

Telling Tales: the absence of drama on Australian community television

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Abstract:

Why is there virtually no drama on Australian community television? Within this sector of the Australian media, the potential of fictional screen narratives to powerfully and imaginatively explore human experience in relation to issues of cultural diversity, social equity and community change has been unrealised. Are the demands in time, money and effort of this form of production too great for predominantly non-professional and un-funded program creators and producers? In the digital era, the blurred media space between the professional and the amateur has been expanding and changing. In relation to film and television, this increasingly significant space is occupied by community television and a range of independent producers with alternative creative and cultural perspectives. This paper discusses the research I have been undertaking into the practical and creative possibilities and constraints of “no-budget” television drama production and the impact a lack of money has on the creative outcomes of a project. Drawing on the work of writers such as Bourdieu and Bakhtin, as well as filmmakers such as Alexander Kluge, my practice-based research has been investigating the production process for a no-budget television program, which has a particular focus on issues of social change and formal innovation.

Introduction

While almost constantly marginalized within the broader media environment on issues such as funding and spectrum access, community television in Australia has in recent years made significant gains in stability and popularity, particularly in Melbourne, where it maintains a programming ethos of access, participation and

diversity. However, within a very full program schedule, it is notable that there is no drama on community television. Given the number of drama programs on both public and commercial television, its absence on community television seems to require investigation. This absence has the potential to restrict the further development of community television, reinforcing perceptions of the sector as a poor relation to the more mainstream forms of broadcasting, much the way that perceptions of poor technical quality have affected it in the past. (Rennie, 2006, p.87) My interest in film and television drama is in its potential to explore those aspects of personal and social experience that deal with emotion and imagination in ways that are not possible within the current 'factual' forms of programming. In this regard, I would also suggest that the absence of drama results in community television only poorly reflecting the communities it aims to represent.

In this paper, I will explore some possible reasons for the lack of drama on community television and report on research I am undertaking, that involves the production of a pilot for a television series entitled "How To Change The World". This research project, which applies principles of practice-based research to the film and television production process, is specifically looking at the creative possibilities and constraints of what I have called no-budget television production, a sector of the Australian film and television industry that is scarcely visibly in many analyses but which includes alternative media practitioners, emerging filmmakers and most community television producers. Through this research, I hope to be able to model a production process than demonstrates a viable way forward towards the production of more drama on community television.

There is almost no drama on community television in Australia.

At both the 2005 and 2006 Antennas, which are the Australian National Community Television awards, the prize for best drama had two nominations, one of which was in truth, a magazine-style program on theatre and the arts that occasionally included footage of theatre drama performances. Greg Dee, the Station Manager of C31 in Melbourne, has reported that in 2006 there was only one drama program shown, a six-part series called “One Night Stand”. In 2007 there is no drama currently scheduled (G. Dee & G. Noble, personal communication, January 29, 2007). Before examining possible reasons for the lack of drama on community television, the question needs to be asked – does it matter?

Community television is often defined by its values of access and diversity, with proponents of the sector stressing the importance of this diversity to a healthy democratic society. It is difficult to discuss the relationship between television and democracy without referring to the work of Jurgen Habermas and his concept of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005, p.412; Howley, 2005, pp. 19-20; Rennie, 2006, p. 34). However, in his discussion of Habermas in relation to public broadcasting and democratic culture, Graham Murdock has highlighted the limitations of Habermas’s emphasis on information and argument.

[I]f we accept that a culture of democracy requires citizens to grasp the links between the good life and the good society and to see their own life chances as inextricably tied to the general quality of communal life, then the habits of sympathy and projection required by fiction and the capacity of comedy and art to decenter established ways of looking, are essential resources. (2005, p.179)

John Downing has also stressed “the centrality of emotion and imagination in radical media, the peril of seeing their role as informative in a purely ratiocinative sense. A democratic culture cannot only subsist on rational argument” (2001, p.47). In his own

discussion of Habermas, Downing refers to the theoretical work of Alexander Kluge (2001, p. 29). Kluge is regularly cited in academic debate on the public sphere, primarily because of his work with Oskar Negt, “Public Sphere and Experience” (1993). However, in a remarkable career, Kluge is also an internationally established film director and television producer, as well as being one of the few filmmakers who has combined both an extensive theoretical and creative practice. In an interview published in 1988, Kluge has discussed how his ideas about the public sphere differ from that of Habermas. He stresses the importance of the private sphere (by which he seems to mean areas like family, relationships and individual fantasies) in understanding the public sphere and problems that result from “the noncorrelation of intimacy and public life” (Liebman, 1988, p. 45).

The public sphere is only as free as the intimate sphere is free and developed. Therefore, you have to examine paths within the sphere of intimacy, family politics, for example, to understand what public life means. (Liebman, 1988, p.41).

If we accept Kluge’s argument, it suggests that film and television drama can play a significant role in exploring these private spheres, thereby contributing to the development of a more democratic society. Kluge’s own films model a style of fictional narrative exploration within a documentary social context that I have drawn on in the design of my research project.

What are the possible reasons for the absence of drama?

There does not seem to be any lack of interest in screen-based drama within the no-budget sector, when there are over 600 entrants to a short film festival such as Tropfest (2007). While the issue would benefit from further research, the complexity

of the production process seems to be a significant factor in this interest not translating into the community television sector. A television series is longer and more complex than a short film and drama is more creatively and technically demanding than other forms of television production, which in the mainstream professional sector results in it being more expensive and in the volunteer sector being more time-consuming.

The 2005/2006 National survey of feature film and TV drama production conducted by the Australian Film Commission (2006) indicates that in key areas the amount of drama on Australian television is declining. While the overall slate of TV drama hours rose slightly from the year before, it remained below the five year average and showed a decline in adult drama, with no series at all produced by the ABC, where you would normally expect to find the more challenging and innovative work.

In relation to the community sector, C31 in Melbourne has reported that one of the station's most popular programs over the past two years, "Vasili's Garden", is shot and partly edited, in one day. In contrast, the one drama series shown on C31 in 2006, "One Night Stand", took three days to shoot each episode. Moreover, this series was consciously designed to be as logistically simple as a drama series could be, shot multi-camera in the studio with one location and limited cast (G. Dee & G. Noble, personal communication, January 29, 2007).

I would argue that accepted forms of screen drama, whether feature films, television series or soap operas, all model a production approach that is unachievable in the non-professional or semi-professional environment found in community television. Even for the independent or emerging producers that often use community television as a springboard into the mainstream industry, the logistical and creative challenges of realizing a drama project using the accepted models are daunting.

Digital Storytelling is the closest thing to drama that can be found in the community media field – with its focus on narrative, personal experience and memory. Without denying the creative richness of many digital stories, the self-imposed limitations of the format currently limit the creative potential and social impact of this form in the broadcast environment (Burgess, 2006).

The dominant approach to producing funded or mainstream film and television drama is long and complex, with an emphasis on principles of control over the creative process. Because of the amount of money involved and the perceived riskiness of the venture, particularly at the production stage, a great deal of time and effort is spent in the development of the project. Scripts commonly go through multiple drafts over periods of years, with input from editors, assessors and investors. A key principle in the process is ‘tightness’, where each scene, line of dialogue and action is interrogated for its contribution to the story. Similarly, during the large-scale intensity of the production stage, processes are organized to provide as much control as possible over the final outcome. Consistency and technical quality are key principles driving the process.

Allied with this is what I would describe as the ‘tyranny’ of continuity. Continuity is popularly understood as an issue related to props appearing the same way in different shots filmed at different times. However, the principle of continuity pervades almost every aspect of the production process, aiming to achieve the illusion that individual shots within a scene have not been filmed out of sequence and at different times (not uncommonly on different days or weeks) but rather conveying the action of the drama as a seamless real-time experience. Approaches to the design of the coverage (how the action within a scene will be filmed from different angles), lighting, sound and art direction are heavily determined by principles of continuity. Perhaps most

damagingly, otherwise successful scenes are discarded in the edit suite because of relatively minor continuity errors.

Jean-Pierre Geuens (2000) has written one of very few books that attempt to relate the practical complexities and detail of the film production process to a significant body of contemporary cultural theory and film history. Critiquing the Hollywood model of screen drama and the industrial mode of production associated with it, Geuens discusses how, on a professional production, each shot is commonly lit by at least three or four lights, all of which have an accepted and specific function. When the time comes to do a reverse angle, efforts are made to reconcile the contradiction between maintaining a similar lighting style on the person opposite and a consistent look to the overall lighting in the scene, a process that results in the lighting becoming overly complex and time-consuming. Furthermore, to save time during the shoot, which is the most expensive stage of the production, the sequence in which shots are taken is usually determined by the order that minimises the number of different lighting setups, regardless of the impact this has on the needs of the actors or the other creative objectives of the process.

Can these obstacles be overcome?

I would argue that the dominant approach to drama production in Australia (modeled on the Hollywood approach), is heavily influenced by the financial investment in the production. While the presence of a budget allows crew and cast to be paid for their labour and the expertise they bring to their work, the need for investors, producers and broadcasters to get a return on the money invested in the production not only influences issues such as stories and characters but a large number of other issues, from the relations between cast and crew, the style of lighting, camerawork and performance used, the number of takes that are shot and the design of the coverage.

The professional environment in which the production occurs and in which the key participants have been trained and grown experienced, much like Bourdieu's "habitus" (1993) or the related concept of "figured worlds" developed by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain (1998), creates a disposition towards certain behaviours and ways of acting.

In his analysis of the industrial mode of production exemplified by Hollywood but also widely applied within the professional sector of the Australian film and television industry, Geuens (2000, p.122–125 & 139-140) suggests that the key to more fully realising the creative potential of film is in viewing the production stage as an exploratory one, where the focus is less on control and more on the filmmaker being open to what occurs. His position is supported by Sainsbury (2003a; 2003b), who is critical of the conservatism of the Australian film industry and what he describes as 'pragmatic' filmmaking, stressing the need for the production to be a process of discovery, rather than the mechanical visual realization of the script.

The experience of watching a pragmatic film is to feel that the tools of cinema have been commandeered and enslaved by something that demands a rigorous obedience and forbids all but the most minor show of independence. The something is, of course, the script. (Sainsbury, 2003a, p. 8)

It would be a considerable setback for the development of the community television sector if drama was seen as an elite form of programming, beyond the reach of producers within the sector. My research was designed to explore the practical implications of the alternative views expressed by people such as Geuens and Sainsbury and to assess the impact of a different approach to the process of the production of a television drama program.

Researching an alternative model

As a relatively experienced filmmaker, I have had a long-standing interest in innovative approaches to resolving the tension in film drama between a serious engagement with social issues and the ability to reach a wide audience. My interest in telling stories that focus on the mundane world and characters whose journeys do not follow the familiar path of the Hollywood ‘hero’ has meant it has often been difficult for my productions to receive much support or funding. As a result, I have had extensive experience in low budget and no budget forms of production.

My research is practice-based, so I am actually producing the pilot for a television series and reflecting on the process as it unfolds. In the way that Peter Downton (2003) refers to design research as having three possible perspectives – research for design, research about design and research through design – the approach I have taken is to conduct my research *through* the production I am undertaking. This involves systematically reflecting on the process as it unfolds and documenting it in a wide range of ways, including the recording of a considerable amount of video footage. While there is a significant amount of professional and academic writing about the film & television production process, academic study *through* film & television production is a relatively undeveloped field.



“How To Change The World” has been designed as a television series set in a pub called The Junction Hotel. My research involves the production of a pilot episode,

which can be seen as a prototype for the series as a whole. To briefly outline the content and structure of the program, it is set in a small neighborhood pub called the Junction Hotel, which is owned by Max, an old-style publican in his mid-seventies. The Junction is losing money and Max decides that he cannot let it slide into oblivion. He renames the pub The Progress Bar and works to attract a younger and larger crowd, introducing live music and international cuisine. Against the backdrop of these changes, the life of the pub goes on. A wide assortment of customers comes to drink and talk about the issues that matter to them. Various pub staff come and go, each with their own story. The pilot episode focuses on the story of Jazz, an international student from India who is working in the pub as a waitress. The program also includes a segment called the Ghost News, where the ghosts of two journalists who drank themselves to death in the pub come out of the broom cupboard late at night to report on current events, in this episode the street protests against the G20 meeting of world finance ministers that was held in Melbourne in November 2006.

The program was designed to build on my previous work as a filmmaker with experience in both the mainstream and no-budget sector, having written and directed a fully funded feature film and worked in commercial television news, as well as making numerous more experimental works. “How To Change The World” was also heavily informed by my knowledge of previous cinema and television drama, as it applied to the questions I am exploring – films and filmmakers that drew on developments in the mobility of production equipment to shoot on location and in actual social environments (such as Italian Neo-Realism and the French New Wave), screen productions that have explored hybrid approaches to drama and documentary or to everyday and imaginary worlds (from the work of Alexander Kluge to TV series such as the *Young Ones* and the *Singing Detective*), and productions that have used

improvisation in a dramatically structured context (such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or the Australian comedy series *We Can Be Heroes*).

A number of significant questions arose in the course of the production. I would like to focus on several key issues relevant to the viability of this model of screen drama production for the community television sector.

No-budget promotion

There are many challenges for a television producer working in a no-budget environment. Some of them are obvious and relate to the logistical practicalities of finding equipment, props and locations to use on the production for little or no cash. Other challenges are less apparent but no less significant.

Giving Up Control

When getting a movie financed is always a matter of cracking the market before the film is made, and never the other way around, the script becomes by far the most important consideration in the risk business and its value is increasingly measured by quasi-objective criteria. As such, it has to promise a degree of safety. It has to look and feel familiar. It has to cover all the bases in telling a conventionally intelligible story. It has to comply with certain given rules of the writer's craft. And above all, it has to entirely determine the film that is made from it. (Sainsbury, 2003b, p. 5)

How To Change The World was shot without a script. A five-page outline was the main written document used to guide the process and communicate the objectives of the program to the many people involved in its production.



Using an approach partly based on the films and theories of Alexander Kluge, the overall strategy was to combine scenes where the actors improvised dialogue, with narrated sequences then being used to link the action, convey plot exposition and generally reflect on the implications of the action on screen. The objective with the improvised dialogue scenes was to capture performances that were genuinely unpredictable. The voice-over was not written in advance, although the general shape of the narrative existed prior to the production starting.



The experience of shooting a drama this way raised a large number of interesting issues, to do with how the actors conveyed the characters in the story, how the crew functioned in a less controlled production environment and whether the project produced worthwhile creative outcomes. It has to be said that some actors were more comfortable with the improvised approach than others. As the shoot unfolded, I made the decision in some scenes to take a more focused approach and to use improvisation

more as a workshopping technique, so that the actors in the scene arrived at an agreed way to play the dialogue, which was then recorded. However, in the majority of the dialogue scenes, the scenes were based on whatever dialogue the actors came up with in the first take, without prior rehearsal.

According to Soules, improvisation works best within a structure of ‘protocols’, which he describes as strategies which ‘glue’ events together, even in the most free and loosely structured improvised jazz or theatrical performance.

More than just guidelines, protocols retrieve traditions and recuperate them into present practice; they imply a cultural repository of aesthetic taste; and they signify an attitude toward social responsibility and engagement” (2004, p.6)

Soules draws attention to the issue that improvisation is rarely successful in a vacuum. It requires both the performers and the director to frame the improvisation within a context of social and cultural experience. As Soules suggests, I also believe an improvised approach encourages a conscious engagement with the traditions of the field, in my case film and television production. When so much is focused on the construction of the screen narrative as it unfolds during the shoot, I felt it was necessary to have a clear structure based on reference to directors who I felt were relevant and whose work I admired, such as Kluge, Godard and Rossellini. How they integrated improvisation into the broader structure of their screen narratives gave me a framework for thinking about my own work.

I believe a more improvised approach has many advantages over a tightly scripted one. It gives actors more responsibility and autonomy over the portrayal of their characters and produces performances that have a compelling unpredictability. I feel that improvised performances work best with an ‘all or nothing’ approach, where actors are not asked to rehearse or repeat a scene for the sake of resolving technical

issues or recording alternative angles. However, this suggests that the use of the camera and lights on the production needs to be kept simple and functional, denying the production the opportunity to creatively explore the visual potential of a screen narrative. Where possible, I attempted to address this concern by allowing an improvised approach to the camera as well, not necessarily by employing a fashionable hand-held style but through applying these ideas to creative/technical areas such as focus.

An example of this is a scene we shot in a bar, where five actors were having a conversation. The dramatic context was that one of the male pub customers had invited one of the barmaids out to have a drink with some of his work colleagues at an upmarket bar, where the barmaid progressively gets drunker. This scene was shot from one static angle over two takes, one of which ran for eight minutes and one for five, the two takes framed as occurring at different times of the evening. The actors were not given any instructions about the dialogue apart from a general discussion about their characters and the context of the scene within the overall story. The sound was recorded using two microphones onto two separate tracks, so multiple conversations could run simultaneously and remain separate. The shot was recorded on a telephoto lens, so that all five characters could not all be held in focus at the one time. The camera assistant was effectively allowed to improvise which characters would be in focus at any one time by adjusting the lens as the conversation unfolded. This was done in a fairly arbitrary way, as the camera was so far from the actors that the conversation was almost impossible to hear.



From my perspective, the results of this approach were extremely successful. Both cast and crew had a high level of creative autonomy, the drama was convincingly portrayed with the relationships between the characters, their social world and the emotions they are engaged with all being communicated using images and sound in an unusual but accessible way. In addition, the creative autonomy of the cast and crew complemented each other, rather than being in conflict.

As Geuens has discussed, the theories of Mikhael Bakhtin are relevant in better understanding an improvised approach to film and television production and the relationship between the author/director and the other participants in the production (2000, pp. 137–139). In Bakhtin’s view, a ‘dialogic’ approach to the novel (found in a writer such as Dostoevsky) allows the characters to have a voice independent of the author’s.

a prose writer can distance himself from the language of his own work, while at the same time distancing himself, in varying degrees, from the different layers and aspects of the work (1981, p. 299).

Improvisation shifts the creative control within the production from the author/director to the other participants. The role of the director becomes less to ‘direct’ than to ‘select’. While it is possible to view all film direction this way, in an improvised environment this aspect of the creative work is significantly foregrounded.

In the bar scene described above, it was meaningless to do other takes from other angles, which would be normal production practice. This would require the actors to repeat what they had said, which in the circumstances (13 minutes of unscripted conversation) was absurd. So all the director can do in this situation is say the raw material is there and use the editing stage to select the fragments that will be used to construct the scene.

Discussing the issue of the construction of meaning through language more broadly, Holland et al (1998) draw on Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia' in the construction of their own theory of cultural identity and agency. Through this concept, Holland et al are arguing that an individual, in their use of language, is not a "freewheeling agent, authoring worlds from creative springs within" but instead that meaning comes through choices made about the use of language loaded with the social and historical contexts of others, "inevitably and inextricably also ideological and lived perspectives on the world" (1998, p. 170).

Bakhtin himself more directly applies the concept of heteroglossia to the creative work of novelists.

languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia ... They may all be drawn in by the novelist for the orchestration of his themes and for the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values. (1981, pp. 291-292)

The concept of heteroglossia resonates with my experience of constructing a screen narrative out of performances and images improvised by others. It also suggests how the construction of a narrative in this way is more broadly relevant to language in general, considered as a living social means of expression and a fundamental tool in an individual's construction of meaning. For my approach to drama to be viable, it

also requires a shift in emphasis from the production processes being focused on creating the illusion of a spatially and temporally consistent and continuous dramatic world to being an explicitly constructed, fragmentary and hybrid one, an approach where Bakhtin's ideas also seem relevant.

Hybrid Worlds

This paper has focused on the concept of drama as a distinct media form within film and television production. While this is an industry convention, it is somewhat arbitrary to conceive of drama as being distinct from other forms of production such as documentary, in relation to both content and production processes. In fact, much of the previous discussion about improvisation in drama evokes production processes widely used in the documentary form. In my research, I was interested in blurring the distinctions between conventional media forms, to create an umbrella fictional space in which a wide diversity of voices and perspectives were expressed in a range of rhetorical styles. Bakhtin has stressed the importance of what he calls hybridization in the development of new ways for perceiving the world in language and literature (1981, pp. 358-366). Bakhtin views hybridization as

a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor. (1981, p.358)



My strategy in relation to this issue included having segments involving ‘pub customers’, who were people invited from various fields to appear in the program as themselves, discussing ideas and issues over a drink. These shots were then intercut with the more fictionalised elements of the narrative. It also included a television news segment presented by ghosts, which attempted to explore an actual current social event (the protests against the G20 meeting in Melbourne) from the perspective of a fictional character. This segment aimed to combine elements of conventional news style with a more visually poetic treatment to explore issues of emotion, imagination and personal agency within the contexts of this street protest.



It is not at all unusual in television to have hybrid program formats, where drama, documentary, talk, music and other forms of entertainment are combined. Numerous programs in the reality television genre (such as *Supernanny*, *The Osbournes* and *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*) make use of existing social environments, and essentially for similar reasons to mine – making use of digital production technology

to simplify the logistics of the production stage and capture a more spontaneous feel. However, I believe the potential of this approach is undeveloped and have attempted in my production to give it a more explicitly political and poetic focus.

Overcoming the Tyranny Of Continuity

What also became apparent was that, once the production abandons an approach to the drama that locates the narrative within a 'realistic' world, one that creates the illusion of space and time being unified and consistent within and across scenes, issues of continuity and technical quality that escalate the degree of difficulty within the production process begin to recede in significance. This consequently allows the production to proceed in a less rigid and laborious manner, within an environment more effectively supportive of the exploratory creative work suggested by Geuens (2000) and Sainsbury (2003a; 2003b).

Symbolic Capital

Film and television production is an intensely collaborative activity. On a no-budget production, the process of finding cast and crew who have the expertise, commitment and available time to devote to the production can be extremely challenging. In my research, my inability to pay people for their labour was not a primary factor in their motivation to be involved but it did affect the extent to which they could commit to the production.

Bourdieu (1993) has discussed the concept of symbolic capital that exists within the field of cultural production. While his analysis is focused more on concepts of prestige within a particular field, in my research there were nevertheless exchanges of value occurring amongst the participants in the production that were not financial. It was noticeable that the situation was also slightly different between the crew and the

cast, although in both cases the judgment was around what the participant would get in exchange for their involvement.

In relation to the crew, most of the people I approached were students or recent graduates from media production courses. They saw an involvement in my production as offering them an opportunity to gain experience in roles that would help them establish themselves within the professional sector of the film and television industry. On a no-budget production, a talented but inexperienced crew member can have creative opportunities and a level of input into the creative aspects of the production that would not be possible in the professional environment. So the production was offering them an experience that they perceived as valuable to them – whether it was creative experience that allowed them to develop new skills or showcase existing ones. In return they offered their time, labour and expertise.

In most respects, we found it easier to find actors who were willing to participate than crew. Whether there are less opportunities for actors or, within their figured world, there is a greater acceptance of the need to work for no money in return for creative satisfaction, actors were in general more willing to juggle paid work and their participation on the shoot. While many actors were also motivated by perceived future professional opportunities, it also seemed the creative satisfaction of practising their craft on a worthwhile project seemed more prominent in their decision to participate. As an example, one of the main female actors on the production was Australian-born but with Indian parents. Despite obvious acting ability and some significant prior experience, she described how difficult it was for her to get any major roles because of her Indian appearance and the reluctance of agents and producers to cast her in other than supporting roles. So involvement in this production provided her with an

opportunity to break out of the professional stereotyping she had experienced, an opportunity that offset the lack of financial compensation.

The argument I am proposing about symbolic capital in this area is supported by our experience in relation to the participation of minor crew members and actors (bit players and extras). We found that it was consistently easier to find people for the major roles (despite this involving a greater commitment of time and effort on the part of the participant) than the minor ones. In the more significant roles, the production could offer creative satisfaction and experience valuable in the development of a professional career. In the minor roles, there was much less on offer and hence much less perceived value in being involved. Unaware of this at the planning stage, I structured the program to focus less on a few major roles and more on a larger range of less substantial ones, working on the assumption that it would require less time commitment from any one participant. However, in the end, more time was spent in securing the involvement of extras than was spent in casting the main roles.

An Economy Of Goodwill

My production involved an uncommonly long shooting period. This was a conscious decision, to avoid the extremely long daily hours that are characteristic of low budget productions. So all days were scheduled at 8 hours with 30 minutes for a meal break and on only a couple of occasions was this exceeded. However, extending the shoot over this number of days created great obstacles for anyone to participate in the entire shoot, even if they had favorable material circumstances and a commitment to the project. So, with a couple of exceptions, I had to accept that even quite important roles had to be swapped and rotated, with this occurring more frequently as the production proceeded. However, partly because of the strategy for shooting the production and partly because suitable replacements could be found, I did not feel the

creative objectives of the project were unduly affected by these changes. While this ambitious shooting period was fraught with potential disasters, it ultimately ran surprisingly smoothly. In addition to an exchange of labour for creative and professional opportunities, my research also indicated there was another exchange of symbolic capital occurring on the production, in relation to what I have termed an economy of goodwill. This was based on a culture of respect and fairness that I felt was needed to support the production process in a no-budget environment. This is easier to assert than to implement in practice, given the large and diverse range of people involved, with equally diverse pressures and objectives at play. An example of the pressures in relation to fairness was around the issue of payment to individuals. On a no-budget production, where there is an explicit agreement that participants will not be paid, should you make any exceptions and agree to pay someone who has particular talents that are required or can argue particular extenuating circumstances? Most no-budget shoots operate on the basis that participants will not be out of pocket to be involved, so food and travel costs are covered. However, the issue of expenses and differential treatment for individuals can create feelings of inequity and adversely affect the culture within the production. I would argue that a shoot like this is only viable if the creative production group, which includes all cast and crew, can operate in an environment which is relatively cohesive and free of conflict, so an equitable approach has to be maintained.

My research suggests that a sustained no-budget shoot requires many of the attributes regarded as ‘professional’ – effective communication, a reasonable working environment and reliable planning – as well as a respect for the contribution of all participants, regardless of their experience or status within the field, for even at the no-budget end of the field, there is a hierarchy of status and symbolic power involved.

It became clear that this production was operating in an ill-defined space between professional and amateur. Atton (2002, p.27), in his discussion of attempts to define alternative media, has suggested “de-professionalisation” as a criteria for this area of the media. Howley (2005, p.3) has also cautioned about the conflation of producers and consumers that occurs in some discussions of community media, mentioning ‘funniest home video’ programs as the extent to which mainstream media acknowledges the work of amateur producers. However, I would argue that in recent years the debate has shifted in regard to the relations between professionals and amateurs within the media, and in fact more broadly in society. Leadbeater and Miller (2004), in their work on ‘pro-ams’, have highlighted the scale of activity within contemporary post-industrial societies of people who do amateur work to a professional standard, in diverse fields ranging from astronomy to computer games. They have also highlighted the often symbiotic relationships in many fields between the activities of paid and unpaid participants. The extensive discussion within internet studies about the role of ‘prosumers’ and ‘produsers’ also provides evidence of the blurring between the professional and non-professional in online networked environments that is occurring in fields such as journalism, advertising and media (Deuze, 2005; Bruns, 2005; Humphreys, Fitzgerald, Banks & Suzor, 2005). While there are clear tensions in these developments between perceiving them as enhancing participatory media practice or increasing commercial exploitation of media users, I would suggest that this phenomenon is significant and relevant to the field of community TV drama production. However, I would also argue that it raises important ethical issues that no-budget producers need to address.

In producing a drama program with unpaid labour, the position I took was to be as explicit and equitable as possible. Agreements were signed with all participants that

the production was a non-commercial one and that if the resulting program earns income then they have the right to be paid for their contribution. This is standard practice within the no-budget sector of the film and television industry. However, I also felt it was important to take the less formal steps I have outlined here to ensure that all participants felt that basic ethical principles were underpinning the process.

Conclusion

I believe it is important to explore approaches to storytelling on screen that model unconventional ways of portraying the complexities of human experience in a social context. Whether they are successful or not in reaching an audience, there is great potential in the media of film and television that remains unrealised.

It was important for the objectives of my production to not so completely abandon the mainstream conventions of screen drama that a mainstream audience would not be interested in the work. My objective was to develop a strategy for the drama and its production that would broaden the range of stories, characters and styles available on Australian television. Put another way, I was interested in alternative approaches to television production that met the audience halfway.

“How To Change The World” is currently being edited, so it is not possible to draw final conclusions about the effectiveness of the approach I have taken. The shoot did not model the speed of a typical television drama production schedule, which is often extremely quick and one of the determinants of the form. However, this speed is a requirement of the economics of the medium, so in the no-budget sector it could be argued that different principles should apply.

The success of the production will partly be determined by its ability to reach and affect an audience. However, in modeling an alternative approach to drama

production that may be viable for the community television sector, I believe the production has demonstrated that the approach used is one that can succeed. While not achieving the consistency of a mainstream professional production, the quality of the performances is perfectly adequate, with numerous scenes and moments that have the freshness and unpredictability that was sought. The technical quality achieved was of an in-between standard between the professional and amateur. But I would argue that contemporary audiences are increasingly comfortable with this level of quality, if the program content is of sufficient interest.

I believe my research has demonstrated that an open and ethical approach to the people working on the production is consistent with getting acceptable results on an uncommonly long and demanding shoot. While it requires constant flexibility and improvisation around the use of both crew and cast, the work produced met or exceeded initial expectations. And there was no evidence that any participants were unhappy with the process or would not be interested in repeating the experience should their circumstances allow it.

The approach to no-budget drama I have modeled in general requires an appreciation of the creative possibilities of improvisation on all levels, both in the production of material for the program and in the management of the production process. I would also argue that, to be successful, this approach to drama requires cultural resources as much as material ones. Both innovation and improvisation require an engagement with the traditions of the form to produce meaningful and effective results.

Community television offers a site for innovation within film and television that is significantly unexplored. Effective drama on community television would add to the richness and development of the sector and of the Australian community more generally. I have a particular interest in exploring the potential of screen-based drama

to convey issues of social change in alternative ways to those commonly employed in television. However, there are a vast number of other social and cultural perspectives that could find a valid means of expression in this space within the media landscape. Holland et al (1998) have a broader focus on issues of agency within “cultural worlds” but I believe their ideas are highly relevant to the issue I have been discussing – the potential of drama on community television to enhance innovation within the Australian media and raise the prominence of issues relating to social change and social justice:

the ‘metapragmatic’ capability to figure social practice – through narrative, drawing, singing, and other means of articulation – is at the same time a capability to figure it otherwise than it is (1998, p. 143).



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