeling that many of those in the black-tie audience only viewed the performance as a respite between parties, which both preceded and followed the show itself.

For the record, the loudest and longest of the standing ovations given all five honorees was probably the one accorded Astaire. The crowd broke into frequent applause at film clips of Astaire dancing alone, with Ginger Rogers — who stood up and took a bow in the audience — and with several mirror images of himself in the spectacular "Puttin' on the Ritz" number. As a tribute to Astaire, the cast of "A Chorus Line" performed its finale on stage. It was one of several moments in the evening that was genuinely spellbinding.

On television, the program is bound to move more quickly that it did last night — partly because a lot of it will end up on the legendary cutting-room floor — and TV viewers, unlike those in the audience last night, will not be subjected to blinding, murderous spotlights shining in their faces throughout most of the performance. When TV moves in, everything else must accommodate it, and oh, brother, does it ever. The event was manufactured by the Center with television specifically and prominently in mind.

For all that, the show is likely to land among the bottom 10 in Nielsen ratings for the week after its Tuesday night airing. Formidable as they are, names like that of Leonard Bernstein, Edward Villella, and even Aretha Franklin do not draw big crowds to the tube.

The show was placed by CBS in a nearly sacrificial position in the schedule—opposite the all-powerful Tuesday-night lineup of situation comedies on ABC. That means most viewers will not see Tony Bennett do an altogether superb performance of "I Wish I Were in Love Again," hear Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) pronounce Jose Ferrer's first name with a hard "J," hear Art Buchwald proclaim that "On this very site, just a few years ago, there were buffalo," or get the benefit of Bernstein's grandiloquence.

Bernstein reviewed the program even as it began by hailing it from the stage as "a glorious beginning for this new form of national tribute." Even allowing for variations in the eyes of beholders, "glorious" is clearly too strong a term.