Neal Shapiro, public televisions's newest recruit

Photo: Joseph Sinnott, WNET

IS PBS STILL NECESSARY?

You bet it is, says its newest recruit, veteran commercial TV newsman Neal Shapiro, who now heads New York City's public-television stations.

By Fritz Jacobi

"Is PBS Still Necessary?" was the ominous headline of a Sunday New York *Times* article last winter by Charles McGrath, who claimed that the audience for public-television programming is being siphoned off by cable-television channels, many of which, McGrath stated, "offer the same kind of stuff that in the past you could see only on public TV, and in at least some instances they do it better."

"I think he's wrong," says Neal Shapiro, the veteran commercial-television news executive who recently took over complete responsibility for the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, licensee of public-television broadcasters Thirteen/WNET and WLIW New York. "Our programming is different

from cable shows, which are cut-and-paste biographies. Ours have in-depth research and quality. They are not reinvented; they are enduring." He added that "no good public-television station should be afraid to innovate," calling attention to the multi-part Jane Austen series on *Masterpiece*. "Let's try to find new and better ways to present our programs."

After a year of on-the-job training under William F. Baker, who headed the station for 20 years after a long career at Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, Neal Shapiro is now in full charge. And he's already crafted several attention-grabbing innovations. For example, *Sunday Arts,* which ushered in the spring, targets a very specific and unique audience: those interested in the arts. "This is our basic mission," he says. "Regardless of what the doom-sayers predict, our programming works because we stay true to our core beliefs."

Sunday Arts is a veritable kaleidoscope, a fast-paced tour of New York City cultural happenings. The debut program started at the Morgan Library, focusing on a collection of Irving Penn photographs and Jasper Johns paintings, followed by a dash to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was also displaying works by Johns, then back downtown to an avant-garde dance group at the Joyce Theater, then a dash to the Belasco Theater in the Broadway area for a glimpse of the rousing rock musical, "Passing Strange." All of this breathless activity was followed by in in-depth interview/profile of the controversial French conductor Gerard Mortier, "the bad boy of opera," who will head the New York City Opera in the fall. Mortier describes his plans for bringing more young people to opera and shows some of his "bad boy" excerpts from classic operas produced in Europe.

Then came a complete performance of the new and critically acclaimed New York City Opera production of "Madama Butterfly," hosted by the soprano Susan Graham. This broadcast was preceded by a touching tribute to *Live from Lincoln Center* director Kirk Browning, who had just died at the age of 86 after a lifetime of directing opera and symphony for television. He was to have directed "Madama Butterfly."

Another of Mr. Shapiro's innovations is *Reel 13,* a unique, interactive Saturday-night feature that kicks off with a classic film at 9:00 p.m., followed by a short film selected by viewers on the *Reel 13* Web site, and the premiere of a new independent film. The project began last January with the 1973 classic, "The Paper Chase," and the broadcast premiere of the independent film "American Wake." *Reel 13* is intended to attract a broader and younger audience. Among the films already scheduled are the Australian coming-of-age comedy "The Rage in Placid Lake," "Wilby Wonderful," starring Sandra Oh; and "Boesman and Lena," an adaptation of the Athol Fugard play about apartheid.

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Most recently Shapiro announced that, starting this fall, WLIW will launch an international news program, tentatively titled *Your World Tonight,* designed to connect viewers to issues

and events unfolding around the planet. The new venture will replace BBC World News, which is distributed by WLIW, and will be offered to public-television stations throughout the United States.

Shapiro's 25-year career spans print, broadcast, cable and internet media. As President of NBC News from June 2001 to September 2005, he oversaw the global operations of NBC Universal's top-ranked news division. He led the number-one rated news program in every day part. *Today* in the morning, *NBC Nightly News* in the evening and *Meet the Press* on Sunday morning. He also oversaw *Dateline NBC,* the most-watched and most-honored news magazine on television.

Shapiro led NBC News's award-winning and top-rated coverage of every significant news story in recent history-from the terrorists attacks on 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the 2004 elections and Hurricane Katrina's devastation. He personally directed the successful anchor transition from Tom Brokaw to Brian Williams in 2004, the first such transition in 20 years. On cable he oversaw the news operatios of MSNBC and developed *Countdown* with Keith Olbermann and *Scarborough Country* with Joe Scarborough.

On the Web, Shapiro spearheaded a number of changes that helped make MSNBC.com the nation's number one Internet news and information site. He expanded NBC News Radio and began pod casts and cell-phone reports.

From 1993 to 2001 Shapiro was executive producer of *Dateline NBC,* which would become the most honored newsmagazine on telelvision, winner of 32 Emmys, 31 Edward R. Murrow Awards and three Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Silver Batons, three George Foster Peabody Awards and a host of other important accolades.

Shapiro's tenure at NBC began in March 1993 after 13 years at ABC News, where he served as producer of *Prime Time Live*. From 1986 to 1989 he was a special-segment producer for *World News Tonight.* He began his broadcast career at ABC News in 1980 as assistant to ABC News vice president David Burke after having graduated magna cum laude from Tufts University with degrees in history and political science. He was editor-in-chief of the *Tufts Observer* and served as a stringer for *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*.

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Asked if the transition from commercial to public television had been traumatic, Shapiro said: "Not at all. I'm very happy here. It's very similar to why I became a journalist in the first place. Television can be a force for good. It can illuminate and inspire and bring arts and culture to people who would not otherwise experience it. We are discovering the next generation of great writers and great performers. We'll discover the next Arthur Miller and the next Meryl Streep."

After a year of coaching Shapiro from the wings, Bill Baker is now officially "president emeritus." As he recently told Mort Silverstein in a farewell interview (see page 34) "I think the title means that I have a real job, in that I'm going to continue to maintain relationships with some of the key people who have been supporters of public television." He plans

to make programs and has some big projects in mind.

Noting that during his long career at Channel 13 he had produced two movies that were in "the art and religious mode"-- *The Face of Jesus* and *Picturing Mary*-- he anticipates working with the Cambridge University School of Divinity on a major program about the Abrahmic religions, which represent half of all the people in the world. "They have been quarreling for thousands of years," he said, "and I want to look at what is common about them because there are so many things that are similar."

Baker noted that he will also serve as an executive-in-residence at Columbia University's Business School and teach at the Kennedy School of Public Administration at Harvard, adding that "I'm very proud of my successor, Neal Shapiro. He's a terrific choice, someone who will bring new vision and new knowledge to public television." What about public television's seemingly constant on-air fund-raising saturation?

Photo: Joseph Sinnott, WNET

Neal Shapiro

"The funding system we have is not perfect but it's the best we can do," Shapiro says. "Our programming shows that we believe in change and innovation. People will be attracted to a business that is growing. The goal for me is to improve. We have to invent: people watch media--online, on hand-held devices and they download to view later. The media is about content: if you turn out material that is engaging I think you'll attract funding. More and more we're creating programming that only public television can do: documentaries --we do more than anyone else-- arts and culture. Who else is bringing the Metropolitan Opera and Lincoln Center to the public? Only public television. We are also focusing on the local scene: who else is going to look at education and poverty?

Speaking of media, Shapiro's entire family is profoundly involved. His wife, Juju Chang, is a correspondent for the ABC News programs *Good Morning America* and *20/20*. They have three sons, aged seven and four and three months.

"My kids think that all their friends' parents are on television," says Shapiro. "They ask them 'what channel is your mother on?'"

Fritz Jacobi is the editor of Television Quarterly. *He has been working in and around television--both commercial and public--since the time of Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca,* Howdy Doody, Victory at Sea *and* The Great American Dream Machine