BILL MOYERS' JOURNAL: INTERNATIONAL REPORT,

produced by WNET/13, New York

"A CONVERSATION WITH HUW WHELDON"
Air Date: March 13, 1975

Director/Executive Producer: Jack Sameth Editor-In-Chief: Bill Moyers

ANNOUNCER: This program was made possible by grants from the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Ford Foundation, International Business Machines Corporation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

BILL MOYERS: What do you do now? Do you say, this is what is good and this is what the people want to see?

HUW WHELDON: Oh, no, my dear chap, I mean, you must, that, oh no, there is a, there is a, there is a question, the answer to which in broadcasting in this country is taboo, and it's not less than taboo, I mean, it's much more taboo than incest, it really is taboo.

MOYERS: At least it sounds right--

WHELDON: And the question, the question is this, do you give them what they want or do you give them what they ought to have?

MOYERS: I'm Bill Moyers in London. And tonight I want you to meet a man who's presided over some of the most creative programming in the young history of television. I've asked him to meet me at the Glass House Pub in the West End of London, not only for the sake of a convenient meeting place but for the same of a metaphor.

There are two institutions which, to me reflect the vitality of this society, both in its ancient and modern sense; one is the pub. Over the centuries the people of this country have met in places like this, to inform themselves, to debate, to communicate, as well as to have a drink. The other institution is the British Broadcasting Corporation. One of the institutions is quite ancient. One is quite modern. But they both have to do with communications. With informing a people of their past. And also of giving people a chance to laugh. No institution has done it better than the BBC.

MOYERS: This symbol is known throughout the English-speaking world. It stands for the British Broadcasting Corporation and BBC stands for innovation and excellence in television.

Sir Kenneth Clark. "Civilization".

SIR KENNETH CLARK: Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts--the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, which of the three, the only trustworthy one is the last.

MOYERS: Alistair Cooke's "America".

ALISTAIR COOKE: When I first came to this country, I'd been teaching school in East Germany and pictures of Frederick the Great were on the walls of every home, public place, barbershop, and it was the same with Roosevelt. He was a Godhead throughout the 48 states. I didn't know this. And I well remember being tossed out in the middle of the night by a saloonkeeper in the Rockies when I suggested to him that maybe his picture of Roosevelt over the bar was a little romanticized.

MOYERS: Jacob Bronowski. "The Ascent of Man".

JACOB BRONOWSKI: There is no place and no moment in history where I could stand and say: Arithmetic begins here. Now. People have been counting as they've been talking--in every culture. Arithmetic, like language begins in legend.

MOYERS: "Elizabeth R" starring Glenda Jackson.

ELIZABETH: I may not be a lion but I am a lion's cub and I have a lion's heart.

MOYERS: Monty Python's Flying Circus.

(MUSIC)

MOYERS: And this is Huw Wheldon, the Welshman, who keeps the world of BBC Television spinning. He's been with BBC for twenty-three years, as producer and broadcaster, as director of music and documentary programs, as controller of programs and, since 1959, as managing director for television.
Were you surprised when I asked you to meet me in a pub?

WHELDON: I wasn't surprised that you asked me to meet you in a pub. I was a bit surprised to find that it was this one. I thought it would be one of the pubs where we hold rehearsals because it's a very curious thing. I try and spend a few hours, once a week, at rehearsals, if I can. I don't always succeed. But I certainly spend some hours during a month at rehearsals.
We got huge rehearsal blocks, rehearsal rooms and so on. But the tradition of London in the theatre and in television and in radio, the tradition of London is that rehearsals take place in the upstairs rooms of pubs. And at this moment, while we're here, there's no doubt that there'll be, oh, at least a hundred and fifty rehearsals of one sort or another taking place in the upstairs rooms of pubs up and down the West End.

MOYERS: How did that come about?

WHELDON: I don't know. If you're going to hold rehearsals, you've got to hold them somewhere. And if Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson, on the one hand, or pop singers on the other, no matter who it is, you're going to rehearse, you're going to rehearse somewhere. And the upstairs rooms of pubs is what suggests itself to the great British hearts. And it's been taking place for years.

MOYERS: What is the most unique thing about the BBC to you?

WHELDON: Well, it's a very big question. I know the answer. But it's a long answer. I'm trying to give you a short answer. The important thing about the BBC to me is--it's got nothing to do with me or my colleagues is--it's this: that our forefathers in the 1920s and 30s invented a constitutional instrument, which they called the BBC, which allowed you to take broadcasting very very seriously, which means that you've got to do very very funny television and very very sad television and very very short television and very very long television and television about facts and television about fictions. And that this, the notion of being as protean as that, as many-sided, is not because I am many-sided or because other people are many-sided. It's because our forefathers invented this kind of instrument, which allowed it.
But the great thing about the BBC is that it encourages you to make good programs. I mean, you often fail, of course when you make rotten programs. But the foundation itself is an encouragement to make good programs. And that's a very engaging one.

MOYERS: And yet the foundation financially is based upon everyone's participating in the cost of the enterprise. And while this may sound naive to you, to an American, it seems that that would pull down the general level of excellence. When you are trying to please every citizen who is, himself, an advertiser or a subscriber to your medium, that it would somehow bring down to what Tocqueville feared as the ultimate democratization of information and culture.

WHELDON: Well, as a matter of fact, it might, you see; I don't think it'll happen now. I think it's too late. We're all right now. But it might have happened. I mean, it's a very real thing.

The way in which, let's get it quite clear, the way in which it is financed is, that if you've got a television set, as you know, in this country, you've got to pay a license, I mean, you've got to pay a charge. More for color than it is for black and white.

MOYERS: You pay that. You go down to the post office.

WHELDON: You go to the post office and pay it. Now, that money, see, it's not a tax; that's the nice thing about that money. It doesn't belong to the government. The government has allowed that money to come to us. We could collect if we wanted to. But we don't. We get the Post Office to collect it.

MOYERS: I hope it doesn't take as long for you to get your money as it does for us to get our mail.

WHELDON: Well, it's the same kind of thing. You know, post offices are like that. On the other hand, the irony is, the fact is that what we find is that if we collected the money ourselves, it would cost us even more. And so we get it collected by the post office. But it is our money. And we collect that money from, as you say, the subscribers, let us say, the people who have television sets.

Now, then, in a way, they found out in the early days of radio, that collecting the money which you're to make your programs with in that way, does mean that, naturally, you've got to deal with that audience. I mean, it's they who are paying the money. They pay. They've got every right to have what they want.

And they found early on that it was very difficult to do a full public service operation on one network, owing to the fact that at any given moment of time, on this network, you had some program which would please an awful lot of people but would also displease quite an awful lot of people. And so early on, in the 20s, they came to the conclusion that if you were going to do a very big, public service job, in this country, with that kind of relationship to the audience, which is that they are paying, then you've got to have two networks, at least, you've got to have two--so that if you've got boxing on the one, you've got non-boxing on the other. And this came into television. And as soon as television started, in our country, BBC television, as soon as the network started, BBC One, straightaway, we wanted a second network. And we got the second network, of course, in due course; so, now, we've got two networks; they're both BBC networks, they're both national and they're all over the country. We make programs for both the networks and those--there is another network, which is a commercial one--

MOYERS: A third one. Yes.

WHELDON: --a third one, which is also very good. So that one way and another you provide choice and with two networks, you can carry a real range of possibilities, so that you deal with a great majority. As you should. They pay. And who are you to look down your long nose at them? You see? I mean, fair play. They pay. So that you've got to deal with them decently and properly.

At the same time, the country's packed with minorities, like any country,

there are minorities everywhere, and you've got to deal with them too. And if you've got two networks planned together, you can't do it without. If we'd only had one, I think we might have gone your way.

MOYERS: What do you mean our way?

WHELDON: The way you just suggested, that we would have gone.

MOYERS: That you look at the audience--

WHELDON: Yes.

MOYERS: --say, what do they want?

WHELDON: That's right.

MOYERS: What do you do now? Do you say--this is what is good and this is what the people ought to see?

WHELDON: Oh, no, no, my dear chap, oh, no; I mean, you must--oh no. There is a, there is a, there is a question, the answer to which, in broadcasting, in this country is taboo and it's not less than taboo, I mean, it's much more taboo than incest. It really is taboo.

MOYERS: I'm leaving town right after this program.

WHELDON: And the question, the question is this: Do you give them what they want or do you give them what they ought to have? Now, that's a taboo question, because there is no answer to that question. I mean if you'd sat that question to Shakespeare or to P. G. Wodehouse or to George Eliot or to Raymond Chandler, in fact, to anybody who makes things, what would his answer be? Neither. I am giving them neither what they want nor what I think they ought to have.

What Shakespeare and P. G. Wodehouse and Raymond Chandler and Updike and Mailer and anybody gives people is what they can make a living by and something which will gain them the admiration of people whose judgment they admire.

And you finesse the question. Under no circumstances, did Shakespeare say to himself, writing "Twelfth Night", now, is this what they want or--now, is this what they ought to have? Not at all. What he did was to write as good a play as he possibly could, which he thought--he'd also make a living by, make enough to keep himself going to lunch and write another one. That's what he did. And what's good enough for him is good enough for us.

MOYERS: No one sits around the table and says, we ought to do historical drama, we ought to do scientific--

WHELDON: Well, they do, because there's money in it, you see, it takes a lot of money, so there's a lot of sitting around the table. Getting their money is the difference. It's nearly always obsession, isn't it, in the end, it's obsession, preoccupation.

"The Forsyte Saga" is a fellow called Donald Wilson. Highlander. With hair coming out of the cheekbones, you know, rather tall; he was obsessed with "The Forsyte Saga". He just thought that it would go very well. MGM had the rights. And we couldn't get the rights for ages. MGM wouldn't sell them. And that made him all the more obsessed. And in the end, he went to work on "The Forsyte Saga" and found that you couldn't do it unless you--unless you wrote a new part one. He wrote a new part one all by himself. Nobody knew he wrote it but he did. And then he drove and drove and drove to get it, to get it on the air; I mean, he was a producer; he was the head of sales at that time; it cost a lot of money to make,

but in the end he succeeded. Once he got his money, he just went on.

MOYERS: I always wondered if "The Forsyte Saga", the popularity of it didn't represent some yearning for the kind of order and regularity and position of each of us, prior to World War One, if there's some nostalgia there.

WHELDON: I don't doubt it. I don't doubt it. On the other hand, it was also very well done, you see; and Soames, you see, was marvelous.

MOYERS: The chief character.

WHELDON: Yes. I mean he's a man you--and I thought he was better even than John Galsworthy embodied him forth as being in the original book. And he was not very nice, Soames, he was not very graceful; and he was a lawyer, and he was not very aristocratic; he was rather dull; and he was a bit mean. And yet, at the same time, he was enormously human and done down by this ghastly wife of his--Irene. Silvery gray in the moonlight. And there was a sense in which he pulled off all that and the country, as it were, you couldn't fall in love with him, but the country got obsessed by Soames. I personally think--

MOYERS: Was it just very good soap opera--

WHELDON: Oh, no.

MOYERS: Or was it more?

WHELDON: No, I think soap opera, you see, when you give a dog a bad name, you hang it; I think soap opera--we won't--another taboo--I won't allow the word soap opera to be mentioned in BBC television and if anybody goes so far as to say, well, now, this might make a good soap opera, as far as I'm concerned, that's finished and we don't start. Because you've given it a bad name. The word soap opera suggests that it's manufactured. No program should be manufactured--only made. And "The Forsyte Saga" was certainly made.

MOYERS: What do you mean by that? The difference between manufacturing and making.

WHELDON: Well, to manufacture a program is to take a formula, a kind of easy way in which you can make quick tricks, which you can do quite quickly, without too much rehearsal, without too much work. You rest on the formulation, on the formula. That is what a soap opera is, fundamentally and you churn it out. That's the expression. Churn it out. You manufacture it. Now, I don't believe any television program, under any circumstances should ever be turned out. All television programs should be made, either with writers and directors, working together, or with contributors and directors working together, all production should be made and never turned out.

And that goes, above all, for narrative programs, including "The Forsyte Saga".

MOYERS: Did "The Forsyte Saga" become a national obsession in this country?

WHELDON: Yes. I don't think it became a national obsession in this country, to the extent it did in Yugoslavia. I went to Yugoslavia, where it was on there and they put it on on Thursday nights and when you went out on Thursday night, they called it "Saga Forsyta" and when you--you couldn't find a human being anywhere. Policemen were indoors. I mean, everyone was indoors, watching this extraordinary English work. Why, I cannot imagine.

MOYERS: I can't understand that either.

WHELDON: Well, there you are, it went down very big in Yugoslavia. In fact, it helped us get the Army for "War And Peace". Because one of the difficulties about "War And Peace" was how to get an Army. You see, you can't pretend to do "War and Peace" with six soldiers and a shield. You can't do it in that way. You've got to have an army. And, of course, an army is very difficult to find.

Now, the Yugoslav Army is a well-known Army and a very cheerful one. And eventually, we hired the Yugoslav--and quite cheap of course; and so we hired the Yugoslav Army; they were terrific.

MOYERS: So those French and Russians dying in "War And Peace" were Yugoslavians.

WHELDON: Yes. They were--to a man.

MOYERS: Of the programs that have been on the air since you have been managing director of the BBC, which have you personally enjoyed most?

WHELDON: Enjoyed?

MOYERS: You, personally.

WHELDON: Oh, I hadn't expected that question. I enjoyed? Well, I can tell you. They're either great cries of the human spirit or very very funny programs.

MOYERS: Do you like Monty Python?

WHELDON: I adore Monty Python. I think Monty Python's really an excellent program.

MOYERS: What appeals to you about it?

WHELDON: Mainly, what appeals about it is that it makes me laugh. And what I like is laughs. And if I had to choose, on my deathbed between watching the news or panorama or window on the world, or some big program on science or Bronowski or K. Clark or any of these big programs or Bill Moyers with Dr. Kissinger, if I had to choose between seeing either of those or seeing Monty Python or Dad's Army on my deathbed, I would undoubtedly choose Monty Python or Dad's Army, wouldn't I?

MOYERS: You wrote me and said that your favorite segment of Monty Python was the Department of Silly Walks. Why?

WHELDON: Because it made me laugh.

MAN: Good morning, Monty, could I have a copy of the Times, tuppence please, thank you very much?

(SHRIEKS AND LAUGHTER)

MAN: Good morning.

MAN: I'm sorry to have kept you waiting but--(LAUGHTER)--my walk has become rather silly recently--(LAUGHTER)--

MOYERS: How did the decision get made to make some of these programs that have made such an impact, not only here, but in the United States? Henry--the Six Wives of Henry the Eighth.

WHELDON: There was a man called Gerald Savory who wrote a play called "George and Margaret" many years ago. He went to Hollywood. He joined our staff some years ago now and he started talking about the possibility, the idea that we might do six separate plays about these six wives and so he made a few inquiries, to find out whether this was technically possible.

Round about, round about this time, he got a license, so did I, that we really should do this and we were told by a woman called Naomi Caton--she's still with us, a director, very distinguished one and she wanted to direct a couple of these, which she did, in the final analysis; and the reason why she wanted to do this was because she was sure it would work. And the reason why she was sure it would work, was because she remembered that many years ago, we had done a curious program called "Animal, Mineral, and Vegetable" where you've got three archaeologists, sitting around, being asked to give attribution: What is this, Sir Mortimer? He'd look at this thing and he's say, well, that's a 16th century spectacle case. Thank you very much. Quite right. Go to the top of the class.

Now, Naomi remembered that on one of these, on one of these occasions, in the Tower of London, after the program was finished, they were sitting around in the office; they noticed on the mantelshelf of the office, they noticed that there was a silver or silvery codpiece or jockstrap and one of these great archaeological grandees said, I see that you have a silver--heh heh--codpiece up there. And somebody said, yes, would you care to give an attribution? And he looks at it. And he said, why, why French. Wrong. So he passed it on to his neighbor. And his neighbor couldn't give us an attribution either. And the people in the Tower were delighted. And they said, well, they said, it came off the garments of Henry the Eighth. Henry the Eighth's armor is downstairs at the bottom of the staircase. And that armor is very famous armor. You should have guessed this. Now, then not only is his armor there but there's the undergarments he wore under his armor, which was a coat of chain mial and this is the codpiece of that armor. And the reason why it's here is because it came loose and we've had it here for sometime and we should really weld it back on. But we've forgotten. We keep on forgetting to do it.

But the reason why it became loose is because generations of Cockney women have given it a bit of a rub on their way past, on their way upstairs, as a kind of little fertility symbol. If you're going to go past Henry the Eighth, then you want to make a little bow towards fertility because Henry the Eighth is one of the great symbols in the British mind--I mean, like Humpty Dumpty and Alfred and the Cakes, and Lord Nelson. He occupies a real position in the British consciousness, although, in point of fact, as we all know, he never had very many children; the fact is, he's thought of like Bluebeard and his castle of locking them up and knocking them off. And as a great fertility symbol. And there he is.

And Naomi was sure, because she remembered this. She was right. I mean, he occupies a real place in the British heart. And there was no problem. And "The Six Wives of Henry The Eighth" got itself therefore done.

MOYERS: One ought never to forsake the force of creativity.

WHELDON: Well, that's right. You see, it isn't--I mean, that's a very good point, isn't it. Because the--I mean, yes, yes, it is a good point; you made it all. That it is true. Because the source of creativity, you see, if you're going to be serious, now, I'm going to be serious about it, it is a question of living in a creative community; you see, we have a very funny system here; it wouldn't do in the states; it would be against the monopoly commission anyway; it would be absolutely out of the question--against the monopoly laws. It's a very curious system we have.

I mean, I have these great offices over at Television Center. As I say, there are seven thousand people there every day. We make eighty percent of all the programs that are shown on our two networks. We make ourselves there. Those seven thousand people are all producers and designers and cameramen and electricians and so on and so forth. And the place is seething. It is a highly creative community.

Now some of them are only in there for a few months because they've come in from the theatre or the films. Some are there for life. Because, like me, they signed on many years ago to be there. And one way or another, it's a slightly mobile but very very large creative community. And it's in the corridors and the clubs and the offices of that community, that creativity takes place. And creativity nearly always is a question of somebody very bright, like Gerald Savory, getting onto somebody very bright like Naomi Caton. And between them, thinking up some bright scheme. And then, it's up to executives like me--there are lots of us--to agree to those schemes.

Now, on the whole, you agree with them, if you trust the people. And they may be things before. They're very good. They know what they're doing. You trust them...and that's the name of the game. But it depends on individuals. It depends on writers.

MOYERS: But it also depends on tradition. It depends on culture. As you said, earlier--

WHELDON: We're lucky, we're lucky because there is no doubt that in the country, we do have, we do have a very very marvelous literary and dramatic tradition and you can buy actors, I mean, you know, you can buy them in any grocery shop; walk into a grocery shop and ask for fifteen actors, please--five gentlemen and ten ladies and they'll be delivered at three o'clock in the afternoon. I mean, actors are two a penny in England. God knows why. Nobody knows why. I mean, it's a country full of stiff upper lip and dignity and so on but there it is. All--I think, as a Welshman, I can't Act. All English people, men and women, act from the minute they're born. And nobody knows why. It's just a mystery.

MOYERS: Let's talk about trust, Huw. You have to trust a man a great deal to give him thirteen hours on a national network.

WHELDON: But you've got no alternative, you see, I mean the only other thing to do is to trust a committee and, as you know, you can't trust committees. Committees will do nothing. You've got no alternative. Economics is now very much the name of the game. Isn't it? Everybody's talking about economics. And economic man. And inflation. And the economic world. And we thought, perhaps we ought to do something big about economics. Well, what do you do? I don't know what you do about economics.

Adrian Malone is a good producer. And Adrian Malone produced "Bronowski: Ascent Of Man" series. He was very inventive and he got on well with Bronowski and we wondered whether Malone might handle something to do with economic man.

But there is no use getting Malone to do that by himself. You've got to have him with somebody. And the question was, who. Well, we looked around and the question is who really does have authority? And they're not easy to find. I mean, most economists are dull dogs anyway; I mean, they're not as bad as sociologists, but I mean, they're pretty bad.

MOYERS: There goes a very substantial size of my audience. I can hear the sets clicking right now.

WHELDON: You know what economists are like. They're all dull dogs, aren't they?

Anyway, in the end, we went for John Kenneth Galbraith who is not a dull dog and who does have a certain amount of authority and who does cut ice. And we asked him whether he'd be interested in making thirteen hours of programs, taking two years or so for the making of them and he said, yes, he would; and so he and Adrian Malone have now got together and they'll spend the next two years filming around the world.

Well, now, I don't know what they're going to do. But you mean, I've got to

find somebody else--the thing not to have is some panel that'll look at their work. I mean, the best thing you can do is get John Kenneth Galbraith and Adrian Malone. Who else can you trust?

MOYERS: Do you look at these programs before they go on the air?

WHELDON: Not at all.

MOYERS: Does anyone.

WHELDON: No. Not unless there is something very very controversial; I mean, if it's full of naked women or sex--

MOYERS: Is that controversial?

WHELDON: Sure it's controversial. I mean, if there are, say, seven hundred naked women upside down--

MOYERS: I will not go for the moment into the analysis of--now seven hundred would be wrong and six hundred would be all right because I want to stay with Galbraith a minute.

When you ask an individual to do that because he's, as you implied lively and articulate, aren't you, at the same time, eliminating somebody who may have just as much to say as John Kenneth Galbraith and may even be as legitimate but isn't lively and articulate and can't communicate on this medium?

WHELDON: Oh, absolutely, oh, of course, you've got no alternative; certainly, you're eliminating more than him. You're also eliminating people who haven't got enough time.

Now, you see, what we try--

MOYERS: They don't teach at Harvard, which counts--

WHELDON: Well, there you are. What we're trying to do in these big programs is to make, in television terms, the equivalent of a publication of the first order, so that had we been living in the middle of the 19th Century and Darwin had written "The Origin of Species", why shouldn't he have written it for television, as a television program.

"Civilization" is certainly the most important single work, I believe, that Kenneth Clark has made, for example and he's a very very well-known writer on the history of art and his books will be on bookshelves for many years.

Now, then, if you're trying to make the equivalent of a first rate work of art, which is what it is, in the end, then you've got to find somebody who's authoritative. But the limitations are tremendous because they've got to be authoritative like K. Clark or Cooke or Bronowski or Galbraith but they've got to be, as you rightly say, articulate and capable of speaking on these old cameras and so on, which is not everybody's cup of tea; all those are experienced in it; and, as I say, lastly, they've all got to be free to do--to be free for two and a half years; well, that limits things very much; on the other hand, as you know, Bill, there's nothing like a limitation. I mean, if you really want to find a house with only one chimney and a yew tree in the garden and a bent staircase, all you've got to do is to put those down in an advertisement and you have fifteen tomorrow.

MOYERS: But let me commit the dilemma in another way. You trust a Clark and a Galbraith because they have authority. They can communicate. And they can organize their thought. But then, can the viewer trust this medium? Because, in a sense, your choice of those people is going to bias or structure what is presented to them. That is, there may be a legitimate view of the world, of civilization, of

economics--

WHELDON: Oh, well, they're not supposed to be--God--

MOYERS: --that can't be communicated on television.

WHELDON: So, okay, let that be communicated in books or--whatever it is--it's like a book. You've got to be able to be a good writer, you see, I mean, you're limited by those who can actually write. Now, there are lots of people, especially economists who can't write at all. So that, in terms of getting a decent book published about economics, you've also got a very grave limitation on.

MOYERS: It's a limitation that does not seem to impose many handicaps. Aren't, shouldn't somebody proclaim the rights of the inarticulate?

WHELDON: Yes. But you can't, by definition have that proclaimed by a television service. It's like, saying in the theatre, should not somebody proclaim the rights of the untheatrical? I'm sure they should. But it's no use getting plays from people who can't write plays. See, we don't believe--I mean, it's like you; you could easily be, have been earlier in life a big man on the BBC, you're the kind of man the corporation would have gone for because the BBC, both in sound and in television has never believed in people who look nice, you see--

MOYERS: Well, wait a minute, I'm not sure I understand.

WHELDON: Well, now, all right, I beg your pardon. You simply, you simply look nice. You do look nice. But it's never believed in charm people; you see. It's never believed in announcers who are nothing except announcers. It's never believed in anchormen who are just television anchormen. It has always believed in people who are authoritative in their own right, either as television directors or as journalists or as scientists or as playwrights or something--and most of the people who appear and appear a lot on BBC Television are either scientists or artists or historians in their own right or they are journalists or directors or whatever it is, as you were. I mean, you are not--I mean, you and I have both been in the same business. I was on the screen for many years. But if there's one thing I loathed being called, it was a television personality. It suggested you couldn't be anything else, didn't it?

MOYERS: It seemed so ephemeral.

WHELDON: That's right. Well, I wasn't a television personality. I mean, I was a television producer and a television director before that for many many years and that was the game I knew. It was by virtue of my authority in that game that I was able, in the end, to inhabit the screen. That's right. Isn't it?

MOYERS: Did you select television as a profession?

WHELDON: Yes.

MOYERS: Why?

WHELDON: But late in life, mind you.

MOYERS: Late?

WHELDON: Yes. Because I, personally, I mean, I had, well, I'd had one of these undistinguished careers where you fail exams and do all that kind of thing,

you see, and then I joined the Army and I enjoyed the Army very much indeed--

MOYERS: You enjoyed--

WHELDON: --for a lot of years--enormously. And very very--I mean guaranteed life and limb. There's nothing like a war. Very very enjoyable.

MOYERS: I've heard you before discuss the Army. I've heard you talk about it being the most exciting experience of your life.

WHELDON: I don't know about the most exciting; I mean I suppose getting married is the most exciting. Getting born. But--oh I did, I did. There's no doubt that I enjoyed the Army. Yes.

MOYERS: Do you think that this is not unique to Huw Wheldon, that this is something that had been--that whole generation of men who took part in the saving of Britain and the saving of Kenneth Clark's western civilization?

WHELDON: Oh, I don't think because it was saving Britain or saving civilization. I think it was just because it was the Army. I mean, it was nice, meeting sergeant-majors. I mean, it was nice being told--I mean, I remember, writing something down on a bit of paper and sergeant-major bent over and said to me, sorry, he said, always have everything in writing and never put pen to paper. I mean, dead right. I tore it up at once. Quite right sergeant-major, I said.

And I don't know. I liked the men. The great thing. I see--my life has suggested to me that things go in a funny, in a different way. I remember very vividly, indeed, the first week I spent in the Army, as a private soldier and we were in a barracks room and this was early in 1940 and there were no uniforms, uniforms hadn't arrived, this was in the buffs in Canterbury. And so there we were, thirty men in our ordinary clothes, some people in tweed jackets and some people in dark suits and some people in blue serge, working men and university men and aging men--well, thirty; young men, nineteen, And it was a very agreeable week we had.

And then, one day, the uniforms turned up. And we all put these uniforms on. And the first thing that happened to me, most unexpectedly, as soon as people were in uniform was what I saw instantly were their faces properly for the first time. I no longer saw their clothes or the class that lay behind them or the life that one could induce from their shoes, as it were; what you saw for the first time was a group of thirty people with countenances. And I saw these men. And I thought, these really are men. And they were all sorts. And they were strong men and feeble men and hesitant men and impulsive men. And I liked to be part of this body of men.

MOYERS: I don't want to take an unjustifiable, long leap of metaphor; but I am intrigued by the fact that television imposes on a culture the same kind of order a similar kind of order that the Army imposed on this vast--

WHELDON: I don't think it does. No. No. No.

MOYERS: It makes history.

WHELDON: No. No. Structure. I disagree. I think--I think a single director, I mean, with respect, I disagree, I think a single director, directing a show, "Three Sisters" or Monty Python--whatever it is, funny show, light show, a director is in a very tyrannous position; it's a limited tyranny and he is in a very strong, commanding position; he's like a sergeant with troops or an officer with troops; there's no doubt about that. But television as a whole, television service, certainly in our case, the thing about the BBC is that what we live in is a very pluralistic society; in many ways, this is obviously a Christian country; it is clearly a democracy. It is clearly part of the Western world.

And yet, having said that, in a way, Christiantiy is challenged all over the place. Democracy can be seen as going all sorts of different ways. And there is a great deal of debate as to how we should grope our way forward to new forms of belief and behavior.

Now, then, those sorts of divisions make different voices. And it seems to me that what a television service has to do is to let all those voices sing. And, in fact, what you've got to have in a country that are divided, but at the same time, in its own way, unified country, is a television service which allows the Christian, the agnostic, and the humanist, and the man who believes in the left and the far left and the far right and the middle right--you want all sorts of pressures by way of plays, documentaries, programs to go forward--different voices, all of us, in the end, of course, quite clearly inhabiting a country that is soaked in the Christian tradition and soaked in the Western democratic tradition of itself two thousand years. But nevertheless, there are many voices and the business of television is not to impose a pattern upon those voices but let those voices sing come what may.

And yet--

MOYERS: There's a great common theme--or at least, a common assumption of selection of those programs that have been brought from the BBC to America. I mean, Kenneth Clark is an Alistair Cooke in another disguise. And Bronowski, clearly a product of the Western tradition is, in science, in a way to what Clark was--

WHELDON: Well, naturally, if you do something very big of that kind, you go for big, central themes, I suppose; like if you're going to do a very very big dramatization, then you tend to go for Trollope or "War And Peace" or Galsworthy. I mean, you wouldn't risk something smaller and less central.

On the other hand, I mean, there are programs that have been taking place since we've been sitting here. Programs are going to take place on two networks, all afternoon and all evening. I mean, there are going to be an awful lot of programs made by midnight and they are not going to be anything but very various. By definition.

MOYERS: We see the best in the United States. Are you implying that there are some things, not quite so good?

WHELDON: Oh, yeh, with knobs on. Yes, oh yes. I mean, what--

MOYERS: Do you do detective stories? Do you do science fiction stories?

WHELDON: But, of course. But, of course. I mean, going back to what I said a moment ago, if you're going to deal with majorities as well as minorities, if you're going to keep faith with the members of those huge majorities who actually pay in the end all the money by which you make your programs, well, then you've got to make popular programs; that is to say, you've got to make programs which will please me, both when I'm a member of the minority, which is quite often and when I'm a member of the majority, which is quite often because we're all members of both all the time, aren't we.

MOYERS: What are some of the pressures on you? Where do the forces of constraint?

WHELDON: We have very few. We have very few. Most of the pressures upon me, personally, come from making poor programs. I mean, you've got to take the risk of making poor programs, you see, because the game is not avoiding failure at all costs. The game is giving triumph a chance, isn't it? That's the game.

Well, now, if you're going to do that, then you're going to have failures. Plus that, you're going to have failures where there was no chance of triumph

anyway; you just fall because you made a wrong decision to start with; you mucked it up. And the greatest pressures that I have is--is--people who are my colleagues and my friends and therefore, because we are seven thousand strong over there at television center and the place seethes with creativity and out of the creativity quite often, there can come forth these mice. And it's a very difficult thing to live with a mouse, when you expected it to have been a buffalo. You see.

MOYERS: Does the government put pressure on you?

WHELDON: The government? Not at all.

MOYERS: I was here in 1971, when there was a small storm in Parliament because the BBC was showing extremism in Northern Ireland and there were complaints that you were, in effect, promoting violence, not intentionally but consequentially, and for a while--

WHELDON: There was a row. There was a row--

MOYERS: --why you didn't put on IRA leaders?

WHELDON: Well, we've always been very careful about IRA leaders. We've allowed, naturally, you've got to cover what's happening, though, you see, it's a very complicated process, covering what's happening, in your own country, where you've got civil disturbance.

Now, then, the IRA, of course, are from another country. They're from the Republic and we've always been very careful. We've only had three IRA men on, throughout anyway, as IRA people. The row wasn't so much about that. The row was about dealing with the thing in as big a way as we were doing.

Now, there was one government, there was one moment, probably the moment you were thinking of when the government in the presence of Mr. Maudling, who had just come back as Foreign Secretary--Mr. Maudling was Home Secretary at that time and Mr. Maudling asked us not do a program we were thinking of doing, which was a big debate with Painsley and everybody in it--about our stump and we'd got all the main people, you know, to be in this debate, and it was going to last two or three hours; we'd got Mr. Justice Devlin--all sorts of people. It was a very well thought-out program, we thought.

Anyway, Mr. Maudling got very bothered about this and felt that it would harm things and he did ask us publicly--he wrote us a letter asking us not to put it on. And so we had to take it very seriously. And it went to the Board of Governors. The BBC, like everything else has got a board of governors. And so they thought about it. And in the end, they decided, they would put it on because they thought it was a perfectly proper program to put on. So they did put it on. And there was a row, you know; these rows happen.

MOYERS: In 1956, if I remember correctly, when commercial television arrived in Britain, BBC lost a large portion of its audience.

WHELDON: Yes. They went over that. That's right. They said, all right, here we go boys, and at last, we can go look at--at commercial television. And they did. And for a time they were looking at commercial television in the relationship of seventy to thirty; I mean seventy percent of the audience was commercial; the commercial competitor. And only thirty percent was with us. It was intolerable.

MOYERS: What happened, do you think? Why?

WHELDON: We naturally put that right.

MOYERS: Are they back?

WHELDON: Well, of course.

MOYERS: How did you get them back?

WHELDON: Well, we got them back in two ways. We naturally got very bothered because, if our audience had gone down, much more, down to twenty; and, of course, once you go down, it's like a falling circulation, isn't it, I mean, the inherent dynamic of a falling circulation is downwards. From him that taketh away--from him that hath not is taken away even that which he hath. And if you're on thirty percent this week, you're going to be on twenty-nine next week.

MOYERS: And everything that goes down doesn't necessarily come up.

WHELDON: That's right. It doesn't. So we were quite bothered. Secondly, of course, this is going to do a great disservice to a great institution. I mean, the BEC's not some little sexual institution, I mean, it's a great institution of the Western World. And it's not going to be cut off with twenty percent of the audience. So we had to do something.

Well, in the final analysis, it wasn't very difficult, really. We set about a little bit of rescheduling. We found, it's one of these ridiculous stories, we found that if you could, if you could get a very big part of the audience going with you, round about half past six, seven o'clock, and half past seven in the evening, that they were likely to remain with you for the rest of the evening, come what may: I mean, we found, in other words, that commercial, our commercial competitors were putting on very popular programs at half past six and seven and half past seven.

So we thought, well now, then, we'd better knock them in the eye. That's the obvious thing to do. And we are quite capable of making popular programs. And the great thing to do is to make these popular programs and put them opposite those and beat them at it. You see. So we decided, the thing to do was to put on light entertainment, a situation comedy, which the BBC had always been marvelous at and to put on a situation comedy early in the evening, half past six and knock 'em back.

Now, we were up against it because the comedians and the actors didn't like that at all. I mean, they know for certain, where they should go; they should go after a very popular program; so they inherit that amount of audience and be opposite--the documentary on balsam in Chile. I mean, they know. So they didn't want to go in at half past six or seven. However, we had to twist their arms and make them bleed--and all this. And in the end, they played ball and so we put very popular programs in at half past six and seven o'clock, Monday through Friday and within three months, we had them back.

MOYERS: Played the game.

WHELDON: Of course.

I mean, if a Tory government, in its infinite wisdom decided to put up a commercial competitor to compete against us, they could hardly expect us not to compete back, could they?

Stands to reason.

MOYERS: You want--

WHELDON: ...that game, by the way.

MOYERS: Pardon me?

WHELDON: I've got nothing against that game. I like that game.

MOYERS: Do you have any feeling for the possibility of television in the

world becoming more than simply a transmission belt for very well-done cultural and historical programs? Do you see it as a force in a growing consciousness?

WHELDON: I actually slightly see it the other way, Bill. I don't know.

MOYERS: What do you mean?

WHELDON: Well, I think at the moment, that one of the difficulties, my experience has suggested to me that both in newsrooms and in public affairs offices and so on--one of the difficulties now is that there is too much information to digest, as it were. So that by four o'clock in the afternoon, you're up to here in international news, if you want to be.

Now, you can't use it. You can't. There's too much of it. So that when you come to putting on a main news bulletin at nine o'clock, for half an hour, whatever the time it is, in our case, it would be nine o'clock on one of the networks, you've already got to boil an awful lot down and distil it a great deal and once boiled down and once distilled, it becomes, of course, in itself, less meaningful than it originally was.

MOYERS: What's the consequence of this?

WHELDON: The consequence of this, I think is going to be, it would not surprise me that, if in the next twenty or thirty years, there was less international news, as it were; it wouldn't surprise me a bit. Because now, even now, you've got to throw it away. I mean, by the time you've got, by the time you've got this stuff in and you've got this battle taking place in the middle of Africa and this explosion taking place in the middle of South America and something else taking place in the Far East and some hideous catastrophe taking place in Tokyo and some other uprising in Durban or whatever it is--by the time you've got all of this stuff, it is very difficult to use it all. There's too much. Because our collection, you see, is by now, so sophisticated, that nothing can happen anywhere in the world without our being able to collect it.

MOYERS: I don't want to make a profit out of a good producer. But I'd like to try to explore the consequences of this. Does this mean, then that television becomes a force for insularity, a force for retreating into the privacy of our own homes and sitting rooms and living rooms and dens at the expense of a growing sense of consciousness about the interdependence of the world we live in?

WHELDON: Well, I don't think that, you see, I don't think that insularity, I mean, Immanuel Kant, after all never moved more than thirty miles from the house in which he was born--over an entire lifetime; now, nobody would say that he was insular; I mean, if ever there was a universal man, it was Kant; I don't believe that concentration on--and dealing with what you know about and trying to do that truthfully and well is likely to make insularity, as such; but it is likely to make a narrower set of possibilities. I mean, we're not God. We're only human.

MOYERS: Let's don't look ahead. Let's look back to the plaque that's on the entrance hall of Broadcast House in London--

WHELDON: Broadcasting House.

MOYERS: Broadcasting House. And it reads as follows:

WHELDON: Is this in English or in Latin?

MOYERS: In English, of course. This temple of the arts and muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first Governors in the Year of Our Lord, 1931, John Reath

being Director General and they pray that the good seed sown may bring forth good harvests, that all things foul or hostile to peace may be banished hence and that the people inclining their ear to whatsoever things are lovely and honest, whatsoever things are of good report may tread the path of virtue and of wisdom.

Good statement of the spirit of 1931.

Do you think television has fulfilled--do you think the BBC has fulfilled what the first board of governors hoped it would? And has it, in a way, made the man in the pub tread the path of virtue and of wisdom?

WHELDON: Well, you see, when you use phrases like tread the path of virtue and wisdom, they are rather condescending kind of phrases and they are difficult for us to live with. They are like Matthew Arnold's great phrase about sweetness and light. It was a marvelous essay he wrote but sweetness and light came into it and somehow it's difficult to live with.

On the other hand, I don't think that we're as far away from that as a sardonic view might think. In the 30s, our country was much more patrician. It was much more Establishment-minded. And it was still imperial, of course. So that kind of statement was more possible.

By today, we're not imperial, the establishment is virtually national, as it were; it's very democratic, in that sense; and so, we've got a different pulse beating in the national heart.

On the other hand, given all that, what programs should be is truthful, in their different ways. If a program is funny, well, then it should be a good program, which is funny; and it should be a funny program that is good. If it's a serious program, well, then, it should be truthful in its own serious way. And I do not believe that it is entirely, it's not sense to dismiss big words like truth and beauty. In the end, you can't ; I mean, if you do--I don't mean, you--nobody can; in the end, the question is, are those programs good? I mean, was that first one really as funny as they said it was? Was that second one as documentary--in a documentary sense as meaningful as they said it was? Was it not true that the first was really commonplace and vulgar and predictable and was it not true that the second one was really very biased and what it was really saying was, why aren't you more like me, which is what an awful lot of documentary programs do say. Is it really true, that that news was well judged and was it as accurate as it could have been and was it true, in the end that that play that was commissioned with such a rage of trumpets wasn't really cheating, cheating itself, cheating its own author, cheating the public, cheating everybody by, in the end, cutting corners. I mean, were the programs as good as they were said to have been?

Now, it is possible for them to be. And if programs are as good as that, well, then, you are, as a matter of fact, the best can, living up to that kind of tradition. And that's what the inheritance allows you, at least, to try to do, and all we do, of course, I regret...fall at it all the time but at least, that's what you can try.

MOYERS: I had this sense that Alistair Cooke, Bronowski, and Kenneth Clark were continually being surprised, delighted, and excited by what was happening to them as they made these programs.

WHELDON: I think that's true. I think that's true. I think they were. And I'm sure it's true. In fact, all three have told me that it was true. And one of the things that excites them, you see, is a little extension of what I just said. And if you, if you actually get close to grandeur, then the grandeur, if it doesn't rub off on you, certainly rubs off on the program; I mean, it's very very difficult to make a bad production of "Twelfth Night". I mean, you can try. But you're up against Shakespeare. You see. And it's a job.

Now, the great thing about those people is that they are on these big themes. And if you're going to be on a theme that involves Venice, Galileo, or if you're going to be on a theme, that involves the Supreme Court or the Philadelphia

Convention, if you're going to be on big themes of this kind, well, then once you get there, once you find yourself, wherever it is, in Pisa, in Boston, in Berlin, the field itself and the people who people the story are themselves so big that this stuff is like a bit of the wind behind you. And they did, all three of them, all four of them; they did find themselves much helped, not simply by the capacity of television to handle these things but by being reminded of the immense power of Michelangelo anyway. And once you're there, you see, there's Michelangelo too.

MOYERS: And you don't find it incongruous to discuss such things in a pub?

WHELDON: Oh, no, that's what pubs are for.

MOYERS: From London, this has been A Conversation With Huw Wheldon, the managing director of the BBC. I'm Bill Moyers.

ANNOUNCER: For a transcript, please send one dollar to Bill Moyers' Journal Box 345, New York, N. Y. 10019.

This program was made possible by grants from the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Ford Foundation, International Business Machines Corporation and the Rockefeller Foundation.