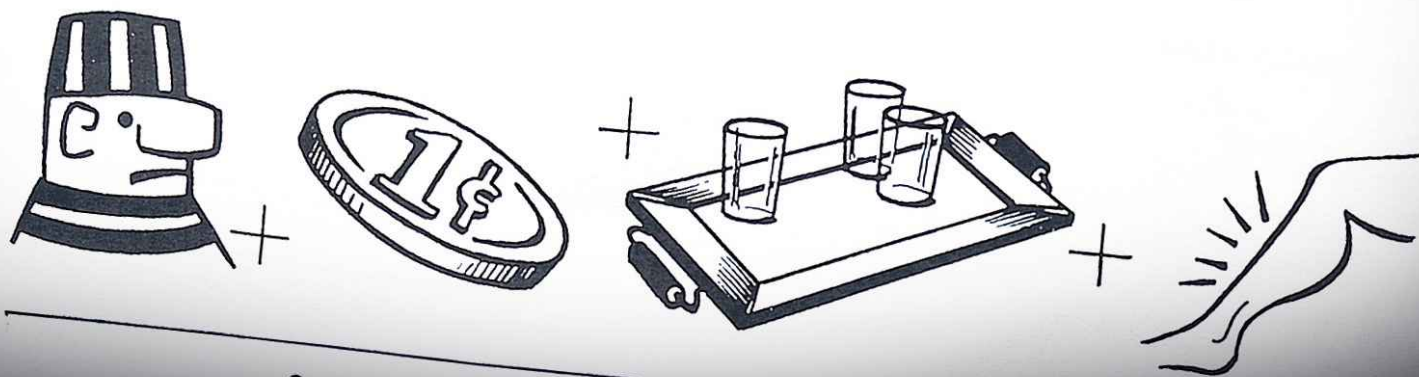


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MOVIES

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B8



The mind behind 'Concentration'

HOW NORM BLUMENTHAL'S SIGNATURE PICTURE PUZZLES MADE HIM A TV PIONEER

B4

LIVE FROM DIX HILLS Q&A with Joe Piscopo before tonight's show newsday.com/entertainment

A man of great
'Concentration,'
daytime TV pioneer
Norm Blumenthal is
never at a loss for words

HE'S STILL GOT GAME

BY DANIEL BUBBEO
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Norm Blumenthal has never been at a loss for words — or ideas for drawing them. From 1958 to 1973, he created more than 7,000 picture puzzles for TV's popular daytime game show "Concentration" and also was the show's producer.

In the nearly four decades that Blumenthal worked in television, he always gave it his all. And in the case of "Concentration," he gave it his "awl."

"Someone once wrote an article and said, 'People in the United States do not know what an awl is unless they watch 'Concentration,'" says Blumenthal, 87, of West Hempstead.

For the record, an awl is a pointed tool for marking surfaces or piercing small holes. It was also a fixture in many of the picture puzzles, or rebuses, that Blumenthal designed during the original run of "Concentration" as a symbol for the word "all." In the game, contestants called two numbers from 1 to 30 in the hopes of finding matching prizes. If they matched, the numbers would revolve to reveal pieces of a rebus. Contestants who solved the puzzle could win prizes such as wall-to-wall carpeting and overseas vacations.

"Many game shows were based on children's games," he says. "'Concentration' was also a game where children would turn 52 cards face down and try to make matches."

Blumenthal usually drew an 8-by-10-inch sketch that phonetically represented a phrase like "To be or not to be" on a grid that mimicked the TV show's oversized puzzle board. "I did it so that if you turned one square, it didn't give you the [whole] puzzle. That square might have a piece of an apple, for example."

He ruled the control room

Unlike most of today's programming, "Concentration" was done live, and Blumenthal chronicles that "anything that can happen, will happen" environment in his book "When Games Ruled Daytime TV" (BearManor Media).

As the producer, Blumenthal ruled the control room, over-



Blumenthal, center, with "Concentration" host Hugh Downs, left, and announcer Bob Clayton in 1968

seeing the cameramen and the rest of the technical crew, to make the shows run smoothly. Not that they always did. "One of our contestants was a salesman from some other state who was with a very attractive woman sitting in the audience," he recalls. "He won a mink coat, and I had an idea that we should bring his wife up and have her model the coat. It turned out she wasn't his wife. He probably ended up

with a divorce."

On another show, host Hugh Downs went to shake hands with a new contestant who immediately fainted. "Luckily, Hugh Downs didn't let her hit the floor," says Blumenthal. "He helped her into the seat, and I went to a commercial."

One day, Downs, who enjoyed practical jokes, blurted out his producer's phone number and invited everyone to the Blumenthal home for a

party. "I had to change my number," he says.

One incident that did hit close to home occurred when a former contestant spotted Blumenthal on line at a neighborhood market. "She said that she had won a wardrobe and the sizes were all wrong. I said to her, 'I'm in the supermarket now, can you call me at my office?' and she said, 'No, I want everyone to know how dishonest you are.' I never

went back to that supermarket because I was afraid I'd meet her again," he says.

Blumenthal had more pleasant encounters with the many famous names he met during his TV days, such as Betty White and Johnny Carson, who played "Concentration" in celebrity charity matches.

"Norm's a good guy," says baseball legend and TV host Joe Garagiola, now of Scottsdale, Ariz., who made guest appearances on "Concentration." "He was always friendly, always looking for a laugh. He wasn't about making a fuss. He always made you feel right at home, and you had a good time."

Maybe that's because Blumenthal was never star-struck. His late wife, Sylvia, would tell people, "He just met James Stewart today, and he couldn't care less," Blumenthal recalls. "Nobody impressed me. I would say, 'They have to take the garbage out like everyone else.'"

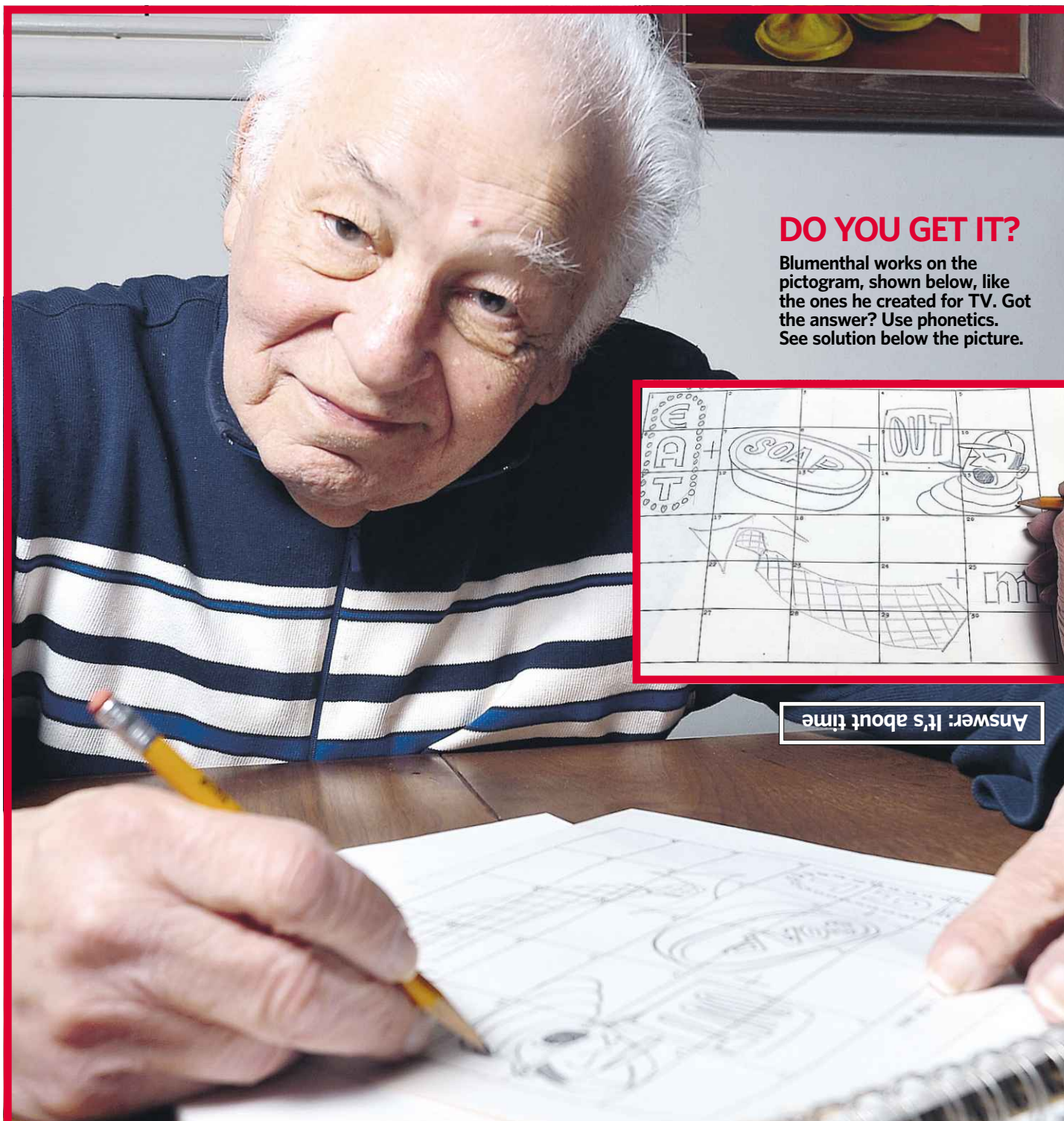
What did impress Blumenthal from an early age was the idea that you could have fun with words. In fact, the seed for "Concentration" was planted in Blumenthal's mind when he was 14. At the time, there was a radio game show hosted by sportscaster Bill Slater in which contestants drew a cartoon based on a familiar expression, and then a celebrity had to guess the saying.

"I thought his name, Bill Slater, was a puzzle," Blumenthal says. "So I drew a cartoon with a woman's body and a guy with a gun like he just shot her, and the caption was 'William, what did you do?' And the puzzle was 'Bill slayed her.'"

Looking for an art job

Blumenthal was 8 when his father died in 1934. As a student at the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan, Blumenthal dreamed of being in show business. (Alumni of the school include actors Liza Minnelli and Jennifer Aniston.) After graduating, he knew he had to help support his mother, so Blumenthal began looking for an art job and ended up at Esquire magazine. Within a few years, he was assistant art director. It was there that he began drawing rebuses.

The thought of a show-biz career had never left him. Those feelings escalated over lunch with someone from Barry and Enright Productions, which produced the popular



DO YOU GET IT?

Blumenthal works on the pictogram, shown below, like the ones he created for TV. Got the answer? Use phonetics. See solution below the picture.

I had to give orders to a host through a third person.”

Ultimately, through the friend who helped him get the “Wonderama” job, Blumenthal was hired as a producer for a new cable channel, American Movie Classics (AMC), which was going to be devoted to showing films from Hollywood’s golden age. “For two years, they couldn’t get that channel ready. I was the one who brought in an emcee and created the whole idea of the

living room set with a host giving you facts about the movies,” he says. He stayed there six years.

Since then, Blumenthal has been working on books and is in the process of finding a publisher for his latest. “The United States of Amazement” is a look at all 50 states, complete with unusual facts about each one. (Who knew Maryland has Chessie, Chesapeake Bay’s

answer to the Loch Ness Monster?). The book is illustrated with Blumenthal’s signature drawings.

There’s also a documentary about him that was made by his older son, Howard, a producer for the Public Broadcasting System in Philadelphia, who knew he wanted to follow his dad’s career path when he accompanied him to NBC. “I was 5, and I thought, ‘I’m doing this,’” he says. “We’d wander around from one studio to another. So we’d watch Carson rehearse, or see the news or a soap opera and another game show or variety show.”

The documentary, which Howard is hoping will air on PBS, contains clips from his father’s television shows, his artwork and plenty of face time for Blumenthal. “He was spectacular, and the interviews were coherent and interesting,” says Howard. “When the lights go on, he knows what to do.”

But then, he always knew what he was doing.

“I wasn’t out to teach anybody anything,” Blumenthal says about his “Concentration” puzzles. “My feeling was, I’m taking liberties with the English language, I’m mutilating it and making it something it never was, like using a bottle of ink for the suffix ING,” he says. “I just wanted people to laugh.”

quiz show “Twenty-One” and the interactive children’s show “Winky Dink and You” (using special crayons and a plastic vinyl sheet placed on the TV, kids were instructed to draw a picture that fit the scene). “He told me, ‘We’re moving to two days a week, and we’re looking for another artist.’ And that was it,” Blumenthal says.

The job lasted for about a year and a half, until CBS decided to cut “Winky Dink” back to once a week. When his bosses heard that Esquire wanted him back, they created a new position for him that lasted three months: contest coordinator for “Winky Dink.”

He stayed, and they kept finding new jobs for him: office art director (“I redesigned the hallway,” he says) and then purchasing agent. “I got a phone call from one of the girls in the office that there’s no more tampons in the ladies’ room,” he says. “That’s when I ran to my boss, Dan Enright, and said, ‘I’m finished.’”

Better than ‘Lucy’

Sensing Blumenthal’s frustration, Enright made him production coordinator of all the company’s shows, until the idea for “Concentration” came up. The show was one of

NBC’s biggest daytime hits (“We even beat reruns of ‘Lucy,’” Blumenthal says). It was still doing well when the show was canceled in 1973.

During the entire run of “Concentration,” Blumenthal lived in the West Hempstead home where he still resides, and even turned down the chance to produce the Alex Trebek version of “Jeopardy!” on the West Coast. “I told them I’m not leaving New York. My family’s here, my friends,” he says.

One of Blumenthal’s favorite post-“Concentration” gigs was producing game shows for companies like Chrysler and

Avon, as a management teaching tool. “It was just like a game show but not with a camera,” he says. “We built a set and used regular employees as contestants.”

Far less harmonious after leaving “Concentration” was the year he spent producing the local children’s show “Wonderama.” Up to that point, host Bob McAllister had been producing and he and Blumenthal were not a wonderful match. “It’s a bad thing for a star to be the producer because no one could tell him what he’s doing wrong,” Blumenthal opined. “It was the only time

Answer: It's about time