

Chats & Conversation  
Jim Goss, Producer & Writer  
April 11 & April 14, 2017  
Burbank, California

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**Note:** I attended a reunion of Missouri State Theatre & Dance graduates in Burbank, California on April 11, 2017. I had never been to an off-campus alumni reunion before. I highly recommend it. I met fellow graduates and MSU faculty and staff which led to a couple of informal chats. One chat was with veteran producer and promotions writer, Jim Goss. We spoke that evening and a couple of days later at a Starbucks in Burbank. This conversation is an amalgam of our chats.

To provide an example of the impact that Jim Goss has on the lives of his fellow veterans and others, take a moment to view the following short film (2 minutes, 30 seconds). It's not only an emotional and important story, it's a great example for aspiring filmmakers and the power of storytelling. (ST)

<http://moments.org/watch/thank-you-for-your-service/?autoplay=true>

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Jim Goss: I started out at SMSU the first-two years as a pre-law major and I got really bored with it. And I was taking a stage design class and I think an acting class and I really enjoyed it. So, I decided I'm changing majors. I'm going to be a theatre major. I called my folks (my dad was a welder and farmer and my mom sold Avon). "Hey, mom and dad, this lawyer thing? Not going to happen." "Oh, well what's your major?" "Theatre". "Oh, can you make a living at that?" I replied, "Sure." with all the confidence of a nineteen or twenty year old. And it turns out I was right. And I have, in theatre and with the television networks for thirty-some years. You just follow your heart.

Steve Taft: Were you originally from the Springfield area?

JG: Yes. Stratford (Missouri). Right outside of Springfield. Grew up on a little farm. There were about thirty of us from 1<sup>st</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

ST: Eventually you wound up in NYC?

JG: I did. I had no idea when I went to New York that television was an option because I was a theatre guy. I did acting, directing and set building at SMSU. I then went to Florida State University for my MFA in Directing and then I went to New York and directed Off-Off Broadway, having no idea that a world beyond theatre exists or that I'm qualified. I was a Desk Page at SNL for almost two years and I found out about the "business" by talking to other guys around there . . . this was 1976-77 . . . watching these guys that were camera guys on the show that did Sid Ceasar . . . did live TV.

ST: Now how did the Page job come about?

JG: Well, after my first job of directing Off-Off Broadway and starving in New York, I got a referral to NBC to be a Page. I applied for that position and was told they didn't have any openings. I figured that was that and went out and got a job as a bank teller. The next day I got a call from NBC saying they had a job opening and "Do you want come in and work for us?" I said, "What does it pay?" Well, it paid the same as a bank teller so I went over and took the job. The first day there, I'm getting fitted for my uniform and someone runs in and asks, "You're the new guy right?" I said, "Yes." "Can you start working today?" I said, "Yeah." And they said, "Great. Come with me." So, we leave the locker room and went up to Studio 8H, the *Saturday Night Live* studio and he said, "Sit here." And sitting four feet away was home base, the stage.

After I left the Page staff I wound up ultimately getting a promotion and working on launching *Hill Street Blues*. It was a ground-breaking show, one of the more realistic shows of its time . . . at that point *Starsky and Hutch* was the big thing and it was more cartoon cops than the more grit and grind that [Steven] Botcho created. So, we decided to show it to cops in Connecticut and lifers at Rahway State [Prison] to show how real it is and get their reaction. The thing that shocked us was the cops were saying: "Oh, they should have taken it easier on that guy. They should have given him a break." And the prisoners were saying, "They should have nailed him to the wall!" In the pilot you'll remember the cop, Belcher was the one that kept biting people and this one guy says, "I've seen cops jump out of trees. I've seen cops jump out of bushes, but I've never seen a cop bite anybody." Anyway we're taping the interviews at Rahway and I'm standing there next to a guard. And he says, "Do you know what that guy is in for?" and he pointed to a guy about five feet tall, maybe a hundred pounds wet. And I say, "I don't know. Tax fraud?" He said "No, no, no. He's a mafia hit man." I said, "What?" He said, "People have this misperception. They think Luca Brasi. Luca Brasi is who they want you to see because he's the intimidating guy who will keep you at a distance. But if they really want to whack you they'll get the least intimidating guy that will blend into a crowd, pull out a twenty-two, pop two slugs in the back of your head and disappear." That was a chilling moment. A chilling moment.

So, we launched *Hill Street Blues*, I move out to Burbank and became a writer and producer and we launched shows like *St. Elsewhere*, *L.A. Law*, *Law and Order*. *Law and Order* was a busted pilot at CBS. They decided they didn't want to do it after seeing the pilot. An executive of NBC happened to see it and agreed to pay CBS's production costs in order to pick up the rights to *Law and Order* and it became one of the most successful shows of all time on television with various spin-offs that Dick Wolfe has put into it. Dick Wolfe recently built a theatre down here at the Television Academy. He's a brilliant guy. One of the nicest human beings you could ever meet. But even then, with successful shows like *Law and Order*, Dick had shows that weren't successful as well. So there's never a lock on success or a formula. You just have to be open to anything and everything that comes along. I was at NBC and didn't have any idea what anyone did in advertising and promotion, but found out it was one creative area where you could tell little stories all the time. You just had to tell them in thirty seconds or three minutes.

ST: Now how does one go from being a Page to working as a writer and producer?

JG: Well, I'd been on the Page staff for an extended period-of-time and it was a difficult time for NBC for a variety of reasons and there were a lot of people that had jobs that now didn't have jobs. So, during one of those periods I was sitting in the information booth of 30 Rockefeller Center and someone came up and said, "What do you have going on?" And I said, "Well, we don't do tours anymore and we currently have no shows that are running." "Well, is there anything else you can tell me?" And I said, "Well, the bathrooms are downstairs." It was pretty depressing. I had my Bachelors in Theatre from Southwest Missouri, I had been an Army officer for two years. I had my MFA in Directing from Florida State. I had done a couple of Off-Off Broadway shows at that point and I'm sitting here making minimum wage while I have friends that graduated with Business degrees and they had families, a home and cars and I had none of those things. I mean, "Did I make a wrong turn here? Is this going to be a side-track that's just going to end very badly?" Because there were no immediate prospects at that point. It was depressing sitting there. You just wonder. And I don't think I'm unique going through that. It's one of those things in your journey when you hit these obstacles of despair and I just stuck with it and kept on the path and persevered.

A job opening came up in sports and I went up and interviewed for that and it became apparent that I didn't have a passion for sports and they said, "You know, you have good qualifications but you should probably follow something that is more of your passion." Which was great advice. The next thing that came up was some administrative work in the Advertising and Promotion Department. They needed someone to log-in tapes from Burbank so they could locate them. I did that for three months. They expanded my duties and since tenure as a Page was nearing its end (I was on loan to Advertising and Promotions), and they offered me an administrative job, I said, "Well, I really appreciate that. But, my background is creative." I had been around the department long enough to know that most of the work they did was creative and I felt I was most qualified for making promo's, because they were like little short films. And I said, "Well, if you're going to promote me into this position, I'm going to leave in six-eight months. I need to go to California or somewhere where I can get creative work. But, if you'll give me a shot and try me out as a writer/producer, let's see if that works." They said, "We'll give you a three-month trial and if it works, great we'll bring you on. If not, we'll depart as friends." I said, "Great." It turns out I had a knack for that. Three months went by and nobody said anything. Three-and-a-half months went by and nobody said anything. So, I finally went into my boss and he said, "Oh, nobody told you? Yeah, you're doing great work and we're offering you a job as a writer/producer. We're glad to have you." So, that was my path to my first creative job. When I went up to the department on special assignment I really didn't know a lot about that area. I knew about programming and I understood making stories and all that, but I didn't know anything about advertising and promotion. But, it turned out to be the world in which I've lived and led for the last thirty-some years.

You know you're only talking thirty or so years earlier, but it seemed like ancient history to me when I was there as a Page. Now that I'm on the other side of it, it's not so far. What you found out when you're talking to the guys around there is that it's all about storytelling. You can learn technique. You can learn camera angles. You can learn lenses. You can learn how to cut and dissolve and create motion by putting in music behind things and how to move from shot to shot. When you're working on stage you're working with a master shot all the time and you use subtle physical means to focus up right to down left to center. You have the same ability in television but you have more in terms of close-ups, wide shots, you have two-shots, you have all of those things to help you tell your story, but it's still story-telling. You're just doing it on a slightly different palette. I think if you stay emotionally true to your subject, find something that you love to do, that there is opportunity.

ST: Tell me a bit about your present position.

JG: Well, I spent thirty some years at NBC, Head of Drama, Head of Comedy Promotion. Got into the digital world when it was pretty young. Seven years ago I got a call from a guy who was head of a television network on the East Coast. He said, "I'm running a network. It's been a Christian network for years. We're turning a corner and want to change directions. We want a family network and within the network we want to create short inspirational films." Anyway, they flew my wife and I out and talked and it felt like the right fit for me for what I wanted to do, so I accepted the position at the INSP Network [<http://www.insp.com/>]. We're in about eight million homes coast to coast and it turned out to be a terrific opportunity. I've been there seven years and part of every month is here in L.A. and part of every month is in Charlotte, North Carolina. But, they needed someone that had network experience and to lead that department and move them into areas they had never done before. And I had that experience and I also had a bit of experience with Christian television. Not professional Christian television, but I had directed services at my church, musical things and this and that and done some TV episodes with my pastor on camera. So, there was a cross-foundation in the two worlds.

I was able to build the department from one person to a staff of about fifteen now and to build the Creative Services Department up. We do web design, posters, billboards and trade show booths and all of that. In addition, I had the opportunity to build the short films department. And for the first five years that was the original programming that INSP had and it was in existence until two years ago when the network made a major push to go into long form original programming. But you can still see a lot of the work we did then, work that I'm very proud of, at a web site called moments.org [[www.moments.org](http://www.moments.org)].

One of those that was the most moving and is still used daily by the Vietnam War Commemoration is a piece called *Thank You For Your Service* which honors Vietnam veterans (which I was) and the many of us that were . . . not treated like many of the soldiers are now when they come home. *Thank You For Your Service* is an encounter between a current veteran and a Vietnam veteran in a coffee shop. With that film, a three-star General, Claude "Mick" Kicklighter, who was Head of the Commemoration when we were doing these, said he took that film and showed it to everybody. From a small group of ten guys to stadiums. And he said, "I can never play that without having people tear up. And I can't talk for a minute or two after I've played it because I'm so emotional." The Vietnam Commemoration was created to say, "Thank you." And this piece was created to do that and we're real proud of it. We've created probably about fifty other short films during the three years that we did that.

We did another project called *Not Forgotten* that is about POW MIA's. We had a partnership with the Medal of Honor Foundation and we did a lot of film about Medal of Honor recipients and there you're talking about self-sacrifice. What greater love does a man have than he lays his life down for his friends? The concept that we had was we didn't want to beat anyone over the head or try to preach. But, we believe that we can have a concept that is based on scripture, whether it's a story about forgiveness that brings father and sons together, whether it's a story about redemption, or whether it's a story of learning to trust your father.

So, you never know what path you're going to go down. I've been very fortunate. Stumbling into a job at NBC . . . a guy with no qualifications in television. I really hadn't had a class in television in all that time but you know, you talk to the guys who were working the shows behind the camera and it's all about storytelling. If you understand story and emotion you can make it happen.

ST: Changing direction a bit: When it comes to working on a project and working with a team of people, what are you looking for in terms of abilities, talents or intangibles?

JG: I think someone that's inquisitive, who has a sharp mind, that can write, because it's never going to get on the screen unless you can get it on the page. Someone that has a sense of empathy, who understands feelings, heartache, victory, joy and all of those things. You need to be a student of human life. I'm looking for people that are smart, intelligent, who can take direction. It's no good for me to have someone that is set in their vision and it's no other way but theirs. I have to work with someone that can accept what I bring to the table and be molded by me effectively, and I've found that working collaboratively that can happen.

ST: Of all of the different "hats" you've worn in your career, is there a particular hat you've enjoyed the most?

JG: You know, I've always enjoyed being creative. Now, sometimes that path that led me there was a non-creative path, so there are little turns along the way. I love what I'm doing now as much as anything I've done. But, there's a tremendous amount of satisfaction . . . well, the single-biggest amount of "awe" that I ever had . . . years ago I was just recently hired as a writer/producer in NYC from doing an administrative job for the same department for a period of time. They gave me a movie to do, a thriller called *Roller Coaster* with George Segal. I did the promo for that and I knew when it was going to air. So, I went home to my apartment in Manhattan and I watched my promo play. I created every shot and I wrote every word in this piece. I designed the whole creative promo and millions of people from coast to coast were seeing that! It was a pretty awe-inspiring moment knowing that a little piece I had written was being seen nationally. So, I would say that was the first thing in my career that let the lights go on in terms of working in television.

There's been many more through the years and frankly before that my first moment when I went through the doors of NBC and was sitting feet away from Paul Simon and George Harrison singing on *Saturday Night Live*. That was a thrill. There's been a lot of down times as well. It's been a journey.

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ST: After our meeting at the reunion the other evening I went back to my hotel and watched several of "Moments" short films. *Thank You For Your Service* was incredibly powerful. I served from 1975-79 and was fortunate to serve when we were not at war. Still, we were advised not to wear our uniform around town.

JG: It was an odd time, which you'll remember. People blamed the guys who served during the war. That is was their fault. What a miscarriage. There are a lot of guys, even today, walking around in a lot of pain. They acted as patriots doing what their country asked them to do and were treated like war criminals when they came back. That's why when people see *Thank You For Your Service* we act viscerally to it. The Vietnam Commemoration is an organization that President Obama authorized as part of the Department of Defense to honor Vietnam vets during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the time that has passed since the Vietnam conflict. They (the Vietnam Commemoration people) saw the film. We didn't initially create it for them, we created it as part of our short film (the Moments piece) which I created in collaboration with Thomas Torrey, who I hired to Head the department. We both felt passionately about it and felt like it was the right thing to do to honor our veterans who had served honorably and had gotten a raw shake. That relationship which developed rather quickly has been very powerful.

We did this about a year or so after I joined INSB and I had been doing a lot of airline travel back and forth from Los Angeles to the Carolinas. And I'm on the plane a lot and around airports and I would constantly see people walking up to servicemen saying, "Thank you for your service." And after thirty-some years it kind of created a little tinge in my heart because it's like, "I wish someone had said something like that to me." We were treated horribly when we came back. So, Thomas Torrey, even though he hadn't served in that era, he had a passion for that era and had studied it and it resonated with both of us for different reasons and that was behind the creation of it. One of the reasons we had very sparse dialogue is we wanted the veterans that would see it to supply their own internal dialogue to what they were seeing. So, sometimes it's not what you say, but what you don't say, and you allow the audience to fill in their own experience.

ST: The actor portraying the Vietnam vet is wonderful. He says so much with his eyes, which of course is difficult to capture in theatre unless it's an incredibly small studio space.

JG: You're absolutely right. I don't know if *Thank You For Your Service* would have worked live in a large venue. Perhaps in the Falcon Theatre it might have worked in that environment. One of the first one-acts I did in grad school was a Pinter play called *Silence*. And of course, Pinter always dealt with pauses and silences as integral to the structure of his plays and the power of them and you had to deal with those as if they [the pauses and silences] were dialogue. And there was a difference between a pause and silence. So, all those things had to be factored in and I learned that with that piece.

ST: I'm so impressed that the "Moments" series include these short films and they're so powerfully told in such a short amount of time. I think such films serve as great examples for young film makers and the possibilities that exist.

JG: Especially today with the internet and streaming videos . . . when I started if you were going to create an editing system you needed a hundred-thousand dollars to edit on. This is back in the days of three-quarter magnetic tape. But now you can do it on your I-Phone with free software Apple has given you on your phone. You can do it in I-Movie or something on your laptop. There's so many ways for the artist to be creative and getting their work out there and hopefully having it seen by a lot of people online. I think it's so important whether someone is in theater or film to get their stories down and told.

Many of the pieces we did could easily translate into acting scenes. You can pick anyone of the exchanges between Ralph [Waite] and the young women [in *Old Henry*] and there's heart and storytelling and truth. We named those stories *A Moment of Truth* because in spite of the fact that they were fictional stories, they weren't designed over the lives of any particular people, but they were designed over the truth of particular situations. It's a fact that Vietnam veterans were treated badly when they returned home. It's a fact they carry wounds to this day because of that treatment. It's nothing they dwell on. We all did our thing and made our choices and served our country the best we could. But, it's still a tinge in the heart and we tried to heal that tinge a bit with that story. Now, it got multiplied in ways we couldn't imagine. We created it to run on INSB. We created it to live online on our home site. What happened was it was one of those things that went viral. In the first year we had over a million people that had shared it online. It was during part of that process that we got a call from ABC's, *The View* saying, "Veterans Day is coming up and we'd like your permission to run this piece at the end of our episode." which we granted. We got a call from the Vietnam Commemoration (that I mentioned earlier), and they asked permission to show it at events they had. We gave them permission and provided whatever kind of copy they needed depending on where they were going. And it has been seen for the last six years or so in stadiums, in small offices and around the country and to this day it

continues to be shown. We have a strong partnership with them and they continually give us feedback of how at every meeting, guys in their sixties or seventies, it brings them to tears. You talk about legacies and I think *Thank You For Your Service* is a high point for me over the course of my career. Being a promo guy I hadn't really thought of short films as a possibility, but INSB opened the doors for that to happen and we able to do some terrific stories during that time that I think made a difference.

ST: Having worked out here in L.A. for much of your career, those of us in the mid-west perhaps hear stories of the cutthroat business of Hollywood. What are your thoughts regarding such perceptions?

JG: I think there are a lot of good people in Los Angeles. There may be parts of Hollywood that may live up to the negative reputation that people may think of, but I think most of the people I know in the business are good people, want to do the right thing, and want to do the best possible work they can. A lot of people get into the business (like the young actors we saw the other evening at *The Falcon*), they have a passion for it. They care. They want to make a living, but they also want to make a difference and do great work. That was instilled in them by their university and their professors they look up to and that's a great foundation to grow from.

ST: It's assumed that these young actors have the talent, but sometimes there are other considerations other than talent that may determine whether someone is or is not cast. What are some of those other considerations or qualities that may ultimately determine whether an actor is cast or not?

JG: I had a couple of internships when I was doing my MFA at Florida State. One was at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco and I also went to the Asolo Theatre in Sarasota, Florida. The Asolo played rotating rep so we cast a lot of roles. And Sarasota, being a vacation hot spot where people might spend one-two weeks, the rep would have two-three plays rotating during that period. One night you might be doing Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and the next night it might be *Annie Get Your Gun*. It was an ensemble company and we needed actors that could play various roles within the season. I went to New York with the Artistic Director and the Managing Director. We had a suite in a hotel and actors would have scheduled appointment times and they would come in and present a classical piece and a contemporary piece and then we'd talk with them for a bit. And we did the same thing in Chicago. Anyway, what you would see rather quickly, there were people and it was if you had binoculars and you looked through them backwards, they would disappear as if in the distance. They wouldn't have a presence or the power to play the room. But you would have other actors that would come in an envelope you with character, power and strength.

There was this one guy that had one of the best auditions I ever saw. He comes in [to audition] and says, 'Do you mind if I talk to you for a second?' and he pulls up a chair and goes into a monologue from *The Skin of Our Teeth*. It was warm, it was homespun, you were drawn in, it was funny, it was great! You just felt like you were in his presence. Then he said, 'Just a minute, I need to step over here for a second' and he walked to the other side of the room, turned around and he did *Richard III*. One [monologue] went from warm, convivial, and joyful into seething evil. He blew our socks off! Absolutely stunning. To this day it was one of the finest monologues I ever saw. Now, the flip side of that story is we didn't have the right roles for that guy. I had an opportunity to run across him ten-twelve years later here [in L.A.] and I had to tell him that: 'Hands down, it was the best audition I'd ever seen.' And I let him know it (not being cast) had nothing to do with his talent. I just encourage actors . . . it's not always your talent. You just have to believe in yourself and just strive through the rejection and understand that whether you do or do not get the role there are many factors that transcend the talent that you brought to the audition.

Like this guy, best audition I've ever seen, but just not quite right for the line of roles we had available that season. Yet, he's a strong actor and a working actor that does brilliant work to this day.

One point regarding the recent showcase we saw the other night: in regards to the resume and/or headshot: the actor needs to portray themselves accurately. There were certain headshots that were beautiful, but they were not representative of what the person looks like right now. It's important to represent yourself in the moment and to be remembered. And if you don't look the same as you did in your audition they won't remember you. So, it's not important to take the best photo ever, but to reflect who you are in this moment in time. So, if you've had changes in your life that reflect a different reality, your photo needs to reflect that so it can help you get the job, because when people are in their office and not seeing you in person, they are designing the cast in part based on your photo and your experience level.

ST: The entertainment industry has changed rather drastically over the years. As we wrap up, what are your thoughts regarding opportunities for students pursuing a career in the industry?

JG: As far as the market goes, there has probably never been a time when there are more roles to fill and product out there. When I got into the business there were three networks, NBC, ABC and CBS. You look now and networks have multiplied many times and some of the largest volume of work is now being done by Netflix and Amazon. There's a lot of players out there and a lot of stories are being told, and being told in more powerful ways than had been allowed previously. So, I think it's a terrific time to be a creative whether it's writing, directing, acting or design. It's a great time to have that skill set. Ultimately, we are living in a world where content is the thing and that you can get the work done. Now, there are a lot of economic factors behind that which can be challenging, yet it's also a time of opportunity. Online work opens up a wealth of opportunity for actors beyond the traditional auditioning process and for many no matter their creative path.

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*Note: Since the time of our chat Jim has returned to Burbank, California and is SVP Creative Production & Promotion. (ST)*