

# FALLEN HEROES

## Tributes to James Day, Kirk Browning and Jay Iselin

### A Principled Life

By Richard O. Moore

**J**ames Day stands alone among the early pioneers of public television in his steadfast vision of what public television should be: a communications instrument free of commercial and political influence, with dedicated funding from the federal government. His model was the BBC, an independent, non-governmental broadcast institution, funded by tax dollars. From the outset Day recognized that this concept was subject to modification given the American tradition of commercial broadcasting. Throughout his life he held steadfastly to the ideal in the face of many challenges, frequently at great personal cost.

My earliest recollection of Jim is from 1940 in Berkeley when we were both undergraduates at the University of California. Allowing for the unreliability of memory, I have an image of a young Jim Day with a mop of red hair and (I swear to this) a bow tie!. At the time, I was a participant in student government with the grandiose title of Forensics Commissioner. Radio was part of forensics, along with the debate team and the campus literary

magazine. In my youthful and elitist world radio was an inferior medium and I paid as little attention to it as possible. I could not have anticipated that, less than a decade later, I would be part of the first experiment in noncommercial, listener sponsored radio, KPFA.

My next contact with Jim Day followed my resignation from KPFA in 1952. I was aware that he had been appointed general manager of Channel 9, the TV channel reserved for educational television in the Bay Area. It's somewhat ironic that KPFA, some months prior, had filed a license challenge with the FCC claiming that no action was being taken to activate the channel. Soon thereafter, James Day and Jon Rice were named as general manager and program manager respectively, with a mandate to put the station on the air as soon as possible. I had the good fortune to join the staff of fewer than ten employees in January 1954 and my first assignment was to present the case for educational television to as many PTA's as possible. Fortunately, both Jim Day and Jon Rice had a broader vision for KQED than merely broadcasting in-school programming. Although Jim and



Photo: Carolyn Watson

*Jim Day*

Jon had different personalities and ambitions, they were an effective complement to each other when it came to setting goals for the new station.

Our first broadcasts were from a tiny room at the top of the Mark Hopkins hotel. Jim was a perfect host for the new venture whereas Jon was always more comfortable behind rather than in front of the camera. Throughout all of these stages it was Jim's off and on camera demeanor that set the tone for KQED in the Fifties. A small but growing audience shared our enthusiasm as we tested our talents and, sometimes, the limits of the television camera. As Jim Day once remarked, "We didn't have the money to fail, so we had no choice

but to be good."

A wholly new challenge faced Day in the Sixties. The once-familiar world was undergoing change with Vietnam, the growing strength of ethnic minorities, an explosion in the arts and young people vs. parents. It seemed that everything was being called into question including the role that KQED should play in a turbulent time. Jim was more than up to the challenge. Unafraid to approve risky ventures in public affairs and the arts, Jim preserved a fine balance between local programming and programming relevant to a national audience. KQED emerged as a major producer for National Educational Television, the program source for the system. It was during this time that the station

reached the zenith of its reputation as a creative source of programming for public television. Jim Day made his personal contribution to programming with *Kaleidoscope*, which foreshadowed hours of later interviewers who addressed their guests in a relaxed, highly personal manner. And the guests appeared: Eleanor Roosevelt, Robert Kennedy, as well as Buster Keaton, Shirley Temple Black and Bing Crosby. Equally memorable was his series of conversations with Eric Hoffer, San Francisco's longshoreman-philosopher.

By the late Sixties fundamental changes were underway in the United States, and public television was not immune to change. NET president Jack White was about to retire. It seemed reasonable, if not inevitable, that Jim Day would be asked to replace him. In 1968 he left San Francisco for New York. He could not have anticipated the changes yet to come. The Ford Foundation had been a major catalyst in the early development of public television. Day was soon to encounter the realities of power at a national level. Up to this point, New York City did not have a major player among producing stations. The local noncommercial station, Channel 13 WNDT (for New Directions in Television) was not yet a national producer. The majority of national programming, much of it perceived as "left leaning," was produced by NET and stations in Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Pittsburgh and the South Carolina and Nebraska networks. With prodding from the Ford Foundation and the newly formed Corporation for Public Broadcasting, WNDT absorbed NET, overnight becoming WNET and

a national program producer. Jim Day remained as nominal president of WNET until his departure in 1973.

For the next 30 or more years Jim Day was something of a lone voice crying in the wilderness over the lost potential of public broadcasting. It was simply not in his nature to engage in compromise as a means of gaining power. He never again occupied a prominent institutional position in public television. Jim remained in New York and resumed his career as an interviewer, producing an extensive series of interviews under the title *Day at Night*. In 1995, after more than 20 years of writing and rewriting, he published *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Broadcasting*. The book set forth the concept of public broadcasting as a commercial-free, politically independent national system with a mix of centrally produced programming and local programming by affiliates. James Day's sense of what public broadcasting should be was shaped in his early days in San Francisco and remained passionately intact. My memory of Jim Day as a man steadfast in principle and stubbornly resistant to compromise remains sharp and clear.

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*Richard O. Moore succeeded James Day as President and General Manager of KQED San Francisco in 1968, resigning four years later to help found PTV Productions, Inc., with Lawrence K. Grossman and Eugene N. Aleinikoff. In 1981 he joined KTCA Minneapolis/St. Paul as director of special projects, later becoming President and CEO of this outstanding public-television station. He retired in 1991 to resume a frequently interrupted career as a poet.*

# A Man for All TV Seasons

By Robert Isaacson

I met Jim Day in the late 1970's. He'd left New York City's public-television station WNET/Channel 13 to begin a professorial appointment in the TV/Radio department with the City University of New York at Brooklyn College. He was a living legend in the world of public broadcasting and I, a new arrival at CUNY following a three-year appointment with the Lindsay administration.

Jim brought with him to CUNY decades of broadcasting experience. He had done pioneering work in public television, serving on the founding boards of PBS and The Children's Television Workshop. On the international scene he had been one of the original board members and a major figure in the establishment and growth of INPUT, the International Public Television Screening Conference.

During his 16-year tenure as President of KQED in San Francisco, Jim pioneered the vision of what was then called educational television as a local, community-based enterprise. He was clearly a genius behind the camera, but was also brilliant in front of the lens as the host of the weekly program, *Kaleidoscope*. As noted above by Dick Moore, in the show's 14-year run, Jim interviewed several hundred celebrities, among them Eleanor Roosevelt, Buster Keaton, Robert F. Kennedy, Bing Crosby and Aldous Huxley. His 12-part series of interviews with Eric Hoffer and six-part series with Arnold Toynbee were distributed nationally. His tenure at NET and WNET produced such innovative

programming as *An American Family* and *The Great American Dream Machine*.

He resigned from the presidency of WNET in 1973, established his own production company, Publvision, and created the nightly interview show called *Day at Night*. One hundred and thirty episodes of the series were distributed to PBS stations across the country.

In 1976 Jim was appointed Professor of Broadcasting at Brooklyn College/CUNY. He taught graduate-level MFA courses and some undergraduate courses in broadcasting for 12 years. Although he retired as Professor Emeritus in 1988, he continued to teach his legendary course in international public television from CUNY TV's small closed-circuit studio in Manhattan. It was at that time that I got to know Jim Day – the scholar, the public-broadcasting pioneer and the kind and thoughtful man.

During the next decade, while getting to know Jim, I developed an appreciation for the vision of public broadcasting as originally intended, and the reality of what it was forced to become. According to Jim, there were those who actively sought to devalue the founding vision, and openly welcomed such a change. Jim was a realist about these developments and we discussed with regret the commercialization and politicization of PBS, even as these events occurred.

We had intense and exciting conversations about how to best position CUNY TV, this non-commercial, educational and cultural

cable- television channel operating in the communications center of the world. In effect, Jim was already the unofficial leader and sole member of my advisory board years before CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein asked him to serve as chairman and invite additional professionals to join him as board members in 2000.

It was incredible to watch Jim put together this board. He cleverly designed a very high-profile group that would not have regularly scheduled meetings. Jim guaranteed everyone he approached that the CUNY TV advisory board would not have any committees, nor a mandatory annual meeting and of course, no homework assignments. What they would have was lunch.

When Jim and I wanted advice on a specific issue we would invite a board member to lunch. This plan of action evolved into a voluntary annual meeting, a "New York" event catered by Zabar's. We did pretty well on attendance, although Jim, who at this point had been living in New York City for more than 30 years, still could not acquire a taste for bagels and lox. He did, however, learn to appreciate the drawing power of this delicacy and we used it to our advantage.

Jim enjoyed CUNY TV and we enjoyed Jim. He would visit at least three times a week but refused the offer of a desk on site. He befriended several members of the staff and expressed great interest in learning Apple computer technology. After every visit, he was off to swim in the pool in the ASCAP building, and each time he returned to CUNY TV he proudly reported how many laps he did. Jim's commitment to healthy living and exercise allowed him to be active, vibrant and productive to the very last days of his remarkable life.

His level of intellectual curiosity was always superb and he absorbed emerging technology like a sponge. When we gave him an iMac to take home, we found ourselves enjoying videoconferences with him. He even learned how to copy his prized *Day at Night* series from videotape to DVD to preserve it. Although he was in his late 80's, Jim was a man of the future.

In 2001, when Jim told me he was going to INPUT, I asked him if he would consider curating a series of independent documentaries from the conference – and thus began the series *Global Tube*, perfectly in sync with his passion for international public television content and perfectly in line with the station's mission. We are now in our seventh season, broadcasting a wide array of programs that cannot be seen anywhere else in the country.

One day, I was expressing my frustration about a series we had videotaped called *Black Writers in America*. It was sitting there in the can for more than a year; I was sure it was PBS quality but I had a lot of trouble getting the producer to focus on executing the required research and post-production to shape the eight half-hours. Jim looked at the master videos, reviewed the background of the writers, and said he would like to take over the series as senior producer and get it ready for air.

He had never done anything like this before but jumped in with tremendous enthusiasm. He explained that, when he was president of Channel 13, his producers had always made him look good, that he welcomed the new challenge and wanted to do the same for me and CUNY TV with this series. In less than a year the eight half-hour series was completed and accepted by

American Public Television for national distribution.

Jim Day was a man for all (TV) seasons. He loved life. At the end of his days he had twice the energy and intellectual acumen of most people at the height of their careers. He was one of the most important people in my life.

Jim Day finally finished his book, *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Television* and was very proud of it, though sadly his original vision for public TV had indeed just about vanished.

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*A 25-year cable-television veteran, Robert Isaacson is Executive Director of City University Television, CUNY TV, channel 75, the nation's largest non-commercial university cable-television channel, reaching approximately two million households citywide. He is responsible for creating local cultural, educational and public-affairs programs for this audience.*

# John Jay Iselin, Crimed

By John Pope

**T**he Harvard *Crimson* newsroom in 1953 was self-consciously seedy. Clusters of grey metal desks were pushed together here and there. The desks were topped with old looking but highly functional typewriters. Stacks of yellow copy paper lay around. And ashtrays! A news

wire clucked, clattered and chimed off to one side. And at the back of the room where stairs descended to the print shop, stood the curved desk known as the slot, where the managing editor or his surrogate would administer the final benediction on the copy for tomorrow's edition. This was the lair of the self-styled Crimeds, those keen-eyed fledgling journalists who observed the manly custom of addressing one another by their initials (usually three): David Halberstam was DLH, Tony Lucas was JAL, Arthur Langguth was AJL. And so it went.

With the spring competition of 1953, there arrived in this newsroom with us other freshman candidates a new, bouncy set of initials, JJI, along with the sprightly little person of their owner. John Jay, JJ, or Johnny Ice, brought a species of joy to the newsroom. He seemed not quite so serious, so intent, so competitive as his peers. But this may have had more to do with his manner than his substance. Dan Reznick, another member of our freshman gaggle, remembers him this way: "Jay became a protégé of David Halberstam and indeed succeeded him as managing editor. I always thought they were an odd couple--David was so loud and rambunctious, with sharp elbows, and Jay was this soft-spoken patrician to whom things seemed to come so easily. But underneath I think they were kindred spirits--the fires of competitiveness and ambition burned brightly in Jay, less openly than in David, but they were nonetheless there, and I think that is what attracted them to each other."

Let me say, parenthetically, that while president was the top job on the *Crimson*, managing editor was the gut job--the job that made the



Photo: Carl Samrock, EBC

John Jay Iselin

paper what it was.

Ambitious or not, JJI brought to his work a boundless optimism and sense of possibility. He approached each assignment, each task, as though it were a wonderful present left on his doorstep by fortune: a package to be teased open, explored, enjoyed and played with until all its possibilities were discovered and revealed. The self-discovered pleasure Jay found in everything not only spurred him on, but invigorated all the rest of us, too.

Dan Rezneck comments on another aspect of Jay's personality. "Jay has gone to St. Mark's and was a member of the Fly Club. Many of the St. Grottlesex crowd withdrew into club life and had little to do with the life of the university. They certainly did not like the idea of competing with the public-school graduates, many of whom were Jewish and few of whom aspired to the final clubs. Jay was different. He welcomed that competition and had such a gift for making friends that he moved easily in different circles. I never felt ill at ease in his presence or

that he condescended in any way. He did wear chinos and old sneakers a lot, which I would never have dared to do, but that was part of his easygoing charm."

Like most Crimeds, Jay liked to stick it to the competition, which to us meant the *Yale Daily News* and the *Daily Princetonian*. When the Yale newspaper cravenly gave up serving its readers on Saturdays, Jay was managing editor of two editions of the *Crimson* that were circulated door-to-door in New Haven on Saturday mornings to take up the slack. Shamed, the Eli paper resumed Saturday publication.

Classmate Jack Rosenthal--still pursuing a distinguished career at the *New York Times*--writes about another stunt. He and Jay were working on a Saturday football extra to follow the Harvard-Princeton away game, but the *Princetonian* got wind of the plot and announced they would publish their own extra. "What to do? Something that turned out to be even more fun," Rosenthal writes. "We published a parody of the *Princetonian* extra,

declaring that the game had ended in an official protest that left the final score still in doubt. Jay and I and Bernie Gwertzman (another *Times* veteran) maintained the deception, sitting in the press box calling in phony stories. Of course our parody, printed ahead of time, beat the *Princetonian* extra to the street by precious minutes. Jay and I watched as the people streamed out and read the news with consternation. I'll never forget Jay's face, his chin lowered into his characteristic wide grin, allowing himself a restrained 'heh-heh-heh.'"

Even in those ancient, undergraduate days in the *Crimson* newsroom, Jay was the person we all came to know: enjoying everything, full of vim, teasing himself and all of us to see the

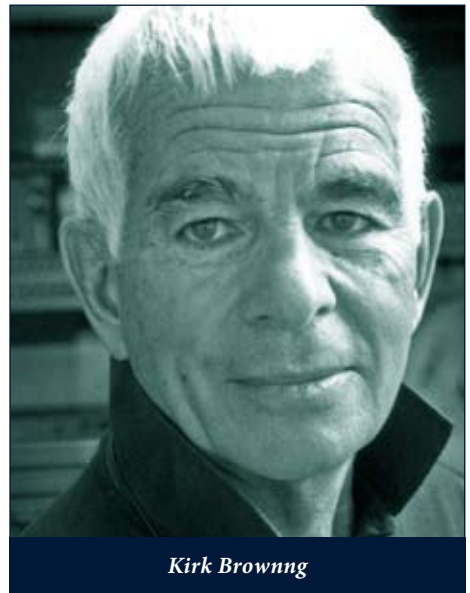
possibilities in things, to be upbeat, to think our best thoughts and to do our best deeds.

*Forty years ago John Pope joined the Readers Digest General Books Division, which became the primary source of the Digest's profit. When he retired in 1995 he was global editor-in-chief of the division. His Harvard '56 classmates and Crimson colleagues included Jay Iselin, former president of New York City's public-television station WNET Channel 13 and subsequently president of Cooper Union; and Jack Rosenthal, who has served as editor of The New York Times editorial page and the Sunday Times Magazine, and since 2000 as President of The New York Times Foundation.*

# Kirk Browning: The Maestro of Performing Arts Television

by Brian Rose

**K**irk Browning's television career spanned nearly six decades—and was still going strong when he died on February 10, 2008. Typically, he was in the process of preparing for an upcoming program—in this case a March 20th telecast of



Kirk Browning

“Madama Butterfly”—which would have marked the 186th time he gently commanded the director's chair at *Live from Lincoln Center*.

It's possible to describe Kirk Browning's remarkable achievements simply in terms of numbers—the

Photo: Suzanne Faulkner Stevens, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

hundreds of live telecasts at NBC in the 1950s, the scores of innovative in-studio opera stagings for *NBC Opera Theatre* and *NET Opera*, the dozens of productions for *Theater in America* and *American Playhouse*, the first director of *Live from the Met* and *Live from Lincoln Center*, the series of historical Toscanini broadcasts from Carnegie Hall and Studio 8-H. But just chronicling his inexhaustible productivity and range doesn't really come to terms with either the man or his legacy. Because to my mind, there's no question that Kirk Browning was not only one of the founding fathers of American cultural television, but also a boundlessly enthusiastic creative force whose work inspired generations of artists, directors, producers, studio technicians, and viewers.

Browning's widely varied and colorful pre-television career provided him with many of the essential skills that distinguished him as a director—an engaging curiosity and intelligence, a passionate love of the arts, and a happy willingness to experiment. In the years before starting out at NBC in 1948, he tried his hand in many fields: studying piano and composition at Juilliard, majoring in ornithology at Cornell (before dropping out due to money problems), working as a reporter in Waco, Texas, crafting poetry and music while serving as an ambulance driver in England and France during World War II, writing advertising copy in post-war Manhattan, and finally running a chicken farm in southern Connecticut, where his friendship with neighbor Samuel Chotzinoff (the head of NBC's music department) ultimately led him to a job at the network.

His first assignment was filing scores in the NBC music library. But in just a few weeks he moved to the position of stage manager, shifting to the network's pioneering series, *NBC Opera Theatre*, at its premiere in 1949. His responsibilities continued to grow, as he rose from assistant director to director, quickly mastering the theatrical and musical skills required to stage and shoot live, in-studio operas. The series, which remained sporadically on the air until 1964, was an extraordinary training ground, offering Browning the opportunity to closely collaborate with artists like George Balanchine, Leonard Bernstein, and Gian-Carlo Menotti (whose *Amahl and the Night Visitors* received its world premiere on the program), and to experiment in an environment of unusual creative freedom. His imaginative work on the telecasts, along with his Toscanini concerts and his adaptations of drama and film for *Producers' Showcase* and *The Hallmark Hall of Fame*, revealed his expertise as a sensitive "translator," one of the few people in television able to effectively bring to life material originally designed for the stage or concert hall.

The providential home NBC offered for his talents lasted 15 years. Despite his versatility, including a stint as the director of *The Frank Sinatra Show* and various anthology drama programs, Browning left the network with the collapse of *NBC Opera Theatre* and migrated to the arena best suited to his temperament and expertise—the wide-open but painfully malnourished realm of educational television. At National Educational Television, then the program supplier for noncommercial

TV, he declined the role of staff director, preferring to remain freelance and see what came his way. With characteristic good fortune, he found himself directing a diverse cultural menu, ranging from adaptations of *Under Milkwood* and *The Beggar's Opera*, to erudite magazine and talk shows, to a series on the aesthetics of photography. "Everything," he noted, "was a total delight."

NET-TV and subsequently PBS would continue to provide him with a bounty of opportunities and creative challenges for the next four decades. In 1969 he returned to the world of in-studio opera with NET Opera Theater, a series featuring English-language performances and a large degree of experimental staging and camerawork. When the program ended its run in 1972, Jac Venza, the executive producer of *Great Performances*, asked him to work on *Theater in America*, which pioneered a unique collaborative approach teaming well-known theater directors with their TV counterparts. Where some might find this forced artistic alliance difficult to navigate, Browning quite naturally flourished, stimulated by the creative energy and rewarded by the fact, as he later remarked, "that I felt I was introducing all of these wonderful talents to television in a way that would allow them to go into television themselves if they wanted to."

Though he was reluctant to return to the concept of live theater broadcasts, after the nearly illegible programs he directed from the Metropolitan Opera in the early 1950s, producer John Goberman persuaded him in 1975 to tackle the problem anew, using the various stages of Lincoln Center as their testing ground. Special

low-light cameras and long lenses helped overcome some of his initial aesthetic reservations and by January 1976 *Live from Lincoln Center* was launched with a telecast of the New York Philharmonic direct from Avery Fisher Hall.

For the next 32 years, he and Goberman formed an exceptionally durable television partnership, creating with *Live from Lincoln Center* a vibrant approach to bring the immediacy and excitement of live performances (whether musical, dramatic or operatic) to viewers at home. The key for Browning was dynamic camerawork and a responsive sense of cutting and pacing. As he once observed, "I think that in order to persuade the general audience to stay with it, you have to make the audience care, which involves a committed camera—a camera that uses an active approach, rather than simply being just a passive reporter." The process involved tremendous preparation, breaking apart the musical score (or script) bar by bar or line by line to discover how best to translate a work's movement, tension, and energy into compelling television terms. This might mean anywhere from 500 to 600 separate shots, all meticulously spelled out for the eight or more camera operators stationed throughout the auditorium, and then woven together with split-second timing by maestro Browning in the studio control truck.

As he continued to explore the challenges of live performances with *Live from Lincoln Center* and its companion series *Live from the Met*, Browning also directed his first single-camera film production—an adaptation of Dorothy Parker's short

story, “Big Blonde,” for PBS’s *Great Performances* in 1980. Though he described it as “one of the most joyous adventures I ever had,” he expressed little enthusiasm when two Hollywood studios called him afterwards and asked him to come out and talk. To their astonishment, he told them he was quite happy working in New York and, even more heretically, wasn’t interested in doing any more film. The dog-eat-dog pressures of Hollywood couldn’t be farther removed from his style and approach, and while most TV directors would jump at the chance, he later confessed that “I think it was the wisest decision I ever made not to dabble in that whole area.”

Entering the second half of his nearly six-decade career, Kirk Browning remained as one of the most active directors in public television, but he occasionally made guest appearances at the commercial networks for special attractions like a Vladimir Horowitz concert and an Alvin Ailey performance for NBC or the four-hour live *Liberty Weekend* spectacular for ABC in 1986. His services were also in demand all over the country for locally-produced PBS telecasts featuring the Chicago Lyric Opera Company, the Boston Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C., and concerts from the White House.

Even into his 80s, Browning never lost his joyful spirit and engaging passion for performing arts television, continuing to explore new types of projects for *Live from Lincoln Center*, including musicals (both revived and current), contemporary ballet, concerts of American standards, and intimate chamber-music recitals.

Looking back on his career, it’s hard not to be overwhelmed by its scope and its quality, let alone its remarkable longevity—is there anyone else who started at the very beginnings of American network TV who continued to flourish for 60 years? While Kirk Browning won numerous awards and accolades, they can’t really do more than suggest the full measure of his achievements—the hundreds of imaginative programs he directed, the techniques he pioneered, the artistic collaborations he found so fulfilling, the co-workers he inspired. His generous manner and ardent embrace of life, art and television will be sorely missed.

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*Brian Rose has written two books on American cultural television: Television and the Performing Arts and Televising the Performing Arts (which features a long interview with Kirk Browning). He is a professor in the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University.*