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William Alexander has become a smash television hit teaching people how to use palette and canvas

BILL ALEXANDER GAINED FAME ON KOCE

'HAPPY PAINTER'S' MAGIC PERSONALITY

By DENNIS McLELLAN,
Times Staff Writer

He's stocky, with a barrel chest and big, beefy hands, and he speaks with a German accent, an audible reminder of his East Prussian homeland where he was born during World War I.

At 67, William Alexander hardly fits the stereotype of a successful television celebrity.

But as the star of his own Emmy award-winning PBS television series, "Magic of Oil Painting," Alexander bears all the earmarks of celebrity status. Consider:

—His series, produced by KOCE Channel 50 in Huntington Beach, first aired in six installments on

KOCE in 1974 but is now carried by 120 PBS stations around the country, including KCET Channel 28. The show is one of the most successful PBS programs in generating viewer support during pledge periods.

—It takes five KOCE staff members, working out of a trailer dubbed "Alexanderland," to handle the more than 2,000 letters a week generated by Alexander. Mail ranges from "love letters to Bill" to requests for his three instructional books, which have sold more than 300,000 copies.

—Last May more than 1,000 people turned out each day to see Alexander during a series of personal appearances at a Chicago shop-

ping mall. So intent were some fans to hug or touch the painter that six policemen had to escort him to the stage.

—In response to viewer requests for more information about Alexander's personal life, KOCE is preparing not only an hourlong TV special but also a book called—what else?—"The Bill Alexander Story."

Not bad for someone who 10 years ago was doing painting demonstrations in Los Angeles area shopping centers and living under the poverty level.

"I was really a poor son of a gun in Los Angeles—now it's just absolutely going crazy," says Alexander, a Canadian citizen who lives in the

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PAINTER: ALEXANDER'S RISE TO FAME

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dream home he built a few years ago in Powell River, British Columbia.

"Isn't it funny—through the TV series all of a sudden I became something? We sit here at the breakfast table and thank God for all the things we have now. It's so wonderful!"

The unexpected success of a man who defies the stereotype of the typical TV celebrity is not lost on KOCE station manager Don Gerdts.

"There's nothing slick about him, but there is a charisma there," Gerdts acknowledges. "Early on, when somebody would ask me who Bill Alexander is, I would say he's the Julia Child of oil painting. If you looked at her and listened to her you'd say nobody would ever put her on television. But she has that same irrepressible quality."

Gerdts said many first-time viewers initially are put off by Alexander's German accent and sometimes awkward—for television—manner.

"But the minute he picks up a brush and starts to paint he becomes very dynamic," Gerdts said. "He pulls you in and one forgives any moment of awkwardness. That's when the magic starts to happen."

Indeed, the magic of "Magic of Oil Painting" is not just what Alexander does with a blank canvas—in demonstrating his easy-to-learn "wet-on-wet" painting technique he amazingly completes a detailed landscape in only 30 minutes.

The real magic lies in the effect Alexander's ebullient personality has on viewers, who have dubbed him "The Happy Painter." It's a contagious *joie de vivre* combined with an inspirational Think Big attitude that comes across while he's painting.

"He's Norman Vincent Peale with a paintbrush," said Gerdts. "What he's doing is painting, but he's selling a philosophy of life, and his philosophy is: don't be afraid to try new and different things. He inspires that drive to do it. That's what his mystique is."

Gerdts said that after one of Alexander's personal appearances last year, a woman on crutches and her husband approached the artist. With tears in his eyes, the husband hugged Alexander and said, "Bill, you

saved my wife's life. She was dying in the hospital and saw you on TV and said, 'I want to learn to paint.'

"There are hundreds of these stories," Gerdts said.

In 1973 KOCE, on the air just a year, had just finished an art instruction series when Gerdts first heard about this "fast oil painter" named Bill Alexander. Gerdts arranged a meeting and, impressed with what Alexander could accomplish in 30 minutes, suggested they do a pilot for a series demonstrating Alexander's painting technique.

The pilot aired in late 1973 with a tag at the end asking viewers to call or write to the station if they wanted to see more of William Alexander.

Gerdts admitted that station officials weren't sure they really wanted to see the results. At that time, KOCE offered only six hours of daily programming and audience response, at best, had been limited.

"But within the next week we received more than 200 phone calls and 150 letters saying they want to see more of this guy," Gerdts recalled. "That was more mail and phone calls than we had gotten totally since we went on the air."

In 1974 KOCE produced six more 30-minute programs, the first of which Channel 50 aired in March, 1974. Like any young TV station, Gerdts said, KOCE aspired to have a show that other stations would air, and so it began offering the Alexander series to PBS program directors around the country.

It was, admits Gerdts, a hard sell.

"Some would look at the first few minutes and say, 'Ah, you're kidding—you don't expect us to run that.'"

The response of WTTW, the powerhouse PBS station in Chicago, was typical: In 1980 Richard Bowman, vice president for broadcasting, watched the first few minutes of "Magic of Oil Painting" but passed on airing it because, he said, its lack of production values made it resemble an early '50s how-to instructional show.

But Bowman finally was convinced to take a second look. And, thinking, "Well, maybe there's something here," he decided to give the show a try—at 4 on a Saturday afternoon.

"I'm quick to say I missed on that one," Bowman said.

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"It was an instantaneous success in the ratings, it got a lot of mail and people just fell in love with his (Alexander's) personality. We have an enormous audience here in Chicago for the show."

The personality of a show's host, Bowman said, is the key to any how-to program's success. And, he observed, personality is the "secret" to Bill Alexander, who regularly draws an estimated quarter-million WTTW viewers.

"He's fun to watch; he's a character," said Bowman, who has become one of the show's biggest boosters. "His personality works so well—he seems like the kind of guy you'd invite to a cocktail party."

In 1980, "Magic of Oil Painting" won an Emmy for best instructional series. The latest installment, taped last fall, was underwritten by Aaron Brothers Art Marts, which promotes the series through displays in its stores. In February, Alexander will be in Southern California to do personal appearances for the store chain.

Over the years KOCE has produced numerous nationally syndicated educational telecourse series, documentaries and musical specials, but Gerdts said nothing has equaled the success of the "Magic of Oil Painting."

"Without a question, the 'Magic of Oil Painting' has had the greatest impact of anything we have done," Gerdts said. "It's had the greatest impact on its national carriage, in consistent repeat plays of the material, in station and viewer requests for new series and, finally and overwhelmingly, in audience mail.

"The letters that come in are so full of love. Again and again it's, 'You have given me a reason for living.' "

Because so many viewers also want to know more

about Alexander—they write in requesting snapshots of his house, his dog Brandy and even his boat because he talks about fishing a lot—KOCE is producing the one-hour special and writing a book.

"The Bill Alexander Story" is indeed quite a story, one that includes his being wounded on the Russian front while he was a soldier in the German Army during World War II and later being taken by the Americans as a prisoner of war.

It was while he was a prisoner that Alexander began painting portraits from snapshots of the American Army officers' wives and girlfriends. He was so good at it and so ingratiated himself to the officers that they built him a studio where he painted full time. After the war he ran a printing press for the occupation forces and in 1951, with the help of his American friends, he moved to Canada, where for years he struggled to earn a living as a painter.

The KOCE special, which will concentrate heavily on Alexander now living the good life in Powell River, could be used by stations during their pledge periods, Gerdts suggested.

An appearance by the Happy Painter—live or otherwise—during pledge periods has benefited both KOCE and other PBS stations.

Alexander once made a live pledge night appearance on the Fresno PBS station, Gerdts recalled, and the station wound up raffling off his brush and palette. In fact, the fishing hat he was wearing generated a \$100 pledge.

"We have received quite a large number of pledges over the years with references to the Bill Alexander show," Gerdts said. "He has been very good for us as a station and we've been very good for him.

"Bill has a good phrase: 'You know, everyone should make a happy buck.' "