

Drama on Public Access TV

How a local-community project burgeoned into a regional and national venture.

By Shirley Ann Bruno and Norman Hall

“The New Playwrights project offers the viewer the unique opportunity to witness the budding talents of a young Neil Simon or a Tennessee Williams, the creative geniuses of tomorrow’s theater, in their infancy.”

This is a typical viewer response to an extraordinary project conducted by a public-access TV corporation in a suburban community adjoining metropolitan New York City. Established in the mid-80s as an organization serving 15 incorporated Long Island villages, the Public Access TV Corporation had as its mission “to promote and produce programming of an educational, scientific, literary, cultural or civic nature for cablecast.” In 1995 PATV launched the New Playwrights project, which has been a huge success with a growing ripple effect.

The driving forces behind the New Playwrights project are Shirley Ann Bruno, executive director of the Public Access TV Corporation, who has taught television production and communications courses in high school and college; and Norman Hall, an acclaimed 50-year veteran theater and daytime television director who has directed all the New Playwrights productions for the past 10 years. The winner of an Emmy® Award for One Life to Live, Mr. Hall is president of the board of directors of the Public Access TV Corporation.

In their own words, Ms. Bruno and Mr. Hall describe the saga of this venture. It is quite a story! —Ed.

Norman Hall: When I was asked to serve on the Board of Directors of Public Access Television in the Great Neck/North Shore area, I enthusiastically agreed. I met with the Executive Director, Shirley Bruno, who knew that I had been a television director and she suggested that I think about creating programs, with a limited budget, for broadcast on our Public Access Channel. The studio was conveniently located across the

street from the PATV office. It was a box-like room about 15 by 20 feet with two tracks 15 feet off the deck, each allowing for both a gray and black velour drape. There were about eight to ten lighting and scenery pipes. With three cameras and some modular units in the room it was a tight fit. The control room was narrow, accommodating four seats and one standing position for the audio/tape technician in the same open control



Nikki Lauren (left) and Charles F. Wagner IV during the production
 "Seems Like Old Times" by Lucile Lichtblau.

room. The audio problems would be difficult, but that was the situation.

I suggested a number of program ideas. *New Playwrights* became our first project. We decided to advertise throughout the country for two- or three-character short plays running ten to twelve minutes that could be staged in one set. We planned a competition, which would choose two plays for production each year and have a host interview the competition winners when the play was videotaped and edited. The prize for the winners would be a production of the play, a copy of the tape and a year's subscription to our membership list. We invited Shirley Romaine to join our *New Playwrights* committee to act as our host and interviewer. Ms. Romaine is an actress who has appeared extensively on and off Broadway. The program was

to be a half hour long. Shirley Romaine, George Gimpel, a former Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Long Island Stage, Shirley Bruno and I would act as the panel of judges to choose the contest winners. We advertised the competition in our local papers and in mailings and flyers in our community. We set a deadline and the first year we received 13 entries.

Shirley Ann Bruno: In our initial discussion with our judging panel, we set up the parameters for selection of our competition winners. We discussed the project envisioning the dramatization of the play for television and what the author intended when creating a one-act play for the stage. In essence we were bringing "theater to the local TV audience." We felt that with the use of multiple television cameras and editing

techniques, we could bring an additional level to each of these productions.

NH: Since this was the first season the plays were produced as staged readings with full-blown productions planned for the future, I planned to use actors with whom I had worked before. Also, since I was on the teaching staff at the Weist/Barron School of Television and Film in New York City I had access to free rehearsal space. Marcelo Mendez, our PATV technical coordinator, would be my technical director when we did a three-camera shoot and act as the camera operator if the approach was to be single camera film style. Marcelo would also be the editor for the productions. In the other technical areas we would use volunteers and interns. The North Shore Community Arts Council provided a small grant to help with very basic productions needs.

Our first play was “Sense and Censorability,” by John Haney, a Queens college professor and Board member of Queens Public Access

Television. The subject was the censorship of an art show in the Manhasset Library. We set up music stands as lecterns for the cast and a position for a reader, to describe the set and stage directions. The reader was seated in a high director’s chair in the downstage right area.

We used three cameras, planned a “line cut” and approached the production as “live on tape.” If we needed to correct anything we planned to shoot inserts and pick-ups after the taping. The play ran about twelve minutes. Scenically, behind the cast at the music stands, there was a gray velour drape. Entrances and exits were made from the upstage left area.

The second and third plays, “Second Chance” by Mark Feldman, about a man wanting to change a part of his life; and “I Need a Job So Shoot Me,” by Spencer Moser, about the difficulties in finding a job, were modified staged readings in front of the gray velour drape. For these plays we eliminated the music stands and set up furniture for the actors to work in. The plays were again short and by the time we completed rehearsal in NYC and got out to the studio all the actors knew their lines but used the scripts in hand only as a prop. We continued to use a reader and again we planned to do the plays as “live on tape” productions with three cameras. The audio set-ups combined a hand-held boom mike and cartoid mikes placed on furniture wherever convenient. We shot each of the three shows in one day. As before, we taped the introductions and interviews on a different day.

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SB: By 1999, we began to advertise our *New Playwrights* competition in the Dramatist Guild Resource Directory and received 63 submissions from over 45 writers. Our authors were enthusiastic about the way their theatrical pieces were produced for television. Our viewers reacted positively, too, saying that they didn’t need to travel to the city to see theater, because PATV was bringing theater to them at home. Furthermore, they hadn’t seen anything like this on broadcast TV.

NH: In 2000 “The Band Takes a Short Break,” by Albert Meglin, was our first

full-scale production. The story was about a young couple involved in an adulterous affair that the young man was trying to break off. Since we could not afford a set designer, or personnel to handle hard walls that would need building, I planned to design the productions myself using set pieces, furniture and occasional pieces that could easily be built, all to be placed in front of the cyc that encircled the studio. We created a corner of a restaurant for the two-character play and again approached the production as “live on tape” with a three-camera set up with pick ups and inserts where needed. Since the script called for the actors to dance, we set up a circular area of black velour as a dance floor and on a separate day shot the dancing sequences.

The audio for the dancing sequences was a hand held boom mike and for the table scenes the actors wore lavalier mikes in addition to a hidden mike on the table. We edited in the dancing sequences with music and sound effects at a later date. Although we videotaped the production in color, we edited it in black and white. This effect was startling and enhanced the mood of the play.

“Another Story,” by Lucile Lichtblau, focused on a young couple walking down a street on their way to temple arguing about the wife’s appearance. We “walked” the play at a small strip mall on a day that all the stores were closed. Using one hand held camera and one hand held boom mike, covered with a wind protector, we ran and shot the play as we walked down the path of store windows. No matter how many different ways we tried it, it didn’t work.

I asked the playwright if we could re-locate the setting. We discussed possibilities and decided that we could move the play indoors to the couple’s

bedroom by “backing up time” as if they were getting ready to go out. Minimal dialogue changes were made but we did save the final two minutes of the play for a location outside the couple’s house and the street on the way to temple.

The setting became the couple’s bedroom as they were getting ready to go out. Still short on funds for the project, we used the same French door unit that was used in the previous play, with added drapes, as a corner of the bedroom. We placed a vanity table downstage with small stuffed chairs on either side of the set and made it look like a bedroom.

The dialogue described characters and settings in various locations so we decided to shoot these characters as they were talked about. We shot these “silent scenes” in the studio. In addition we shot one exterior location in front of the director’s house and another interior at the home of one of the actors in the Great Neck area. These scenes were videotaped silently and played back over the dialogue as scripted. There was also a reference to a street urchin begging for coins in Rome, so we shot a young boy in front of a blue background and edited in a picture postcard of the Coliseum in Rome as the background. The two-character play became a seven-character play.

“Exit the Maven from Mott Haven,” by Milton Polsky, spotlighted an old man moving to a retirement home, after a lifetime in an apartment across the street from the Yankee Stadium. Reluctant to go, the old man reminisces longingly with his nephew, who is helping with the move, about the Yankee games they watched. The set was a table, a chair, and a standing lamp against a totally enclosed black velour drape except for a window that we built to hang on invisible wire a distance from the main action. We

planned a one camera shoot. We acquired Yankee ballgame footage and used a blue screen technique to edit in footage behind the old man of games with DiMaggio, Mantle, Berra, Ford, Martin and others. We occasionally went to the footage full screen. Marcelo Mendez, our technical coordinator, shot this production film-style in two days using a Steadicam and body mics. In editing, we added crowd sounds and the music of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame".

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"Break a Leg," by Lucile Lichtblau, was a backstage dressing room story of two Shakespearean actors about to go on as Romeo and Juliet, a delightful romp back to the 17th century. We went to the Theatre Development Fund costume collection in NYC to choose appropriate costumes for our three actors. A member of the Great Neck Fire Department volunteered to build two large clothes racks which we dressed with extra costumes, hats and props. From pipes above we hung thick coils of scenery rope. I must confess the idea for the "backstage look" came from the Laurence Olivier movie "Henry V."

At nearby Hofstra University there is a replica of the Shakespearean Globe Theater that would be our "location shot". We obtained permission to videotape the miniature model for use over opening and closing credits. With crowd sounds, applause, and 17th century music it worked wonderfully.

SB: Our productions began to get positive feedback from other access organizations and the New York University Tisch School of the Arts. Professor George Stoney showcases our programs as he lectures to community groups nationwide. "*New Playwrights* is an example of public access television at its best," he says. "Professionals from the community are given a chance to experiment in ways the commercial theater never affords them and do it with class.

I am repeatedly amazed when I see the work of PATV's *New Playwrights*. They maintain thoroughly professional standards while working in limited space and with limited technical support. Here is proof positive that non-commercial, community-

run television need not be second rate."

On a county level, we were the recipients of a NYSCA grant from Nassau Grants for the Arts. The community liaison, Polly Whitehorn, also a community resident, was very interested in having a copy of this current production sent to our local high school's English class that was studying Shakespeare. She had seen the production at the *New Playwrights* Showcase and felt that the detail in the period elements was an excellent example of Shakespearean productions. The class used this *New Playwrights* production to discuss aspects of Shakespearean theater including the fact that men played all the parts.

NH: In 2002 Cablevision opened a new facility. We happily moved into this new complex of studios, offices, a green room, storage space and a conference room. The new studio for Public Access was more

than twice the size of the one we had been working in. This larger space opened new artistic possibilities for the *New Playwrights* productions. In addition, we were fortunate in having good contacts at NBC TV and we were able to acquire lighting units, set pieces and other equipment that were made available to us.



"Two Old Men Talking in a McDonalds in Plainview" by Albert Meglin, featuring Marvin Einhorn (l.) and Michael Rosenthal.

The first show we produced at the new studio was "Two Old Men Talking in a McDonalds in Plainview," by Albert Meglin. It concerned two elderly gentlemen who had lost their wives, one of them trying to convince the other to join a bereavement group.

With the cooperation of a local McDonalds franchisee, we obtained furniture, food and beverages. We set up a number of tables and added background customers to the production. This production was shot as a three-camera line shoot with pickups and inserts at the end of taping. We also went on location, to the franchisee's restaurant in Nassau County, Long Island, N.Y. for the opening and closing shots.

"Waiter, There's a Writer in My Soup," by Martin Russell was, according to the author, a "quirky" play. A man and a woman are seated at single tables in the foreground of a coffee bar and a waiter, who is an integral part of the script, serves them. We filled the background with other tables and a number of background customers. The set was the

usual black velour cyc that encircled the tables and chairs with a long bar in the background that served as a coffee bar for the waiter. The name of the establishment was played against the black velour with a cut out in a Leko lighting unit. There were also circles of light on all the table areas upstage. Part of the "quirky" script called for the man at the table, adjacent to the woman, to ask the question, "and who are you?" Her responses were written as if different characters responded to the question. We decided to answer the man's questions with the original dialogue but with a change of costume for the woman each time she answered.

We shot the entire play as a three-camera line shoot one day and did the woman's answers, in costume in limbo setting, the next day. In editing we replaced her from the line shoot with the limbo shots. The woman's character changed each time, as did her costume.

The author lives in California so we arranged with the public access station, Access San Francisco, to videotape him in their studio answering questions that our



Rehearsal of "Let's Dance" by Brenda Shoshanna with actors Lynn Laurence and Greg Horton.

received additional grants from Astoria Federal Savings and New York State Council on the Arts to aid in the cost for production, outreach and distribution.

NH: "Cool Reception," by Mitch Coleman, spotlighted a middle-aged couple sitting at a table during a wedding reception observing and commenting

on the bride and groom at the other end of the room. They are reminded of their own marriage and its ups and downs.

SB: During this production we added patrons at a restaurant and called upon some of our volunteers to be part of the production. They were eager to help, feeling that this was a local way of supporting the arts. When our volunteers were not involved in the actual taping they would help us out with the catering for our cast and crew. Since the production days were long, we needed all the help we could get to facilitate the completion of shooting.

This was the first time PATV partnered with another access center for *New Playwrights*. At this time PATV was receiving over 65 scripts from all over the USA and even one from England. The knowledge that other access centers would assist us by taping the author interview segment enabled us to consider scripts from all parts of the country. PATV

Since the author lives in Michigan, we arranged with the public-access station in Grand Rapids (GRCTV) to tape the author who was sent questions, using the same format as we did for the San Francisco interview.

"Let's Dance," by Brenda Shoshanna, was about a couple meeting in a singles bar. It turns out that they knew one another from the old days, when they were kids in Brighton Beach. Painfully they find a way to re-connect.

SB: When Norman told me that he needed 20 extras for the dance club and they had to dance, I was stymied. We held an open call for auditions and we had a few "dancers" come down. The problem was with the weekend commitment and our marathon shooting schedule – 10 hour days. When you are working with professional actors who are volunteering their time, you better get it done in one day.

I decided to contact local colleges and was surprised when the US Merchant Marine Academy, at Kings Point, NY, responded that they had a ballroom dance club and they would be happy to participate. Not only could they dance; they were happy to get a chance to show their stuff. Recreating a dance club including a bar and plenty of patrons and dancers proved our most challenging production.

New Playwrights is now in syndication, with the entire series on public access channels in the five boroughs of NYC, as well as in Larchmont and Mamaroneck in Westchester County, all of Nassau County, Western Suffolk and Easthampton on Long Island. Finally, in order to answer many of the production questions from public access organizations, we will

produce a documentary on the making of our current play, "Seems Like Old Times", by Lucile Lichtblau.

We are gratified by the success of this enterprise. Perhaps the biggest surprise is that we have already received more than 150 scripts, a record number, for consideration for next year's productions.

"*New Playwrights* is the only program of its kind," said one viewer. "It is a fresh, commercial-free series of original theatrical productions outside the mainstream of corporate productions. As such, it provides exposure for original and talented but unknown playwrights, as well as excellent entertainment for those of us lucky enough to be plugged in!"

For further information about the *New Playwrights* project, both Shirley Ann Bruno and Norman Hall can be reached at pachannel@aol.com or 516-629-3710 ext. 12. Also on the Public Access TV website (www.patv.org) there is a link to *New Playwrights*.