

❖ Prisoners of the Media

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This place is just like a hotel.
Lizzie Birdsworth, Prisoner

Prisoner, the Australian soap opera that first went to air on Australian television in 1979, has achieved an unusual longevity. It just won't go away.¹ The television industry, the fans, even the original stars are keeping the memory alive. In 2007, the entire series (all 692 episodes) was made available in a Complete Collection on DVD, which also included a special book written by TV journalists Michael Idato and Andrew Mercado. In 2006, Channel 7 in Sydney hosted a reunion of ex-*Prisoners* in front of a live audience, 20 years after the final episode screened in Australia. It appeared in an American remake in 1992 as *Dangerous Women*, as *Vroumenlengel* (Women's Wing) in the Netherlands in 1993-4, and as *Hinter Gittern* (Behind Bars) in Germany in 1997-98. The final episode of the second re-run on British television ended only in 2001. Meanwhile, a dedicated UK website, *On the Inside*, continues to promote the program, recently advertising the opportunity to meet two of the stars of the show in an intimate performance setting in November, 2010. The two performances have already sold out.

The phenomenon of *Prisoner* has certainly been noteworthy, with the distinction of 'a secure and honourable place in Australian cultural history'.² As a subject for research, critics have also believed it provided a 'rich vein' for cultural studies.³ I, too, found it serious enough to make it the subject of an Honours thesis in History in the mid-1990s.⁴ There is certainly something intriguing about *Prisoner*. For a commercial television soap, the setting of a woman's prison was unique for its time. The dramatisation of life at the fictitious 'Wentworth' offered the chance to explore and witness what was normally a hidden and taboo topic, female incarceration. The producers at Grundy apparently took their program research seriously, embarking on nine months preparation before the show was filmed. Interviews with prisoners and prison officers were conducted, and the recently released Royal Commission report led by Justice Nagle into NSW prisons was perused. An ex-prisoner, Sandra Willson, was made an advisor on the program.⁵ Mulawa, the only women's prison in NSW, located at Silverwater on the southern outskirts of Sydney, became the program's model; Reg Watson, one of the creators of the show, boasted that even the prison bars were the same size as those inside: 'With *Prisoner* we're going more for realism. All the situations are things that have happened, or could have happened.'⁶ Peta Letchford, who headed the team responsible for the preliminary

research, stressed the commitment to realistic representations of female imprisonment: 'There was a need, an obligation, to do it properly. We couldn't just go in and make some fairy floss story about girls in a weekend camp. This was to be close to the real thing, warts and all.'⁷

Some of the program's storylines were quite daring. Stories about rape, euthanasia, lesbianism, murder and drug addiction all found their way into the series at various times. *Prisoner* incorporated issues of social concern, examining domestic violence and abortion for example. Moreover here was a program where men were virtually absent, with a cast almost completely made up of women who were not only in the particularly unglamorous setting of a jail, but were actually *ordinary looking* to boot. No wonder, then, that it gained such a diverse audience, even finding enthusiastic acclaim among some feminists who applauded the tough, unglamorous representation of the female inmates, at a time when soap operas like *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *Charlie's Angels* were setting the norm for female appearance on television. The treatment of the female body in *Prisoner* was an enormous part of its appeal. Here were 'real' women. They wore no make-up; some were overweight; they swore. Dave Worthington, a scriptwriter on the show, noted that you couldn't have 'a realistic prison show without the women calling each other bitches, *at least*'.⁸ And as one recent fan-based website applauded, here there were 'no pretty young faces, no nice homes and no romance'.⁹

Despite its promising start, *Prisoner* degenerated from its earlier premise, and as the program progressed over almost 8 years, seemed to lose whatever daring and ingenuity it had originally possessed. The stories got less interesting and more 'soapy', as prison life became simply another location for staging a conventional female experience of domesticity and emotional drama, petty intrigues and gossip, while maintaining voyeuristic appeal via its sporadic catfights, schoolroom pranks and sex. 'Realism' seemed to become a flimsy excuse for more sex or for having women beat up on each other, an enormous audience attraction. A particularly popular device was to have the women transform into an animalistic, uncontrollable mob, going at each other with knives, fists and soldering irons. One actress, Jenny Lovell, surmised that men watched the show because 'quite possibly it was everything they believed women were deep down, you know, conniving bitches, vipers and people who fight'.¹⁰ From her experience on set, the shift to more wimpy storylines and pacifist characters created a backlash among viewers. They wanted a return to more violence.

Illicit sex was always an enormous part of its appeal. 'There's sex all over the jails', one researcher said, 'and we knew that it would be a vital part of the make-up in most of the ruthless characters we would be introducing to viewers'.¹¹ Frankie, introduced at the beginning of the series, was one of the most memorable examples of this link between illicit sexuality and violent, anti-feminine behaviour. Played brilliantly by Carol Burns, Frankie appears in the first episode in baggy overalls, fag and breasts hanging loose, a leering expression in her eyes. She leans in close to a new cell-mate, Karen: 'You're beautiful. I love beautiful things...we'll have a happy time together Karen, it's up to you love-you can really enjoy yourself if you put your mind to it.' An ugly laugh punctuates the scene as Karen responds with a look of horror and fear. Frankie is given to psychotic fits of rage, as when she finds out that Doreen, Frankie's girlfriend, is being moved away from her. Frankie was a particularly confronting character, but she was an early example of the way sex and violence were linked throughout the serial. Particularly pervasive was the idea that prisons were a hotbed of illicit sexual activity. As one researcher declared:

We were committed to realism, the nitty-gritty...the sex is there, lesbians are there, whatever you can imagine is there. Prisoners get bored and it's either sex or drugs as a diversion - and often both. You want the bottom line on this? Jails

*are a smorgasbord of sex. "Line up and get it" we were told.*¹²

It's interesting to note that writers such as Susan Sontag were picking up on the connections between sadism and homosexuality being exhibited in popular culture in the decades following World War Two.¹³ The connections between sadistic behaviour and illicit sex in a lowbrow soap like *Prisoner* are nothing like the examples of cinema used by Sontag, where she found a clear 'eroticisation of fascism', but there is a very faint whiff of recognition. Perhaps more relevant to understanding the way in which *Prisoner* reflected some of the shifts occurring in representations of deviant sexuality in the 1970s, is Lee D Rossi's observation of the departure in men's soft porn away from the clean, healthy and well-scrubbed playmates of *Playboy* to the 'voluptuous, world-weary and tough' images of women in *Penthouse* and *Oui*.¹⁴

Ultimately however, *Prisoner* became more defined by its petty intrigues and gossip. Meanwhile another soap opera about a men's prison, *Punishment*, intended as a twin to *Prisoner*, failed so dismally it was taken off air after three episodes, despite a star cast including Mel Gibson, John Coleby and Mike Preston. With little talk and no play, with beatings and the rape of young inmates as central themes, the male version had none of the attractions of its female twin, and there were none of the comical interludes and the light relief afforded by *Prisoner*. The difference in the two representations and their public reception highlights Blanche Hampton's point, that:

*there appears to be a perception that for men rape and beatings constitute the major horror of incarceration. For women aside from the occasionally unwarranted, but not physically intrusive sexual contact and the 'odd scrap', prison consists of sitting around drinking cups of tea and talking tough to officers. Neither is a representative picture.*¹⁵

Punishment was before its time. Nowadays there is far more willingness to watch shows about men's prisons where the brutality, the rapes and the beatings are horrific and extreme. But there haven't been any more programs about female incarceration since *Prisoner*. Instead, we prefer nowadays to celebrate a different, softer kind of imprisonment for women, in places like Wisteria Lane. But in the late 1970s, it was prison, described by one ex-inmate as 'the most degrading and debilitating form of life for any woman', that became the place to sit back and enjoy each evening at 8:30pm in the comfort of the suburban living room.

The serial was launched at a specific moment in Australia's penal history, when intense on-the-ground prison struggles intensified public debate surrounding the penal institution. Growing publicity about the terrible incompetencies and brutalities of prisons in NSW eventually forced a Royal Commission in 1978. Led by Justice Nagle, the Commission found the allegations of bashing and other abuses of power to be true, and his report conveyed a sense of outrage at the treatment of prisoners for over two and a half decades.¹⁶ Amongst all this heightened awareness about prison conditions and prisoners, women behind bars remained an invisible and mysterious phenomenon. Information about conditions for female inmates in Australia's jails was virtually absent, despite the attempts by women's action group Women Behind Bars to make them public. The prison crisis of the 1970s was a male crisis.

Mulawa is an Aboriginal word meaning 'place of shadows'. It was originally built as a maximum security prison, and became the main gaol for women from 1969, the first of its kind to have dormitory accommodation for women. Throughout the 1970s and in to the early 1980s, the rate of women prisoners in NSW jails increased at a rapid rate. The average number of female inmates in 1976 at any one time was 81; by 1984, it had more than doubled to 193, at times reaching over 200.¹⁷ Justice Nagle noted in his report that conditions for female prisoners were

often worse than they were for their male counterparts. He made specific recommendations in relation to the fact that, unlike men, women were not allowed contact visits; women were not given cellular accommodation but forced to exist in overcrowded dormitories; women had no access to work release programs, no provision for exercise, no education or work opportunities and women were over-sedated. Even movement within the prison was seriously impeded. He also noted the reluctance of management at Mulawa to institute even basic reform. Tony Vinson, chairman of the Commission of Corrective Services from 1979 to 1981, also noted the belligerent and inhumane attitudes of those in charge at Mulawa,¹⁸ a sentiment backed up by inmate Lee Gadd in her letter to the Department of Corrective Services in 1979. 'The RSPCA would never allow animals to be treated in the way the administration and their associates treat us.'¹⁹

Originally built to house 109 at most, Mulawa consistently held at least 130 women in the late 1970s. Overcrowded conditions meant that 'inmates were sleeping on mattresses on the floor, packed in like sardines. A lot of tension was in the air and because of this inmates were at each other's throats.'²⁰ The excess were mostly held in a wing called Catchpole, originally supposed to be for the remand section of the prison population. The Women in Prison Task Force set up in 1984 to investigate the state of facilities for women in NSW prisons found broken windows, vermin such as rats, cockroaches and possums, severe overcrowding and inadequate bathroom facilities, and concluded that 'under no circumstances is Catchpole fit for accommodation purposes.'²¹ One woman who spent five weeks there said that it was so nightmarish inmates commonly 'experienced "stepping out" (experiencing contemporary madness)...'²²

Possibly the most appalling reports about the treatment of women in Mulawa related to health problems. During her 17 years imprisonment at Mulawa, Willson saw three strikes, all of them over the inadequacy of medical facilities. Panadol was regularly used for anything from minor complaints to serious ones. Attention for gynaecological problems could take several months. Women who had mental health issues were ignored, although tranquillisation of women was common. Women were also used as guinea pigs in drug trials, as academic prison reformers George Zdenkowsky and Paul Brown found. They quoted one commentator who noted the 'pioneering work' of two penal psychiatrists in Victoria, 'with sexual offenders and "promiscuous" young girls using drugs Dep Provera...and Androcur and Cyproterone Acetate...'. These drugs, the report stated, 'are still at the experimental stage in terms of how they control sexual behaviour and their short and long term effects.'²³

In 1981, the daily medication of Robin Lynch, Mulawa inmate, consisted of 50 mgs of Largactil, three times daily; 75 mgs Sinequan, 10mgs chloral hydrate and 2 mgs of Rohypnol. 'These are, in order, a major tranquiliser, an anti-depressant and two sedatives or hypnotic drugs.'²⁴ Maree, arrested on charges of manslaughter, told of her first experience in prison: 'Every night they would give me medication. I didn't even know what it was for, I just took whatever they gave me.'²⁵

A number of feminist scholars engaged in pioneering research in the 1970s noted how dominant discourses of femininity constructed female deviance in terms of a transgression against nature, a betrayal of their sex. While male deviance was viewed as an extension of masculinity, violence and aggression being the natural attributes of men, women who committed crime were perceived as non-women. For inmates of Mulawa, the perception of female criminality as 'anti-feminine', was experienced through the methods used in the prison system in myriad ways. The system applied a madonna/whore approach. On the one hand they were treated as fallen women, dirty and slutty; on the other, they were forced to undergo a process of forced 'feminisation'. In 1973, for example, over a third of Mulawa's inmate

population were investigated for venereal disease, while only ten men in a male prison population of 26, 877 were.²⁶ Meanwhile, the only activities available for women at Mulawa centred on sewing, cooking, ironing and laundry work.

Pat Carlen in her research on women's prisons notes that femininity is constantly engaged, played upon, and simultaneously denied, and writes that 'imprisoned women are continually forced into debilitating and contradictory definitions of womanhood'. While feminine pursuits (sewing, ironing etc) were encouraged, the 'physical and psychological props normally attendant on upon the celebration of the feminine myth' were refused.²⁷ 'I may be a crim but at least I'm not dirty' was a strong ethos of Mulawa culture²⁸, and it was the denial of products to ensure cleanliness that was a constant torment for the inmates:

This letter comes at a very high and tense point in time, we are full of anger, fed up to the neck with the conditions we are forced to endure...we're really fucken' pissed off. Today Tuesday we are confronted with shit like the following: 2x 1k bags of sugar per 15 girls for one week, 2 toilet rolls per month, no disinfectant, no bon amie, no paper towelling, no shower curtains, no dish cloths or scourers...we're told to keep our cells clean and tidy, but we can't do that because we haven't got the items...²⁹

Of course *Prisoner* never set out to document that kind of reality, which would have meant certain death by ratings. It would be silly to hold a soap opera up to the test of reality, whatever the claims of its creators. And people loved it. Perhaps surprisingly, among some of the more ardent fans were those who were institutionalised in some way. One woman spoke of the show's popularity inside a female psychiatric hospital: 'It was the only show that everyone in there watched religiously. Even though it was after lights out...there were certain elements of it that really struck a chord.'³⁰ Among school children the popularity of the serial took on cult proportions. Adolescent boys in particular, perhaps not surprisingly, were among its biggest fans in this demographic, and one man told of how he and his friends all had nicknames based on characters from the show.³¹ Robert Hodge and David Tripp found from their research into the effects of television on the attitudes of school children, that in every class, '*Prisoner* was volunteered as being "just like school"'.³² This was probably more a reflection of the way *Prisoner* made prison look like school. The frequently childish nature of the inmates' responses to authority, the codes about 'not dobbing', the creation of cliques, gossip, bitchiness and girly infantilism are all represented in the show as key factors in the experience of prison.

A group of children in juvenile detention also used *Prisoner* to make sense of and inform their own experiences. The boys at one children's detention centre followed the program closely, and an ex-warden described what happened when it was moved to a later time slot:

We nearly had a riot on our hands. So we said, 'ok, for that night only they can stay up and watch'. They learned their language from that show, learned what tricks to play on each other. There were 14 year olds in there...they'd been in there a week and were already talking like Bea Smith. Children learned how to live in gaol from watching Prisoner, that's what they learned.

Television is a powerful medium, particularly when the distinctions between fantasy and reality are a little blurred, and can sometimes provide a world view that makes sense of something that is incomprehensible. Children are particularly susceptible to this, as numerous studies on the effects of television on children have demonstrated over many years. But they are not alone. As Stanley Aronowitz writes: 'A new world is created in the media of mass culture. This

is not merely a world of representation of reality. Its pervasive character in contemporary society makes it constitutive of social reality.³³

One woman who did time in Mulawa believed that like the children above, she learned what to expect through her acquaintance with the show:

*You see it on Prisoner on TV, it's a good way to perceive prison. As time goes on it's not like Prisoner, but when you first walk in it feels and looks like Prisoner.*³⁴

For some, *Prisoner* provided a reference point to imagine what women's prison was *really* like, even though, as hinted at above, as time went on and it wasn't possible to switch it off, the reality became quite different. But certainly in an era when the diet of prison stories in the media was exclusively male-oriented, *Prisoner* appeared in a total information vacuum about women's prisons. It filled a comprehension gap. Sandra Willson remarked that people inquiring about her time in jail, frequently asked: 'Are there any Veras or Megs or Beas?'³⁵

The success of the program far outweighed expectations. The program was originally conceived of as running for 6 months, and soap opera regulars were conceived of as its target audience. As Reg Watson bluntly expressed it: 'I'd like every housewife to look at this and say, "That could be me in there", because it could be. The only thing different about them is that those inside went through with a crime a lot of other women have contemplated... They're just members of the public inside.'³⁶ Watson clearly understood the power of crime on the popular imagination, the complex mixture of fear, fascination, empathy and disgust that being privy to human fallibility and excess can elicit. Long before the television sitcom and the evening news, in fact, crime had 'enormous organisation significance' in the history of the novel and other cultural narratives, namely because of its role in making the personal public, the private a social event. In the words of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, writing in the 1920s and '30s: 'The criminal act is a moment of private life that becomes, as it were, involuntarily public'.³⁷

Watson, I imagine, would have been rather surprised by the extent and diversity of the *Prisoner* fan-base. Many of its viewers were not housewives, as I have pointed out. The show was particularly famous in the gay community. The sadistic prison officer Joan 'the freak' Ferguson, received an enormous amount of gay fan mail. Post-*Prisoner*, she went on to do a cabaret performance tour at London's premiere gay club *Heaven*, where she apparently paraded around the stage in a tight-fitting, red and sparkly evening dress to the delighted cat-calls of the lesbian crowd, who cheered her foul-mouthed and raunchy behaviour.³⁸ Perhaps the most famous of the gay cult events around *Prisoner* was the turn-out of approximately 3000 leather-clad lesbian bikers at various television network locations in the United States to pay their respects to Frankie, who the night before was shot while trying to escape Wentworth and 'died' after only 21 episodes.

Jenny Lovell believed that there were two types of *Prisoner* fan, those who 'enjoy the tackiness, the ridiculousness and silliness of it', and those 'who watch it for real'.³⁹ As one regular who clearly positioned herself in the first camp explained, she watched because 'it's hilarious and...you can't believe the story lines are so outrageously ridiculous and the acting is so atrocious...(some people) would watch it in disbelief to see whether it could possibly get any worse.'⁴⁰ Many media critics were equally scathing. Sandra Hall wrote that it was 'a mixture of a lesbian lonely hearts club and *Tom Brown's Schooldays* gone ocker.'⁴¹ But as discussed in the beginning of this article, there were others who applauded its subject matter and regarded it as an important milestone in Australian television and Australian popular culture. Ann Curthoys and John Docker argued that the criticisms by journalists were evidence of an elitist contempt

by 'high culture' proponents for the authentic products of popular culture. They defied the snobbery of the culture critics, arguing that *Prisoner* represented 'an historic achievement of popular culture'.⁴²

In Docker's analysis, a certain 'cultural capital' is required to be able to read popular forms of mass culture, something 'popular audiences have, but which "high culture" audiences so often lack'.⁴³ They admired *Prisoner* for its strong female characters, its rejection of conventional gender definitions (strong man/weak woman) and its empathic treatment of female motivations for committing crime. They also saw in *Prisoner* a quintessentially Australian story that drew on a cultural heritage of mateship and anti-authoritarianism.⁴⁴ 'The bottom line is they're the screws and we're the prisoners. It's us or them'. As Sandra Willson described it, *Prisoner* was a 'series about the underdog, ever an Australian hero. Or in this case, heroine'. The decade of the 1970s is renowned as a renaissance period in the production of home-grown Australian drama, and it was this theme of the heroic underdog that was celebrated in productions like *Against the Wind*, *Ben Hall*, *Sunday Too Far Away* and *Breaker Morant* to name a few.

Soap opera has also been linked to the older tradition of melodrama and the carnivalesque in popular culture, where the harshness of fate and history is mocked and where conventions and authority are flouted in irreverent ways. Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the early modern European folk traditions of carnival, which embodied theatrical displays of world-upside-down norm-inversions, misrule and mockery, is often used in this context to draw parallels with late twentieth century soap opera. *Prisoner* has been heralded as a unique example of this inheritance. I can understand the temptation to make this analogy, although from my own readings of the show, I am not so sure the comparisons are entirely accurate. *Prisoner* was more a capitalist product than these appraisals allow, stripped of the spontaneity and political messages that often informed these earlier spectacles, and a different audience experience altogether. Chatting about last night's program in the office the next day should not simply be equated with Bakhtin's example of participatory spectacle 'vividly felt by all its inhabitants'.⁴⁵ For me, Herbert Marcuse's observation that the once oppositional dimension of culture, represented in disruptive characters such as outcasts, criminals and fools, has been eradicated by its wholesale incorporation into the established order, still rings true:

*the vamp, the national hero, the neurotic housewife, the gangster, the star, the charismatic tycoon perform a function very different from and even contrary to that of their cultural predecessors. They are no longer images of another way of life, but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order.*⁴⁶

Soap opera succeeds precisely because it lets us escape the mundanity of our own lives even as it affirms it. Soap opera takes the mundanity of the everyday and injects a bit of fantasy, a bit of gloss. As a number of feminist scholars have observed, soap opera gives women unique narrative pleasure, connecting to their rhythms and desires. Tanya Modleski has demonstrated how soap opera, with its devices of cliffhangers and delayed resolutions, suit the rhythm of the central conditions of women's lives who are confined to domestic household roles, where the 'work is never done' and where distractions, disorder and interruptions rule the domestic universe. She has demonstrated how soap opera also offers the fantasy of an 'extended' family, and of another world that deviates from the drudgery and isolation of contemporary suburbia.⁴⁷ The need to validate a family-centred existence coupled with the wish for community is constantly evoked and reconciled. In *Prisoner*, the core community of women are like a family, united by their imprisonment and their mutual dependence on each other for

protection, and bonded by their common roots. As new inmate Margaret tells a prison officer who recognises her from their school days: 'If those girls find out that I'm some middle class achiever they'll blacklist me out of spite. Don't blow it for me.'

It is true that in the world of television soap, there has never been anything 'quite like it'.⁴⁸ Nowadays we are more likely to sit back with Kath and Kim and enjoy a parody of Australian working class culture, rather than an earnest representation of it, the idea that it 'could be me', but, thankfully, it isn't. There isn't anything the likes of Lizzie, Bea, Doreen or Franky, 'vinegar tits' or 'the freak' on Australian television these days. Female incarceration, meanwhile, has sunk even more efficiently from public view.

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