

Big Bird's boss shares his vision for PBS

Written by Kam Williams

Tuesday, 23 October 2012 09:38



Neal Shapiro:
The "WNET/THIRTEEN 50th Anniversary" Interview

Neal Shapiro is President and CEO of New York City's WNET, America's flagship public media outlet, bringing quality arts, education and public affairs programming to over 5 million viewers each week. The parent company of public television stations THIRTEEN and WLIW21 and operator of NJTV, WNET produces such acclaimed PBS series as *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Nature*, *Need to Know*, *Charlie Rose*, and a range of documentaries, children's programs, and local news and cultural offerings available on air and online.

Shapiro is an award-winning producer and media executive with a 25-year career spanning print, broadcast, cable and online. At the helm of WNET, Shapiro has revitalized programming, nearly doubled arts and culture programming, placed a new emphasis on local programming and community engagement, set new fundraising records and inaugurated a new, state-of-the-art studio at Lincoln Center.

In addition to WNET's signature national series, Shapiro has overseen the launch of a number

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of innovative local programs (including *American Graduate*, *MetroFocus*, *NYC-Arts*, *Need To Know* and *Women, War & Peace*) which make the most of New York City's rich resources and vibrant community.

Before joining WNET in 2007, Shapiro was President of NBC News, leading its top-rated news programs, including *Today*, *NBC Nightly News* and *Meet the Press*, as well as *Dateline NBC*. Shapiro was executive producer of *Dateline NBC* when it was a mainstay of NBC's schedule. And in his 13 years at ABC News, he was a writer and producer for *PrimeTime Live* and *World News Tonight*.

Mr. Shapiro has won numerous awards, including 32 Emmys, 31 Edward R. Murrow Awards and 3 Columbia DuPont awards. He serves on the Boards of Tufts University, Gannett Company, the Investigative News Network and the International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Neal lives in New York City with his wife, ABC News Correspondent Juju Chang, and their three sons.

Kam Williams: Hi Neal, thanks for the interview.

Neal Shapiro: My pleasure, Kam.

KW: I feel like I already know you from watching you introduce movies every Saturday night.

NS: [Chuckles] I have to admit that of all the things I do that's actually the most fun.

KW: What is your favorite genre of film?

NS: Film noir. I'm especially a big fan of Humphrey Bogart.

KW: Congratulations on PBS' 50th anniversary! What special programming do you have planned?

NS: This is not only a great way to look back and celebrate what we've accomplished, but also a great way to think about the challenges for the next 50 years. Digging through our archives, we found some amazing, early footage we didn't know we had of icons like Dr. Martin Luther King, Andy Warhol and Muhammad Ali. So, we're going to do a whole series of specials on news, art and culture. Last month, we led a 7-hour national telethon about the dropout crisis, not to raise money, but to raise awareness and tell people how they can get involved through The United Way, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, The Boys and Girls Clubs, and other organizations. I see part of our role for the next 50 years is to become even more engaged with our community through programs that enable good things to happen.

KW: Fixing the educational system is a really urgent priority, because we'll lose another generation if nothing is done.

NS: You're exactly right! In New York, we have the biggest school system in the country

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and therefore we have some of the biggest problem schools in the country. We want to do everything we can to let people know how critical an issue this is. If we don't get this right, we'll lose an entire generation. Nobody wins when a generation can't contribute to society.

KW: When I attended the Wharton Business School, one of your predecessors, John Jay Iselin, was a guest lecturer in Arts Management. One thing he emphasized stuck with me, namely, that the bottom line was not profit at PBS, but the quality of the art. Was that a hard thing for you to adjust to in coming over from a commercial television network?

NS: He's absolutely right. What's hard to adjust to is being unable to measure your bottom line like you can in the commercial world. How do you measure the ability to touch someone's heart, to give someone comfort or a meaningful experience they might cherish for the rest of their lives? Those are hard to quantify. So, public television doesn't have the same sort of metrics, which is why, as part of the 50th anniversary, we've been reaching out and asking people, "What has been the importance of the programs we've brought you over the years?" And we've received some inspiring responses, like the one from a woman who grew up in very humble circumstances in the Bronx. Her parents didn't have the means to take her to see live performances in the theater. But thanks to PBS, she still had a front row seat, and today she's a professional dancer. Another person credits the show Nature for the inspiration to become a marine biologist. It's hard to put a price tag on stories like that, but they have real meaning.

KW: Earlier this year, you ran a fascinating documentary about the late Daisy Bates, the only female to speak at the March on Washington. It was hard for me, as a Black Studies major, to believe that I had never even heard of such an important civil rights figure before.

NS: We have plenty of examples like that which we chronicle in such a way that they can also exist forever in classrooms. Most people don't know that we have an education department and what a huge impact it makes because we offer the content for free to teachers and students all over the country. Nowadays, kids are quite comfortable learning from video in a way that you and I weren't, since we didn't have much of an opportunity to watch them in school.

KW: Harriet Pakula Teweles says: I never thought WQXR--The Radio Station of the NYTIMES--would sell its frequency to a pop music station and move classical music to a less strong frequency with classical music reaching far fewer people. Is bringing The Arts to public media always going to be about raising enough money? How can we best protect public access to the arts from the whim of the financial marketplace and from political encroachment because of censorship issues?

NS: That's a very good question. When you look at The Arts, there is not a great commercial model for it. And there never has been one. The Fine Arts have always been supported by philanthropy and thereby made available to everyone. I don't think that model's about to change. In fact, there are likely to be even more stresses on it, because there are more demands for the very valuable radio and TV frequencies. So, I think we'll always be reliant upon the kindness of strangers to keep The Arts alive.

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

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NS: That's another very good question. I'll have to think about that. I don't just want to come up with a self-serving question.

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

NS: I'm delighted. I love doing the work of the angels. I get to do programs of lasting import, even if they might not reach a lot of people sort term.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

NS: "The Passage of Power," Robert Caro's latest book about LBJ. <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0679405070/ref=nosim/thslfofire-20>

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

NS: Anything that I can barbecue. I love barbecuing. It must be that primal thing about being around a fire. I also enjoy the math involved in cooking on the grill, figuring out the space and what will need more time.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

NS: I see a happy guy who's been incredibly lucky. So much has gone right for me. And given how hard I work, I figure I'm aging alright.

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

NS: Two-part answer. On the grand scale, I would like to find a way for our representatives to have reasonable political dialogue, so we could actually find some solutions for all our problems. I think the country is paralyzed. Second, my wish for me, personally, is I'd like to be manager of the Yankees. That's no reflection on Joe Girardi, who's doing a fine job.

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

NS: Being pushed into the deep end of a swimming pool before I learned how to swim, and sinking deeper and deeper in until my father's big giant hand reached down and pulled me out.

KW: Dante Lee, author of "Black Business Secrets," asks: What was the best business decision you ever made, and what was the worst?

NS: Good question. I would say my best was launching the local programming we're doing here at Channel 13. My worst decision was doing a show called World Focus which didn't work out because of unfortunate timing.

KW: The Judyth Piazza question: What key quality do you believe all successful people share?

NS: Curiosity.

KW: The Tavis Smiley question: How do you want to be remembered?

NS: As someone who treated people fairly, and who brought out the best in them.

KW: Last chance, can you think of a question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

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NS: Yeah, if you could live at another time, what period would you pick?

KW: That'll be the Neal Shapiro question. Which era would you pick?

NS: I think I'd like to live in New York in the Twenties. It was a period of great literature and great art. My favorite author is F. Scott Fitzgerald.

KW: Thanks again for the time, Neal, and best of luck with PBS.

NS: Thank you, Kam. And don't hesitate to call, if you need anything.