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John Falsey, Creator of Acclaimed TV Series, Is Dead at 67

By **Neil Genzlinger**

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John Falsey, who with his writing and producing partner, Joshua Brand, created some of the most innovative and acclaimed television series of the 1980s and '90s, including “St. Elsewhere” and “Northern Exposure,” died on Jan. 3 in Iowa City. He was 67.

His brother, James, said the cause was complications of a head injury sustained in a fall in his home.

Mr. Falsey and Mr. Brand won two Emmy Awards in 1992: one for “Northern Exposure,” which was named outstanding dramatic series, and one for writing for the pilot episode of the series “I’ll Fly Away.” They had also won in 1987 for “A Year in the Life,” which was named outstanding mini-series.

The two met when they were working on “The White Shadow,” a CBS drama that ran from 1978 to 1981 about a white former professional basketball player (played by Ken Howard) who takes a job coaching a racially mixed team at an urban high school.

“John was a story editor, and he was instrumental in me getting my first script assignment on the show,” Mr. Brand said by email. “After the show ended, I was able to return the favor on ‘St. Elsewhere.’ ”



Janine Turner and Rob Morrow in an episode of “Northern Exposure,” created by Mr. Falsey and Mr. Brand. Mr. Morrow played a young doctor who sets up a practice in a small Alaskan town full of eccentric characters. CBS, via Getty Images

As “The White Shadow” was winding down, Mr. Falsey began writing a show about Northern Ireland. Mr. Brand, however, had sold an idea for a series about a teaching hospital, and tried to recruit Mr. Falsey to work for him on it. When Mr. Falsey balked, Mr. Brand asked instead if he would want to join him as a partner in the venture. “And he goes, ‘Absolutely,’ ” Mr. Brand recalled in an oral history recorded for the Television Academy Foundation.

The resulting show, the gritty “St. Elsewhere,” ran from 1982 to 1988 on NBC (though Mr. Brand and Mr. Falsey handed the show off to others partway through the run) and influenced later generations of medical dramas. The partnership they formed on the show lasted more than a decade and garnered considerable critical praise.

“While the basic premises of their series are often conventional,” The New York Times wrote in a feature article on the two men in 1992, “a typical Brand-Falsey story line has an air of authenticity and unpredictability that sets their work outside the stereotypes of television.”

Their shows also included “Amazing Stories,” an anthology series they helped Steven Spielberg develop that ran from 1985 to 1987, and “Going to Extremes,” another medical drama, which ran in the 1992-93 season.

“We made good things together,” Mr. Brand said. “And we had a fine time doing it.”

John Henry Falsey Jr. was born on Nov. 6, 1951, in New Haven. His father was a tax lawyer, and his mother, Patricia (Sisk) Falsey, was a teacher.

He graduated from Hampshire College in Massachusetts in 1975 and received a master of fine arts degree in 1978 at the University of Iowa, where he studied fiction writing. While there, at age 27, he had a short story, “Bachelors,” published in The New Yorker. The director and producer Bruce Paltrow hired him to work on “The White Shadow” in 1979.

Mr. Brand and Mr. Falsey were known for their willingness to tackle serious themes. “A Year in the Life,” a six-hour production broadcast by NBC over three nights in 1986, followed a fictional Seattle family for one year, from Christmas to Christmas.

John J. O’Connor, reviewing it for The Times, said it “captures the essence of small moments that can have enormous meaning.”

Just as ambitious was “I’ll Fly Away,” about a principled lawyer in the South (played by Sam Waterston) who tackles civil rights issues. “Can a thoughtful, leisurely paced drama about racial and social issues in the late 1950s compete with the plethora of current network shows marketing little more than zippy, mindless one-liners?” Mr. O’Connor asked in his review. “Anyone concerned about the future of television will certainly hope so.”

“I’ll Fly Away” was on the air at the same time as the markedly different “Northern Exposure,” a fish-out-of-water series about a young doctor (Rob Morrow) who sets up a practice in a small Alaskan town full of eccentric characters.

Sandy Veith, a scriptwriter, sued Universal Studios in the early 1990s over the series, arguing that the studio had appropriated an idea he had brought forward while under contract to it in the 1980s and turned it into “Northern Exposure.” In 1994 a jury agreed and awarded Mr. Veith \$7.3 million, a case that helped make studios more cautious about tracking the development of ideas.

In November, Variety reported that CBS was developing a revival of “Northern Exposure,” with Mr. Falsey as an executive producer and Mr. Brand as both a writer and an executive producer.

Mr. Brand said that by the mid-1990s both he and Mr. Falsey wanted to pursue other things and dissolved their partnership. James Falsey said his brother returned to writing short stories and a novella, and about five years ago returned to Iowa to live.

Mr. Falsey’s first marriage, to Kathy Mynes in 1982, ended in divorce in 1995. In addition to his brother, Mr. Falsey is survived by his wife, Julie, whom he married last year; and a daughter and son from his first marriage, Courtney and Christopher Falsey.

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