The Light Burns Out

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One victim of optimism about AIDS may be the annual ABC television special *In a New Light.* The show, which in 1992 became the first prime-time television program to deal with the epidemic, was axed by ABC President Bob Iger in June. “We have been extremely supportive of this effort over the years and have contributed greatly to the cause,” Iger wrote in a Dear John letter to series producer Joe Lovett. “But we simply felt it appropriate to move on, in order to devote time to programs dealing with other issues.”

From the beginning, ABC’s commitment to AIDS education seemed to have more to do with personal loyalty than institutional compassion. In 1991, Barbara Walters asked Lovett, who had spent 10 years producing *20/20*, to phone Phil Beuth, then president of *Good Morning America* and ABC late night television. Beuth had recently lost a son to AIDS and wanted to hear about an AIDS special that Lovett was filming for his new production company.

“At that time, ABC had been bought by Capital Cities. Phil was one of the earliest employees of Cap Cities and was very close to the powers that be,” Lovett recalls. “They knew Phil well and knew about his loss. They cared. In the beginning, this is how AIDS education projects happened. It was all about personal connections.”

The 1992 two-hour premier, hosted by Linda Lavin, Bruce Davison and Robert Guillaume, contained musical performances intercut with educational segments and stories from PWAs. Over the next three years, the shows became progressively more frank-which, surprisingly, met with little resistance from network censors. In order to reach a more diverse audience, Lovett chose sexier hosts like Rosie Perez and Stephen Baldwin for the later specials. Then, last year, ABC scrapped the nubile celebrities and used its own staid news reporters as hosts. The 1996 show was informative but decidedly less appealing to young viewers.

ABC’s decision to pull In a New Light mystified Lovett and came too late for him to find another sponsor for a 1997 show. “I honestly don’t know why they did it,” Lovett says. “ABC has done the show for five years; maybe they feel it’s somebody else’s turn to do their share.” Now, Lovett is looking for funding from foundations to resurrect the series. “I hope that it’s not part of the ’AIDS is over’ syndrome,” he says. “What we need now is more information-not less.”

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