



## From Entertainer to Educator

Q&A With Michael Severeid

The first classroom job Michael Severeid had was at a mostly Hispanic junior high school in East Los Angeles. Teaching English to kids whose first language was Spanish was quite a challenge for the rookie educator, and Severeid, who was 48 at the time and considering a career change, was in for a lesson of his own: The decision to teach full-time meant he had to go back to college to earn credentials.

It also meant leaving a show business career that spanned more than 20 years. As a program executive at CBS, Severeid had supervised the production of some of the most groundbreaking shows of the 1970s, including "All in the Family," "The Jeffersons," "M\*A\*S\*H," "Maude," and "The Waltons."

A move to MGM eventually left him dissatisfied with the executive track, and with many of his friends leaving show business for other fields, Severeid realized that he, too, was ready for a change. Armed with his teaching credits from East Los Angeles, in 1988 he began working toward a master's degree in communications at Central Missouri State University. His family and friends supported his radical new direction—chief among them his father, the legendary CBS newsman Eric Severeid.

In 1990, after two decades in glitzy Hollywood,

Severeid found a new home in Lancaster County, teaching communications and theatre courses at Elizabethtown College. The network exec-turned-professor says it's the best move he ever made.

Severeid and students building trust.

**HBG: Where did life begin for Michael Severeid?**

**MS:** My twin brother Peter and I were born in Paris at the end of April in 1940, and just a few weeks later, we were on the last refugee ship to get out of Europe. It left from Genoa, Italy, and it was jam-packed. My mother had very little of her own belongings—just two baskets full of diapers for my brother and me, and only some of her clothes. My father's big career break was broadcasting to America the news that the Nazis had taken Paris.

**HBG: What was it like having such a famous father?**

**MS:** He wasn't really a household name until he started doing Walter Cronkite's broadcast on a regular basis in 1963. And by then, I was already married and out of the house, so he was always just "Dad" to me. Having a famous father had its advantages, but it did put certain pressures on me. I never felt the need to either emulate him or surpass him in any way, though.

**HBG: How did you get into show business?**

**MS:** I became interested in acting in high school and college, and then I studied drama in London in the early 1960s. After that I came back to New York City and did what most actors do, which is audition for plays and work part-time jobs. I did some plays and a bit of television, and then after getting married in 1963, I decided to go back to Middlebury College in Vermont to get my history degree. Then I went to graduate school for a while at the University of Minnesota, and eventually got back into acting with the Guthrie Theatre. I went on tour with them and did two plays, and I ended up staying in L.A. I did some television shows like "Ironsides" and "The F.B.I.," and I had small parts in movies like "Airport" and "They Call Me Mr. Tibbs."

**HBG: What memories of that era really stand out for you?**

**MS:** I did a play with Jack Lemmon in 1970 called *Idiot's Delight*. The playwright Garson Kanin directed it, and Rosemary Harris, who plays the aunt in the new "Spiderman" movies, was one of the other stars. Jack was the sweetest, most unaffected guy you'd ever want to meet. The play closed on my thirtieth birthday, and that's when I figured I'd better go find a real job. I had two kids by then. I went down to Mexico to do a movie, and six months later I went to work for CBS.

**HBG: What were your duties as a program executive at CBS?**

**MS:** Essentially, I functioned as liaison between the network and five or six shows that were on the air. I reviewed and approved the scripts, went to the cast readings, attended the tapings, and dealt with any problems that arose. Reading Larry Gelbart's scripts for "M\*A\*S\*H" was a real joy. Every time I'd get a script, I'd shut my office door and just sit there laughing for 20 minutes.

**HBG: Was it difficult to balance the creative side of the business with the corporate side?**

**MS:** I could appreciate the corporate side, but I also understood where the artists were coming from. It wasn't so much about counting the number of "damns" or "hells" in the script; it was really about the direction of the shows. Sometimes I had to go to them and say, "They're not going to let you do that scene where the two characters are in bed."

**HBG: What was it like working with a cutting-edge TV producer like Norman Lear?**

**MS:** Norman was tough, but I had a fairly good relationship with him. If the network had objections to something in a script, we had to take them to Norman, but with Norman you generally lost the battle [laughs]. He had so many shows on the air and was such a major force that the network wasn't willing to fight him much.

**HBG: In 1979, you became a vice president at MGM and were involved in producing films like "Fame," "The Formula" and "Cannery Row." Why did you leave CBS for MGM?**

**MS:** One of the reasons I took the job was [that] I thought it was more prestigious than television. In retrospect, it wasn't the smartest move I could have made.

**HBG: And from MGM you became a staff writer and story editor for "The Dukes of Hazzard." That's a major career shift, isn't it?**

**MS:** To be honest, sure, the quality of material was one thing, but it was still an enormous challenge since they'd already done 120 episodes by the time I came on the show. We weren't writing for the critics, we were writing for six- to 10-year-olds.

**HBG: Of all the career directions you could have taken after leaving show business, why did you choose teaching?**

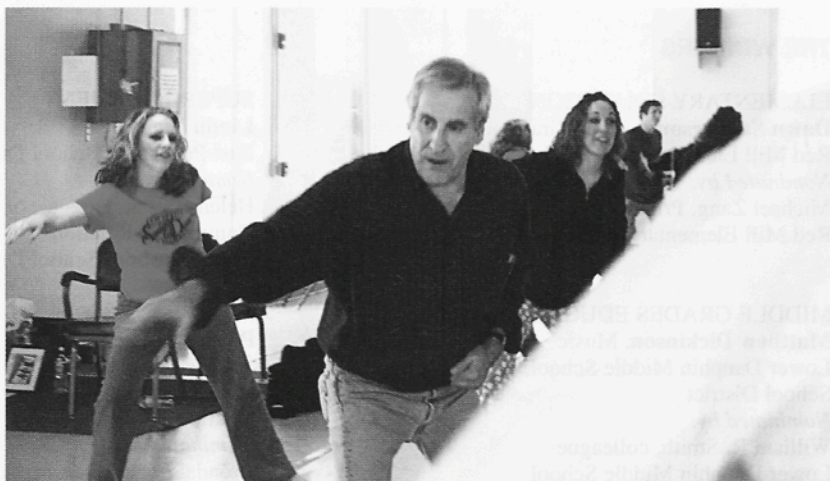
**MS:** I always say I don't know whether show business left me or I left it [laughs]. I'd spent 20-odd years in L.A., and I just wasn't happy there anymore. Also, my dad was thrilled when I started teaching. He thought I had a "young attitude" and would relate to students well. I wanted to take the knowledge and experiences that I'd had in theatre, television and film and bring it into the classroom.

**HBG: Why did you pick Elizabethtown College?**

**MS:** I like E-town because I'm a product of liberal arts colleges myself. I like the slower pace and the beauty of Lancaster County. It's an ideal situation for me. The students and the administration are great, and in the past 14 years we've really expanded the theatre program. We created a theatre minor, and eventually a major, and now we have 15 to 20 new students in the program every year. The college has committed significant resources to the program, and we're doing very solid plays.

**HBG: You've directed an impressive list of productions at the college: *Bus Stop*, *The Children's Hour*, *Inherit the Wind*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Under Milk Wood*, *West Side Story*, etc. Is there a particular show you think really exemplifies what you set out to do?**

**MS:** Well, *Superstar* in Spring 1998 was a biggie because of the size and the scope. We had a 47-member cast and a 10-piece band, and we really gave it the high-tech treatment. It was a multimedia show with a large video screen projecting graphics and video, and



we had live cameras onstage and in the balcony. It was a technical nightmare, but it worked. We sold out three shows, and the community loved it. What I'd like to do now is tackle some current issues that are relevant, like stem cell research, and maybe do some pieces that discuss science and religion. I'd like to have resource material and literature in the theatre, and have talk-back sessions that involve the faculty. That is what we should be doing. I like knowing that we're providing something to these kids that they can use for the rest of their lives.

*Larry Portzline is a professional writer who teaches college students part-time.*

Movement classes are essential for theatre students.

**HBG**