



## Australian Television

by Keith G. Howes

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Despite some important breakthroughs in the depiction of gay men and lesbians in the past, Australian television today lacks any regular and open discussion of queer issues and lives.

Australian television launched the careers of Nicole Kidman, Kylie Minogue, Guy Pearce, Paul Hogan, and Skippy the Kangaroo. One of its five networks led the world in producing a type of sexy, outrageous serial drama that spawned a cycle of soap opera that has beguiled audiences in Australia and in many other parts of the world for over thirty years. Certainly cult television would be the poorer without dramas like *Sons and Daughters* (with the infamous Pat the Rat), *Prisoner/Prisoner--Cell Block H* (featuring the dyke-you-love-to-hate), and *Return to Eden* (heroine escapes jaws of crocodile--just--and takes on new body, face, identity).

The combination of geographical isolation, an unpredictable climate, and hatred of pretension and authoritarianism has found its way into Australia's television programming. This was the country that produced the world's first positive gay character (*Number 96*, 1972-77). And the world's first bisexuals, male and female (*Number 96*, *The Box*). And the world's first gay man to parent a young boy far more lovingly and effectively than the boy's own biological parents (*Players to the Gallery*, 1980).

Despite its small population (under 20 million), Australia has been able to maintain five television networks, three entirely commercial, one partly so, and the fifth--approximating to Britain's British Broadcasting Corporation--valiantly surviving on government subsidy alone. One of the quintet, SBS (Special Broadcasting Service), created in 1980, is the most successful and highly regarded multicultural service in the world.

The inclusion of "Australian content" in drama, documentaries, comedy and other types of programming is a cornerstone that, although significantly eroded since the glory days of the 1960s and 1970s, is still in place.

### Early Days

Gays and lesbians, certainly on a superficial reading of the near half-century of Australian small screen entertainment, have played an integral part in the mix. During the very first hour of transmission, in September 1956, urbane queer artist Jeffery Smart, standing in front of a studio fireplace, expatiated on painting in the children's series, *The Argonauts' Club*.

Smart was very much outside the stereotype of the hard-drinking, sun-browned, fair dinkum Aussie bloke, known as an "ocker," prepared to do and die for his "mates." Although less durable as the 1960s opened up Australia to more diverse influences, the ocker, with his sometimes unstable and dangerous mix of good humor and misogyny, was the predominant image of the Aussie male.

With this strain of homo-emotionalism came a degree of sexual activity, none of which was ever fully reflected in Australian film or television. During the successive conservative governments of Robert Menzies, a lid was kept on the country's sexual tensions and injustices through a combination of legal

sanctions, religious puritanism, and sometimes draconian censorship.

## The 1970s

The mold was broken, or appeared to be, with the noisy arrival of a late night soap called *Number 96* in 1972. Nudity, both male and female, sexual high jinks, and increasingly outrageous plotlines (including "The Knicker-Snipper") were *de rigueur*.

From the very first episode, *Number 96* was labeled immoral trash, pornography, designed to corrupt the nation. Heedless of these admonitions, the Australian public could not get enough of the very full lives of this group of people living in a Sydney apartment block.

One of its most popular residents was quietly spoken, intelligent, handsome young lawyer, Don Finlayson (played by Joe Hasham), who, it soon became clear, was gay, living with a lover, and inescapably good, kind and decent: a pillar of the community. Not quite a fair dinkum Aussie bloke, but close.

Don was later joined by a more flouncing gay man, who, in a manner typical of a series vowed and determined to upset viewers' rigid expectations, began an affair with a woman.

*Number 96* begat *The Box*, even sexier and set in a television station. It displayed a bisexual woman kissing an underage teenage girl. The same show also rang changes on the portrayal of the effeminate gay man: flapping wrists and camp patter but consistently presented as a competent professional and well respected. The actor playing this role, Paul Karo, won the most popular TV Actor award of 1975.

"Real" homosexuals began to appear occasionally on television after the advent of *Number 96*. On a segment of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's groundbreaking *Chequerboard* series (1972), one man actually kissed his lover on screen. The day after transmission, the man was dismissed from his administrative job with one of the Sydney churches.

The mid 1970s, with Australia spreading its wings under the radical government of Gough Whitlam before he was summarily dismissed by the Queen of Great Britain's representative, were a high water mark for the regular airing of gay lives.

However, as well as the euphoria induced by fine upstanding if rather dull Don and his various lovers, boyfriends, and one-night-stands, there was the occasional recognition that there was another, less accepting Australia. In one edition of the ABC's current affairs program *The Monday Conference* (1976), human excrement was thrown at a gay rights activist who was being interviewed before a generally fair-minded audience in the mining area of Mt. Isa in Queensland.

Lesbians remained relatively invisible, with a couple of exceptions. There was a wicked lesbian in a late 1970s serial called *Skyways*. She had her comeuppance in the shower: stabbed 47 times.

Much more to the lesbian community's liking--and to a cult television audience all over the world--was *Prisoner*, also known as *Prisoner--Cell Block H* (1979-1987). Set in a women's prison, the series sought to tease out all possible emotional and sexual *frissons* involving inmates and staff--women characters tough and tender, cynical and naïve in profusion. Queening it over all was a sadistic lesbian warder nicknamed "The Freak": growly of voice, beady of eye, and thoroughly convincing in Maggie Kirkpatrick's imposing black gloved hands.

Public broadcasting was far less committed to lesbian and gay stories. Apart from occasional episodes in short run drama series, the only thing the ABC could offer that was remotely challenging was a mini-series called *Players to the Gallery* (1980). A story seen from three different viewpoints, one gay, it bravely focused on the plight of a political activist whose own personal life is totally taken up with his landlady and

her young son. A custody case hinges on possible corruption of the child by the tenant who is presented throughout as just the sort of mother/father society should be encouraging to parent its children.

### **1980s and 1990s**

Financial constraints, the need for overseas sales, and co-production money seemed to force Australian television away from the relative radicalism of the 1970s. The portrayal of gay men and, apart from *Prisoner*, lesbians virtually ceased for fifteen years.

Making the greatest impact during this period were occasional documentaries, such as *Something to Sing About* (the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir) and *Positive Art* (HIV/AIDS and its impact on gay culture), and, notably, a 1991 interview with conductor Stuart Challender in which he revealed he was dying of AIDS.

Fictional representations were mainly medical, consisting of a few episodes of *A Country Practice* and *G.P.*, issue-based, and well researched. Their intention was missionary and awareness-raising.

Both series were much loved by middle Australia. *G.P.* courted and received some adverse criticism when, in 1994, its makers included a young gay doctor, played by Damian Rice, among its regulars. Even this mutedly negative reaction seemed to sap the producers' resolve, so the character never developed to anything like his full dramatic potential.

Although the high definition bravado of the 1970s seemed a far distant memory, a cannonball hit the Australian viewing public full in the face in the mid-1990s in the form of "edited highlights" of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

Initially--and bravely in the teeth of much church and state opposition--this event was brought into the homes of mythical average Australians, including not a few diehard ocker homophobes by the ABC, who cited its long-held commitment to showing all aspects of the country's human condition.

Taken over a few years later by commercial Channel Ten, the Mardi Gras seems to have become an annual fixture. However, it is seen by not a few people as presenting lesbians and gays as a freak show, light years away from the integration and honesty of *Number 96's* Don and his day to day world.

The political message of Mardi Gras can be discerned beneath all the glitz and surging flesh and pulsating techno. Just.

### **Current Conditions**

What is glaringly obvious in the Australian television landscape of today is the complete lack of any regular and open discussion of lesbian and gay issues and lives; and almost no dramatization of same. Recent soaps featuring gays and lesbians in prominent roles were poorly promoted at home and failed to "sell" overseas. There is a total absence of a *Queer as Folk* or a *Tales of the City* made in Australia about queer contemporary or past Australian culture.

Openly queer figures such as sportsman Ian Roberts, television medical guru Dr. Kerryn Phelps, and comedian and pundit Julie McCrossin do pop up quite frequently on the screen, respected and liked by the television public gay and straight.

These are the exceptions, a fact made quite clear by the extraordinary, if not always positive impact made by "gay Johnnie," one of the sequestered dozen in Australia's version of the reality television phenomenon *Big Brother* (2001).

Seen initially by some as a "backstabber," Johnnie was gradually rehabilitated until he was regarded as a

role model, not only for gays but also for some of his young male "housemates." Much hugging, kissing, and crying ensued both during and after the incarceration.

It remains to be seen whether Johnnie's impression on average Australians, especially those under 20, will be lasting. What was made obvious, through comments in the gay press and elsewhere, was the absence of a broad band of gays on Australian television. The turning point, Don in *Number 96* thirty years before, had failed to turn.

There is hope, however, that the turn will be made. *The Secret Life of Us* (2001-2004), an award-winning drama revolving around the lives of residents of an apartment block in an urban suburb of Melbourne, did have gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters, including Australia's first non-anglo lesbian in the character of Chloe.

### **Bibliography**

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### **About the Author**

**Keith G. Howes** has been researching, writing, and speaking about gay film, radio, and television for 25 years. He lives in Sydney, Australia where he is employed as a bush regenerator, helping to restore native flora and fauna.