

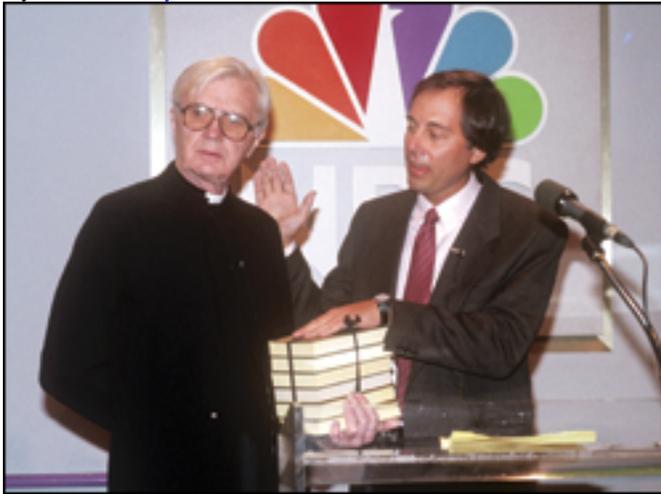
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Posted: Wed., Oct. 17, 2012, 4:00am PT

Collection shows off Tartikoff's legacy

Will be unveiled at the USC School of Cinematic Arts Thursday

By [Brian Lowry](#)



The collection at USC includes memorabilia from events such as Brandon Tartikoff swearing on a stack of bibles to never make another special with Gerald Rivera.

Brandon Tartikoff's legacy finally has a home, and Lilly Tartikoff Karatz has her garage back.

In the 15 years since the legendary NBC programming chief's death, his wife Lilly had held onto a voluminous assortment of memorabilia and more than 4,000 pages of correspondence -- 120 boxes worth of stuff. It took an encounter at a USC football game with George Lucas -- who asked her about preserving his legacy -- to set events in motion for establishing the Brandon Tartikoff Legacy Collection, which will be unveiled at the USC School of Cinematic Arts Thursday evening.

A preview of the exhibition (the university also houses the papers of David L. Wolper and others) provides a virtual how-to manual for Tartikoff's programming philosophy. As Tartikoff Karatz put it, the collection is "essentially a road map of his career, and in his own words."

Spanning a period from 1979 to 1992 -- his entire 10-year run at the helm of NBC as well as his brief time running Paramount -- the material encompasses both hits ("The Cosby Show") and misses ("Manimal"). That's certainly appropriate, since Tartikoff, more than virtually any exec before or since, embraced his failures with almost as much gusto as his successes.

Sifting through the material unearths hand-scribbled network schedules, adages about TV like "The Magnificent Seven Rules of Programming," and countless atta-boys or extensions of advice to other executives, whether solicited or not.

As those who knew him recall, Tartikoff couldn't turn off his programmer's mind, even when he was ill and hospitalized. There's a detailed letter to then-Disney CEO Michael Eisner, for example -- written in June 1997, two months before Tartikoff's death -- suggesting strategies to pull ABC out of its ratings tailspin.

For Lilly, now married to Bruce Karatz, the process of wading through and digitizing these artifacts -- which has taken nearly 18 months -- has been both nostalgic and cathartic. Then again, as those familiar with her philanthropic work know, Tartikoff Karatz is seldom one to engage in half-measures.

"Cancer made him super-focused," she said. "One of his most devastating times was also one of his most productive. He was fighting cancer, fighting to build NBC, fighting to enjoy the time with his family."

Beyond NBC, the Tartikoff collection contains notes Tartikoff Karatz hopes will illustrate an under-appreciated tenure at Paramount, along with his later years as a producer. Amid the 7,500 items, one might peruse a missive to David Letterman about his daytime show in 1980, or a hand-written schedule with notations like "Action Adv or Bochco" penciled into one timeslot. (It's sobering to consider the network weighing an action adventure versus a Steven Bochco drama for Saturday at 10 p.m., long before networks turned that into "Rerun & Amortization Theater.")

As for photos, there's the unexpected sight of a shirtless, tipsy-looking Tartikoff celebrating with an equally shirtless George Wendt and Woody Harrelson at a "Cheers" wrap party.

For USC Cinematic Arts Dean Elizabeth Daley, housing the collection signals the importance of television, and not strictly film, at the university, while providing a resource to students and other scholars.

"They really are made accessible," she said of the libraries. "That's one of the things we pride ourselves on here." Although a Yale graduate, Tartikoff served on USC's board, and Daley noted his career "represents the best of television."

The exhibition includes numerous speeches, presentations to NBC affiliates and press conferences, including one where he demonstrated his hammy theatrical streak by literally swearing on a stack of bibles never to make another special with Geraldo Rivera after critics skewered NBC for airing "Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground."

There's also a transcript of his final address to the Hollywood Radio and Television Society as he was leaving NBC, given merely off note cards, in which Tartikoff discussed his concerns about the future of the TV industry, in remarks he titled "The High Cost of Winning."

"But as I do walk away, I do worry," he said. "My nature is to worry -- I think anybody's nature in this job is to do a lot of worrying, especially about something I care about as much as network television."

In terms of his legacy, at least, he needn't have worried.

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