

The Big Show
John Nicholson

The Big Show was an NBC variety program that ran from November 5, 1950, to April 20, 1952. It consisted of 57 episodes, spread across two seasons. Season one consisted of 27 episodes, and season two was 30 episodes. Each episode lasted 90-minutes on Sunday night from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. for the first season. The second season was broadcast from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m., Eastern time.

Tallulah Bankhead was the mistress of ceremonies. Guests included Fred Allen, Jimmy Durante, Portland Hoffa, Ethel Merman, Danny Thomas, Meredith Wilson, and dozens of other high-profile stars of radio and motion pictures.

NBC seemed to believe that the more money invested in each episode, the bigger the impact on its listeners. \$100,000 or more could be budgeted for each episode. Adjusting the cost to account for inflation, that would mean that each episode would cost about \$1 million in today's currency.

The show's success, in addition to the guest stars each week, was partially attributed to Bankhead's ability to ad-lib. Also, one of the writers was Goodman Ace, considered by some to be one of the funniest writers in radio. He was also responsible for creating *Easy Aces*. In her memoirs, Bankhead stated that she took the show because she needed the money. She was afraid she would be relegated to a standard mistress of ceremonies role, simply introducing each guest before they performed. However, her humor and ease of interacting with her guests generated rave reviews from the critics.

Premiering at a time when radio was on the wane, and television was just coming into its own, *The Big Show* was an attempt to keep the audience away from TV and glued to their radio. There was another reason, however, that NBC decided to air such a high-profile show with its high-budget episodes. That reason was revenge. CBS head William S. Paley snagged some of NBC's biggest names in a broadcast milestone known as the "talent raid." Paley stole Amos and Andy, Jack Benny, Bing Crosby, Edgar Bergen, Red Skelton, and even Ozzie and Harriet's show. Paley accomplish this feat by paying personal attention to the talent at NBC. David Sarnoff, the head of NBC, generally did not mingle with the talent, so Paley's interest in personal attention was probably seen as something to which the actors would respond positively.

The Big Show was scheduled on Sunday nights hoping to lure listeners away from the number one CBS shows; Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, and Amos and Andy. Overall, however, they were totally unsuccessful. In its two seasons *The Big Show* never scored in the top 20 radio shows. In fact, it finished in last place in its 90-minute time period.

Since today you do not have to choose between the CBS shows and the NBC shows, you should find it very entertaining to listen to *The Big Show*. Each show can be an experience of listening pleasure.

The definitive work on this series was written by Martin Grams, Jr. and published in 2019. His thorough investigation of *The Big Show* can be found at Amazon and his website www.martingrams.biz.