

WNET Gets 'Vanessa,' 1958 Pulitzer Prize Opera

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

VANESSA" comes to television this evening, at 8:30 on Channel 13, and the 1958 Pulitzer Prize opera takes hauntingly well to the small screen. Composed by Samuel Barber to a text by Gian Carlo Menotti, the story of two women trapped in a strange love triangle fits neatly into television's snug frame and soap-opera traditions.

The year is 1905, and Vanessa has been waiting 20 years for her lover to return to her Scandinavian country castle. Erika, her young niece, and Vanessa's stern, forbidding mother have become part of the vigil. All of the mirrors have been carefully covered in the somber house.

Finally, Anatol, a handsome young man, arrives, but Vanessa is stunned to discover he is the son of her lover. He briefly courts Erika, who falls in love with him, but then switches his attentions to Vanessa. The youth and older woman are married, and Erika is left to take up the role of endless waiting. The covers are put back on the mirrors as the newlyweds depart.

This production, directed for the stage by Mr. Menotti, was taped last summer at the Spoleto Festival U.S.A. in Charleston, S.C. The conductor was Christopher Keene. The director for television is Kirk Browning.

"Vanessa" is hardly "grand opera," but it has the stature of modern tragedy, somewhat in the manner of Eugene O'Neill or, perhaps more accurately, August Strindberg. And that stature is realized powerfully in this version.

The casting is exceptionally good. Johanna Meier as Vanessa, Katherine Ciesinski as Erika and Henry Price as Anatol are musically superb and dramatically convincing. They are supported solidly by Alice Garrot, Irwin Densen and William Bender in some smaller roles. Outstanding credit must also go to Pasquale Grossi, designer of the sets and costumes.

Mr. Barber's score has survived its first couple of decades with vigor. Ranging from lovely melodies ("Must the Winter Come So Soon") to charming dances ("Under the Willow Tree") to profoundly moving ensembles (the final scenes), the music is alive and well and should be living in repertories in years to come.

Over on UHF television, specifically WNYC/Channel 31, an energetic toiler in penniless formats has now come up with a 40-minute adaptation of "Scenes From American Life," a play by A.R. Gurney Jr. The toiler in question is Danny O'Neil, who co-directed the production with Gary Boyarsky. The re-

sult can be seen tonight and on the next four nights at 10 P.M.

Anyone preoccupied with "production values" can forget about "Scenes From American Life." The total budget, with the actors donating their services, couldn't have been more than a few hundred dollars. The style, therefore, is by necessity early Thornton Wilder — bare stages, no costumes and the sort of thing that was encountered frequently Off Off Broadway in the 60's.

Mr. Gurney's play was produced at Lincoln Center in 1971. It is set in Buffalo, and goes from the Depression of the 30's to a rather sweet and mindless future somewhere around 1980. Children are born, maids and parents have affairs, husbands and wives bicker and get divorced, children grow up to choose their own inadequate mates.

When Mr. Gurney isn't being patronizing or indulgent about his characters, which isn't too often, he's remarkably on target about minor-city types. His use of language runs quite true. And, gradually, the small production weaves a surprisingly strong spell. The New York actors, all of them impressive, are Carolyn Cope, Patricia Eglinger, David Little, Dana Patton, Ralph Redpath and Otis Stewart.

Mr. O'Neil calls this the "inaugural presentation" of WNYC-TV Theater. For the budget-conscious moment, no other presentations are scheduled. The intentions, however, are admirable.