

# It Will Play in Peoria

How Jack Venza, public television's cultural-program chief, achieved success by never underestimating his audience. | **By Greg Vitiello**

**W**hen Jac Venza retired from his position as WNET's head of cultural programs in February 2005, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting awarded him the Ralph Lowell Medal as the "Impresario Creator" of public television's *Great Performances* series. The CPB Board's citation declared: "We celebrate his achievement in making the performing arts accessible to more Americans, and his belief in the taste and judgment of the American people. As he memorably said, 'If a program manager feels it won't play in Peoria, it's probably because he underestimates his audience.'"

Jac Venza never underestimated his audience. Growing up in Chicago as the son of Sicilian immigrants, he learned at an early age that the arts weren't the preserve of a gilded minority. "My family had never heard an opera or been to one," Venza recalls. "But when I developed my love of the arts, I quickly realized that you don't have to be raised in a family that listens to opera or plays Mozart's string quartets. That makes it all the more satisfying when you make works

accessible to people who don't have any other exposure to culture. And this is precisely what television can do."

In a career spanning almost 55 years, Venza was "Impresario Creator" (CPB's term, not mine) not only of *Great Performances* but of such respected public television series as *NET Playhouse*, *American Masters*, *Live from Lincoln Center*, *Dance in America*, *Theater in America*, and *Broadway: The American Musical*.

He started his television career as a set designer at CBS in the early 1950s. Over the next decade, he worked on a wide range of productions from dramas to variety shows and from game shows to the evening news. Though the period kicked off with such fine dramatic series as *Playhouse 90* and *Studio One*, the arts were becoming increasingly marginalized on television by the late 1950s and early 1960s.

"One of the early writers about television said it was rather like a duchess who had these fine jewels that she took out once or twice a year to show them off, then put them back in the vault," Venza remarks. "That meant that after you

did the *Nutcracker* and one symphonic program or a show on Andrew Wyeth, that was it; you felt good, you'd done it. But in fact, it was a time when the arts in America were thriving and defining their strength."

The one program that captured the nation's rich artistic climate was *Omnibus*, which ran for a decade on network television with backing from the Ford Foundation. "*Omnibus* proved that people would watch an intelligent program about the arts if you could get someone like Leonard Bernstein to talk about symphonic music or Agnes DeMille to put her wonderful energy and sense of excitement into her comments about dance," Venza recalls.

"But even though *Omnibus* was created by CBS, it was really for a fringe audience," he adds, "and the Ford Foundation finally decided that maybe they needed to create an alternate system in which you could deal with excellence." That "alternate system" was National Educational Television (NET), which Venza joined as a producer in 1964 after working for WGBH, Boston, on a series titled "A Time to Dance." Two years later, he became NET's first head of drama with responsibility for *NET Playhouse*.

NET's senior creative staff (which included vice president of programming Bill Kobin, director of cultural affairs Curtis Davis, and director of public affairs Don Dixon) faced the difficult challenge of producing five hours a week of quality programming on relatively modest budgets. The job was made more difficult because "educational television" (as public broadcasting was known at that time) comprised an odd *mélange* of stations, many of which typically served minuscule audiences. Venza tackled his portion of the job with acumen, knowing

that it was critical for *NET Playhouse* to gain cultural credibility within the artistic community.

"In my pioneering days as a set designer, I had learned how to produce prime-time quality programs," Venza says. "I knew that whatever we did had to be artistically impeccable so that the arts community and the audience would support it.

"What television lost with the demise of anthology series like *Playhouse 90* was the voice of the American playwright," Venza continues. "We decided to create a drama series distinctly different for public television by creating a dialogue with leading playwrights and directors. We asked such playwrights as Arthur Miller and Edward Albee about how they'd like to see their work produced. When we did these productions, we brought together the director who'd conceived it for the theater with a television-experienced director like Kirk Browning to collaborate on how it should be shot and paced and what things might be altered for this close-up medium." Miller collaborated on two works for *NET Playhouse*: his adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People" and his one-act play, "A Memory of Two Mondays" (in which I made my debut in an uncredited cameo).

Another way in which *NET Playhouse* distinguished itself was by joining up with the non-profit community of theaters, many of which were supported by foundations or had grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. During its first seasons, *NET Playhouse* worked with such companies as the American Conservatory Theatre of San Francisco in the premiere of Ed Sherin's "Glory! Hallelujah!"; the Boston Theatre Company in "A Celebration for William Jennings Bryan"; and the Yale Repertory

Company, a professional company working in unison with a student troupe, in Paul Silas' "Story Theatre." *NET Playhouse* also achieved a coup when it produced the American Place Theatre's production of Ronald Ribman's "The Journey of the Fifth Horse," with the previously unknown actor Dustin Hoffman.

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To ensure the best technical productions, the NET team filmed most of the dramas in studios rather than theaters. "We didn't take cameras into the theaters because we couldn't control where they'd be located," Venza explains. "If cameras were going to be in the right place for soap operas, they could damn well be in the right place for Tennessee Williams or Shakespeare."

Venza continues, "Another drama initiative never seen on the network was long-term series based on important novels and historical personalities. Our first experiment at NET was the BBC productions of John Galsworthy's 'The Forsyte Saga.' It was impeccably produced. And because the BBC hour actually ran for just 52 minutes, we introduced a host to tell viewers more about the work. For that production, we hired John Gielgud."

In subsequent years when WGBH, Boston presented *Masterpiece Theatre*, Alistaire Cooke (and later Russell Baker) appeared as host.

Over the years, each drama season under Venza's guidance included a wide range of commissioned literary adaptations, from Paul Gallico's

"Verna: USO Girl" with Sissy Spacek to adaptations of three stories by John Cheever to Evelyn Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited," which launched the career of Jeremy Irons.

*NET Playhouse* continued until 1972 when NET merged with New York public television WNDT to become WNET/Channel 13. Venza became WNET's head of cultural-affairs programs. At that time, he recalls, "We decided to unify the arts through a series called *NET Playhouse* that would allow us to pursue

new projects. Under this umbrella, we produced *Theater in America*, *Dance in America*, and *Music in America*, which also included *Live from Lincoln Center*."

With continuing support from Exxon Corp., the weekly presence of *Great Performances* enabled Venza to create a dance unit under Merril Brockway's leadership and a music department headed by David Griffiths. Venza continued to head the drama initiatives until he was able to persuade Lindsay Law, whose television career had begun at *NET Playhouse*, to return and head the expanded drama production unit.

"It was no secret that I always favored dance and was particularly proud of our ability to influence George Balanchine's interest in television," says Venza. "Over a span of 12 programs, *Dance in America* set up a collaborative style of carefully planned studio productions that allowed Balanchine to choose the ballets and dancers he thought were best suited for the camera. At one point, he came to us and said he wanted us to do 'L'enfant et les sortilèges,' a Ravel opera based on a story by Colette. Balanchine said, 'I did it with Diaghelev and it's a very funny work, in

which people become trees and furniture. And I realized that with television we can do it better.' The visual designs included puppetry and special effects by Kermit Love in some of the nightmarish scenes when trees, figures from the wallpaper and furniture all come to life. Balanchine actually said that our version surpassed the one he'd done in Paris for Diaghlev.

"My only frustration was that Jackie Onassis' plans for a children's art book based on our ballet didn't work out," Venza continues. "I remember fondly the creative meetings with Jackie, who loved the Balanchine company."

A similar collaborative success involved the choreographer Paul Taylor. "At first he hated the idea that during the studio taping, his dancers would be out of his control," Venza says. "But one day in the control room, when we were working on one of his very dark pieces and the dancers were falling in a great heap of bodies, he suddenly realized that the work on camera could be very different. Eventually the programs we did with Taylor became much more like films."

This was a time when American dance was bursting with creativity. Venza recalls fondly a program for *Dance in America* "of very American works that had been created by Twyla Tharp for Mikhail Baryshnikov. They even included a ballet in which Misha [Baryshnikov] danced Sinatra songs." This series explored American dance from "The Trailblazers of Modern Dance" to the Native American Dance Theater and from four Alvin Ailey programs to a survey of contemporary tap dancing with Gregory Hines.

The pattern of collaboration included younger artists who had grown up with the television medium. "The new artists began to be responsive to us because they had seen the quality of our work and it



Jac Venza (right) with George Balanchine in the late 1970s



with Baryshnikov in 1984



and with Lee Remick as "Jennie" in 1975.

took much less convincing than with the pioneer artists of the 1970s,” says Venza.

He cites the example of the late playwright Wendy Wasserstein. “We were trying to get a greater sense of what young people in the arts were doing, and we were attracted to her first play, ‘Uncommon Women ... and

Others,’ which was about the ability of young women to have a new role in America,” Venza says. “Just a few days remained of the Phoenix Theater’s production of ‘Uncommon Women’ at Marymount College and Wendy was impressed that we wanted to do the play, retaining the young actors who had collaborated on it. We planned to use the existing cast until Wendy learned that Glenn Close wouldn’t be available because she was going into a Broadway musical with Rex Harrison. But, she said, ‘It’s okay because my school friend Meryl Streep is available to come and do it.’”

Wasserstein also played a creative role in one of Venza’s favorite shows: the 20th anniversary of *Great Performances*. “It was a time when the National Endowment for the Arts was under attack, and so I asked a group of leading theater artists if they would do short pieces—a kind of variety show—about why a particular art form was important,” Venza explains. “Wendy wrote a wonderful short play about three generations of actresses—a woman, her daughter, and her granddaughter—played by Nancy Marchand, Blythe Danner and Cynthia Nixon. Terrence McNally, a great lover of opera, wrote a short play set backstage at an opera company as a terrified young standby soprano, played by Bernadette Peters, prepared for her

first performance as Tosca. And Annie Leibovitz did her first film – a film about dance movement with Baryshnikov and Twyla Tharp.”

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At the same time that WNET was featuring important playwrights’ voices and major works of literature, the Venza team was presenting works that brought American history and its seminal personalities to life. “One of our most ambitious production challenges was the series on John Adams – *The Adams Chronicles* – which we produced for the nation’s bicentennial.”

Live broadcasts took a back seat to filmed performances until 1976 when WNET embarked on a collaboration with New York’s Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. The ensuing series, *Live from Lincoln Center* (which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year), was created by John Goberman, and it owed its success to technological breakthroughs. “With the new lenses and light-sensitive equipment, we were able to tape in theaters with relatively little disturbance to the paying audiences and a greater collaboration among the technicians of opera and ballet,” says Venza. “Doing ‘La Boheme’ in a studio, which is the only way it had been done in the early network productions, was intimate but it wasn’t as attractive to the opera-loving audience as being able to attend a Met or Covent Garden or La Scala opera performance free with the best seat in the house. We began this experiment. It meant questioning

how, without compromising the integrity of these works, we could create a new way that the background information was presented for our new opera audience without losing our knowledgeable opera goers.

“To accommodate the audience that was new to opera, I proposed doing a plot summary at the beginning of each scene. Then I came up with the idea of subtitles so that the audience could follow the dialogue. Some people said opera lovers would hate it. But it turned out to be one of our greatest successes. It was the opera lovers who loved it most of all. They realized that without changing the language – and, say, doing an opera in English – they could hear the music as they loved it and, for the first time, know exactly what was being sung.”

When Giacchino Rossini’s “The Barber of Seville” was produced during the initial season of *Live from Lincoln Center*, it was the first opera with subtitles ever shown on American television. [For more on *Live from Lincoln Center*, see “Backstage Secrets at Lincoln Center” in this publication’s Fall 2005 issue.]

While the performing arts continue to be a focal area for WNET, the station has also excelled at interweaving documentary commentary along with various creative forms. “We did a program with Miles Davis in which we interviewed him and juxtaposed his words with the best of his early filmed performances,” says Venza. “This way you could have an intimate and revealing exposure to an artist while seeing the sweep of that artist’s career. We did similar programs in this form about Agnes DeMille, Bob Fosse, Maria Callas and Julie Andrews.”

In 1986, WNET began a new documentary series of artists’ biographies titled *American Masters* under Susan

Lacy’s leadership. “We realized that these programs could be the definitive documentaries about artists,” says Venza. “As documents, they were as carefully researched as the best published biography of a creative person. And if the artist had died recently, our biographies enabled people who had worked with him or her to add their personal perspectives.” Over the past 20 years, more than 100 artists have been featured on *American Masters*, including such totemic figures as Charlie Chaplin, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Martha Graham, Lena Horne, Georgia O’Keeffe and Eugene O’Neill.

“We were moving more and more from just showing a performance in favor of an in-depth portrayal of artists and art forms,” Venza continues. “That also meant dealing with how art is a reflection of culture or history.”

WNET took this in-depth approach in a nine-program series called *Dancing* created by Rhoda Grauer that showed the different ways that dance reflects society. “In our program on dance and religion, we involved anthropologists and sociologists to explore how dance was considered immoral in puritanical societies like America, while in various societies across Africa and India, religion was expressed through dance,” says Venza. “For the courts of St. Petersburg and Java, dance was an expression of power or prestige.”

Venza continues, “Over the years, I was proud of having created a team of leading producers who were as passionate about the arts as I am – Judy Kindberg in dance, Margaret Smilow in documentaries, and David Horn in music.

“That was joyous for someone like myself because by staying on, each year there was a new project, a new challenge. There was something fresh to do.” As his coda, Venza chose a series on the history of

American musical theater. This ambitious collaboration with the series creator Michael Kantor took 10 years to fund, research, write and obtain the complicated rights to a century of Broadway musicals. The station already had a long-standing relationship with the estates of Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein and George and Ira Gershwin based on the production of earlier tributes in which top Broadway stars performed songs of these composers. “The ability to get representatives of those estates in the same place and trust us with the rights was one of the big contributions that we were able to bring to that project.”

After several programs in which

Julie Andrews performed Broadway music, including her final show, “Victor Victoria,” she had hosted a number of these *Great Performances* tributes to the music of Broadway. “So Julie was the perfect Broadway spokesperson to host this extraordinary chronicle of how Broadway created one of America’s great art forms – the musical,” says Venza.

“Because those programs touched on so many music specials that we had created over the last 30 years, I really enjoyed that project – going out with a big song.”

Surely it could be heard all the way to Peoria – or to the Chicago neighborhood where Venza grew up.

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A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Greg Vitiello is a New York-based writer and editor whose books include *Eisenstaedt: Germany, Spoleto Viva, Twenty Seasons of Masterpiece Theatre* and *Joyce Images*. From 1966 to 1972 he wrote for National Educational Television and the Children’s Television Workshop.