Success Comes Home

The professions of Anthony Malara and Richard Merkin could scarcely be more different. But in their commitment to the University and their willingness to share with current students, these alumni are very much alike.

by Alix Mitchell

Anthony C. Malara, president of CBS Television Network, was surrounded. Eager broadcast students pressed around him in the center of the Newhouse Lounge.

Malara had just spent the day addressing broadcasting classes and talking with Newhouse students; in the evening he had presented the film “Making Television at CBS” and fielded questions from an auditorium full of would-be Dan Rathers and Diane Sawyers. Now at a reception, this former Syracuse University student was available, once more, to talk with students.

A tall boy wearing a WJPZ T-shirt bounced nervously on his toes as he waited for his chance. When it came, his voice began to shake. “I’m a student at Newhouse,” he said, “and I don’t know if any of the students have thanked you for coming, but, well, I just want to thank you for talking to us. It is so exciting to hear you speak.”

When the boy finished his speech, his hands began to wrap around each other again and again. Malara, who had been listening intently, now gently asked him about the WJPZ T-shirt. What does he do at this student-run station? The hands stopped. Relieved, the student began to talk of himself.

Once again, Tony Malara had demonstrated his secret to success. Malara runs CBS Television Network with the same sincerity with which he greets Newhouse students. His staff sells more than $2 billion in advertising space and sees to it that the 200 affiliate stations around the country air as many CBS programs as possible.

From his New York office, which features plush chairs in his favorite color, red, and black lacquer tables, Malara recently explained the relationship between the network and the affiliate stations.

“CBS affiliates are under no obligation to air even a minimum amount of CBS programming,” he said. “It is the network’s job to see that the affiliates give us maximum shelf space, so to speak.”

Malara travels regularly, talking to potential advertisers and affiliate station managers. Each spring he sells potential advertisers on the new season’s prime-time programming; year-round he meets with affiliate managers to discuss everything from how CBS was handling Ted Turner’s ill-fated takeover attempt to why a manager would preempt a CBS show in favor of other programming. Malara’s business and social engagements can keep him busy seven days a week and take him from an affiliates meeting in Los Angeles to a White House reception.

Yet he fits in time for Syracuse University. He often attends special functions such as the opening of the Schine Student Center or a dinner honoring former football coach Floyd “Ben” Schwartzwalder. In 1984 he received the Syracuse University Alumni Award, and he has returned twice to speak to broadcasting students.

“We think Tony Malara is one of our most outstanding alumni,” Edward C. Stephens, dean of the Newhouse School, said. “By virtue of his position at CBS, he is making a major contribution to public communications. He is also warm and articulate and the students are very enthusiastic about him, so he is one of our favorite speakers.”

“Mr. Malara is willing to talk to students individually,” senior Rebecca Johnson observed. “He was very busy when he came here last fall, but he gave me 20 minutes of his time and I know he gave as much to other students as well.

“What I liked most about meeting him was that he showed me that there are real people in this business—that you don’t have to lose your warmth, your humanity, to succeed.”

It is easy to see why the words “warmth,” “honesty,” and “openness” come up when people speak of Tony Malara. During his visit this past fall, responding to questions, Malara fixed individual students with his direct, open gaze as he listened to their queries. In both of the classes he addressed, Malara was asked the same question: “How do I get a job with the national network?” It was a simple question with an obvious answer, yet Malara responded patiently and fully.

“Learn everything you can by working at a local station,” he said. “Remember, too, that timing and luck also play a big part in success. The network has on file a tape of every anchorperson in the country and one day you may get a lucky break.”

No matter how often students asked him how to succeed in broadcasting, Malara never tired of answering.

“How am I going to run my life? That is the most important thing a student can ask,” he said. “It is as important as a plea that says, ‘Help me, I’m sick.’”

When he talks to students about their futures, Malara can’t help but recall his own shaky beginnings.

Malara came to SU in 1954 only because teachers and family pushed him to do so. He would rather have been in a two-year business school with his friends. Once on campus, he had little academic or professional drive. At a friend’s suggestion, he began announcing for WAER, SU’s radio station, but then, in a tense moment, he let slip a four-letter word on the air and was fired. He had just learned the importance of Rule Number 1 in broadcasting: Always assume that the microphone is on.

That spring, Malara learned another classic lesson: Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched. After
landing a part-time summer job as an announcer for WWNY in Watertown, Malara returned home in high spirits at the thought of becoming a radio personality. Instead of being a radio star, Malara spent the summer working for the state road crew.

Instead of returning to school that fall, Malara took a full-time job controlling production costs for a factory in Watertown, and a part-time job as an emcee.

"I was making $52.50 at Airbrake Manufacturing and $125 a week at the nightclub, doing two shows a night. I thought, 'This is not very logical, that an entertainer can tell jokes and sing songs and make three times what someone else does who works very hard and uses brainpower.' Somehow that discrepancy brought me back to school—maybe to figure out what this was all about," Malara says.

Having tasted the 'real world,' and realized that an education might open some doors, Malara returned to SU in the fall of 1956 and took a late-night job as the WOLF disc jockey, The Sandman. Feeling burdened by long hours of school and work, Malara again decided to quit school when WWNY offered him yet another job—in this case, full time. Then, once more, the offer was rescinded—this time in favor of an older person.

"I couldn't control my temper," Malara recalled wryly. "A friend who happened to walk by kept me from killing the guy."

After this second disappointment at WWNY, he worked as a theater manager and, again, emcee; Malara decided to try espionage. He passed security clearance and was going to learn Russian.

"That was it," he recalls. "I was going to be a spy!"

Flat feet were his undoing that time. Despondent, Malara went home and hibernated, until WWNY called with yet another job offer. Malara hung up on the caller, but his father convinced him not to burn his bridges so hastily. He reconsidered, accepted the offer, and was hired to work for three months. He left 21 years later.

In 1978, CBS Television Network hired Malara away from Watertown to run a department that was intended to strengthen relations with affiliate stations. Three promotions later, affiliate relations are stronger than ever, and Malara is now network president. But he has not forgotten his past.

"I want to give back to SU," he said. "There was absolutely no chance that a broadcasting career was in my future until I got to Syracuse."

Seeing Malara adeptly handle media interviews, chat with deans and professors, and listen to students during his visit last fall, it was hard to imagine that success had ever eluded this self-confident executive. But as he grasped the hand of the anxious young man from WJPZ, it seemed for a moment that Malara saw a bit of himself.

In his handshake, in his steady way of listening, Malara told the student not to worry. Everything would be all right.

At exactly 10:00 on the morning Richard Merkin was due to arrive on the SU campus this past fall, Patricia "Trish" Johnson, a senior painting student, rushed into the studio arts office and breathlessly asked, "Is he here yet?"

The office assistant smiled. "No, not yet," she said, "but he should be on his way from the airport right now."

Johnson went back to her studio to wait. Merkin arrived 15 minutes later to begin two days of intensive critiques of work by seniors and graduate students enrolled in the School of Art's Visiting Artists class. Trish Johnson was first on his list.

Mounting the steps of Smith Hall to Johnson's fourth-floor studio, the six-foot-two-inch artist carried with him an aura of Edwardian refinement. Wearing a fitted, double-breasted, navy blue jacket featuring a silver link chain running into its pocket, an orange and white striped shirt with shamrock cufflinks, a green and white tie, tan slacks, maroon socks, brown shoes, and a dusty derby, Merkin swept into Johnson's studio with the drama of an actor or a dandy. A cape and cane were all that was missing.

Carefully dusting off a paint-splattered chair and seating himself, Merkin began asking Johnson about her work, which was spread out before
him. The questions came hard and fast, in the shoot-from-the-hip style typical of his native Brooklyn. Why had she done her “lyrical abstractions” in both thick and thin paint? Which came first? Which did she prefer? Why were they all done in the same small size? Interspersing his questions with tales of his own career, Merkin seemed to be jumping from subject to subject with no goal in sight. But just as it seemed he’d lost the thread, he picked it up again. Within a few minutes, he had zeroed in on an artistic crisis that Johnson was facing.

“I was getting into a lot of confusing ideas I didn’t understand,” Johnson admitted, “so I started doing these little paintings to straighten myself out.”

“That’s okay,” Merkin assured her. “I go through periods when I don’t paint at all or when I’m on a wild goose chase. You’re in a kind of passage, and there’s an element of neutrality because maybe these are things you feel a little neutral about. It’s almost like building your wind up for the next sprint.”

“It was very reassuring to talk to someone like that, who can relate to what I am going through, because he has already gone through it,” Johnson said.

This artist’s reassurance carries a great deal of weight. A 1961 graduate of the SU art school, Merkin is a leading representational painter whose largest pastels and oil paintings command prices ranging from $6,000 to $10,000. His work has been shown in the United States and abroad in 35 solo exhibitions and 24 group shows. The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts are among the top museums that include Merkin’s work in their collections. His shows are widely reviewed among the top art journals in the country, and he is represented by Terry Dintenfass, one of the most respected dealers in New York.

Merkin’s success springs, in part, from the fact that while he was trained in the 1950s, a time when abstract art was the rage, he emerged with a distinctly different vision. His paintings, with their bold, flat blocks of color, are almost cartoon-like, combining fantasy and reality.

For some 20 years, their content has sprung almost exclusively from the 1930s and the jazz age. Although Merkin is turning away from that influence, it still dominates his work. Black porters stand in deserted train stations. Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Hitler, and shadowy gangster-like characters people recent works. There are also dogs and baseball players—Merkin is an ardent fan of the sport—and bare-breasted women. In nearly every work, he has combined disparate elements—such as a woman wrapped in fur standing in the desert—into a dreamlike unity.

“This is an art that stems from his own ‘universe of associations,’” wrote Barbara Dayer Gallati, assistant curator of the Brooklyn Museum. Much of his work is filled with references to the passions of his youth: baseball games at Yankee Stadium,
cartoons, movies, and Eddie Condon's jazz nightclub. "Together," Gallatti wrote, "artist and viewer enter into a partnership and the product is a unique experience as their respective sets of associations merge."

Merkin himself regularly appears in his own paintings as a mysterious, moustachioed figure dressed in the studied style of the '30s. As Gallatti noted, this reminds us that these paintings are, above all else, his.

The artist's work has not always been so self-assured and personal. At first, Merkin had no idea of what his style could be. In fact, as a freshman at SU, he had never studied painting or drawing. For a time he was torn between majoring in zoology and art. Despite his lack of training, art won.

During his recent visit to campus, Merkin recalled what first drew him to art. "I fell in love with the people at the art school," he said. "In those days it was a rather exotic little place. It was small and had a wonderful esprit, a wonderful innocence about it, and you were learning all the time. The whole business was tremendously exciting."

Merkin quickly became enamored of the work of Robert Marx, one of his teachers. "It was Robert Marx who gave me the first glimmer of what I wanted my pictures to be about," he recalled. "By the time I was a senior, I wanted to make pictures as much like Robert Marx as I possibly could."

But when Merkin wanted to return to SU after spending one year on a fellowship at Michigan State University, Marx refused to write him a recommendation, asserting that it was time for Merkin to move on. "I was heartbroken," Merkin remembers. "Here was my teacher, my mentor, my spiritual guide saying, 'We don't want you here.'"

Merkin took an assistantship at the Rhode Island School of Design, instead, where he has taught part time for 25 years. Over the years he has realized that Marx was right. "It's one of the best things Bob did for me," Merkin said. "It showed me that the mentor relationship ends at a certain point and after that, baby, it's your world."

Merkin took control of his world early on. Exhibiting in Boston while living in Providence and studying and teaching at RISD, he was discovered by Brian O'Doherty, a New York art critic, who included three of his pieces in an exhibition at the 1964 World's Fair. All three sold. O'Doherty introduced Merkin to Charles Byron, a New York art dealer, who gave the artist his first show in 1967. Held in Manhattan, the exhibition was well received.

"That was very important," Merkin pointed out. "It gave me the confidence to come back to New York."

In 1971, Merkin returned to SU as an artist-in-residence, and this fall he attended the opening of his one-man show, "Broken Blossoms and Other Pictures: Recent Paintings by Richard Merkin," at the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery. (The show moved to the Dintenfass Gallery in February.) Two weeks later he was back on campus as a visiting artist.

Marching through Smith Hall, going from one student's studio to the next, Merkin exuded the confidence of a man who knows his worth.

Talking to senior William Coombs, he noted: "You have been working on developing your own little lexicon, your own vocabulary of symbols. All right, that's understandable. Did you ever look at Philip Guston's pictures? There's a guy who really knew how to invent symbols. I like the personal aspect of your smaller pictures. They have a sense of conviction about themselves. But I also like the larger pictures—their grandiosity, their painterly largesse. They seem benevolent in a large kind of way."

In 15 minutes, Merkin let 25 years of experience tumble out. His talk streamed on, to the validity of different sizes and mediums, to Paul Klee and "those Pollocks that go on for a week-and-a-half," to the creative process, and whether one should think of the audience at that point—Merkin does not. The voice, shaded with humor and larger than life, boomed throughout the studio.

Later, back in his Manhattan apartment, the show resumed. Reading for a photo session in his studio, Merkin asked, "Are you shooting color?"

Yes.

Quickly he examined his costume. A tailored blue-green jacket set off a tight-fitting yellow jersey that accented his broad chest. Pink socks peeked out from under tan slacks held up by blue and white suspenders.

"Am I colorful enough?" he asked. Riffling through a rack of scarves, he selected a pink one and threw it on for a final splash of color.

Yes, Richard, you are.