

# Robert De Niro's Waiting

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**by Lex Marinos**

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The question is, what sort of career would Robert De Niro enjoy if he was an Australian? Well, for a start, he wouldn't just be an Australian, he would be an Italian-Australian. An important distinction since there are many sorts of Australian as the media continually reminds us. There are Greek-Australians, Chinese-Australians, Dutch-Australians, even black Australians. In fact, with over 140 different ethnic groups here, there are more than 140 different hyphenates. And it seems that the only ones who don't require the qualifying hyphen are the 'real' Australians. For 'real', read white Anglo. In media terms, it works like this: Paul Keating is Australian (not Irish-Australian), Nick Bollock is Greek-Australian.

The White Australia Policy still functions, unofficially and perhaps unconsciously in our media, which of course is omnipotent in shaping and reflecting our national identity, both to ourselves and to the rest of the world. A recent survey of locally produced commercial drama showed that only 2% of characters portrayed were from non-Anglo backgrounds. Given that 35% (and increasing) of our society are from such backgrounds, to have only 2% participation verges on criminal under-representation.

To compound the problem, when non-Anglo Australia is represented its image is usually stereotypical and invariably negative. Greeks are taxi drivers, Italians are greengrocers, Asians are refugees or Triad members. Note that Asians are just Asians, there being little desire to consider

any cultural differences between Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese etc. This used to be the case with Greeks, Italians and Spaniards etc. They were all just wogs, homogeneous and interchangeable. So it was with the actors themselves. I started acting twenty five years ago, about the same time as Nick Lathouris and George Spartz. Inevitably we would turn up at the same casting sessions. Fair enough. What was not fair enough was the fact that invariably we would be mistaken for one another. I was often called 'George' or 'Nick', and they 'Lex'. Were we interchangeable as well? Do we really all look the same?

Certainly when I look back on my career so far, in film, television and theatre, any significant roles that I have played have depended upon my ethnicity. Rarely have I had the opportunity to audition for, let alone play, an Aussie. Indeed when the pilot episode for **Kingswood Country** was being prepared, there was an assumption that I would play the Italian son-in-law with an accent. You know, 'biga greena bottle' sort of thing. After some discussion, I'm happy to say that common sense prevailed, and I spoke in my own accent, that of someone born and raised in Australia. Like most actors, I have had my share of bad reviews, and although they are demoralising at the time, I can't say that I have necessarily disagreed with them. However, the only one that ever really hurt was when I was engaged in a season of play? at the Melbourne Theatre Company, and was referred to as MTC's "token ethnic".'

Tokenism is something that has affected Indigenous actors almost as much as racism has. I would not presume to speak on their behalf, but it is worth relating a couple of anecdotes. Firstly, the notorious episode of **Flying Doctors** when the network censored a scene in which Lewis FitzGerald was scripted to kiss Koori actor Kylie Belling. Presumably the sight of a

white male kissing an aboriginal female was something that the audience would find unacceptable.

Then there is the case of **Boney**. Twice there have been series based upon the character of an aboriginal policeman, and twice the leading actor has been non-aboriginal. First time around it was played by New Zealander James Laurenson in blackface and flared nostrils, and secondly by Cameron Daddo. The second occasion created such a furore that the producers agreed to invest 1% of the profits into a training venture for Indigenous television and film students. Even so, it is still difficult for Indigenous actors to obtain roles, even Indigenous roles because sometimes their skin is too light or their nostrils not wide enough!

The point is that unless the part is ethnically specific, then non-Anglos don't have much chance of getting it. If the role is for a doctor, then the assumption is that it will be played by an Anglo. And furthermore, it will almost certainly be male. Now I don't know about you, but that is definitely not my experience when I visit an Australian hospital. The medical staff always seems to include a disproportionately large number of non-Anglos. I carry a lifelong debt to Dr. John Yu of the Childrens Hospital for saving my son, but I know that as far as Australian commercial drama is concerned, no such character exists.

And this is the problem. Whole sections of our society simply do not exist. They play no part in shaping our national identity. And the message that they receive from their exclusion on television is that they are not part of Australia. To disenfranchise so many people by perpetuating the image of Australia according to **Neighbours**, is immature, irresponsible, inhuman and potentially damaging to our society.

These problems were highlighted by the commercial failure of **Heartbreak High**, the spin-off series from the successful movie. Despite being well produced, and with a cast of great diversity, the show failed to capture an

audience domestically, although ironically it was well received overseas. The theories given for this lack of success ranged from it being ahead of its time to the fact that it may have been too realistic for a medium which traditionally presents teenage drama in a more romanticised fashion. Whatever the truth may be, it is to be hoped that it will not be used as an example to discourage similar adventurous productions.

If there is a ray of hope then it may be emanating from a seemingly unlikely source. That of the television commercial. Given the commercial imperative it is perhaps not so surprising that companies are beginning to realise the folly of not embracing the diversity of their potential market. Consequently, the country that used to ride on the sheep's back, now advertises lamb as 'the multicultural meal'. Similarly, if your business involves telecommunications, you don't have to be a genius to realise who it is that makes overseas phone calls.

The situation in drama is indicative of what happens in television generally. News and current affairs are presented predominantly by Anglo-Australians. I know, because Brian told me. Occasionally, non-Anglo women are used, as long as they are mediagenic (ie attractive), but they face a larger problem. With the exception of Jana, they had better start planning for an off-camera career once they pass 35.

And there are still the sports broadcasters who derive childish humour out of mispronouncing ethnic names. How hard is it to make a phone call and check pronunciation? And why don't their bosses make them do it?

A similar but different situation exists on mainstream radio. It doesn't matter what you look like, as long as you sound right, and that includes English and American dialects. But not accents. Accents are things people born in Europe, Asia, and South America have, and those accents are unacceptable on radio. They are not Australian. This reinforces the impression from television that not only are the presenters Anglos, but it is assumed that the

audience is as well.

In the theatre another situation exists. Despite affirmative action policies from the Australia Council, our subsidised (ie with tax paid by all Australians) companies are still Anglo-centric in both repertoire and casting. As soon as a European or Latin-American play is translated into English its customs and manners also become English. Thus while Chekhov's three sisters live in provincial Russia and yearn for Moscow, it is as though they live in Halifax and yearn for London.

And yet, there is no doubt that Australian dramatists are prepared to grapple with the question of identity, and much of our most stimulating theatre in recent times has either dealt with questions of reconciliation or cross-cultural issues. Many of these works are produced at a fringe or community level without major subsidy. On the other hand, the commercial success of **Wogs Out Of Work**, its sequel and its television spin-off are often quoted as major breakthroughs in mainstream multicultural entertainment. And while I delight in the financial success that these shows have enjoyed, I still have the uneasy feeling that a large degree of that success has been based upon perpetuating wog stereotypes which mainstream society finds comfortable and non-threatening. Indeed to complain about the offensive travesties such as 'Con the Fruiterer' and his wife 'Marika' is interpreted as being precious and lacking a sense of humour. It seems that as long as the claim is that it is all in good fun, and no offence intended, that should be enough to make it immune from criticism.

In recent years the area of stand-up comedy has produced some rich talent including comedians from non-Anglo backgrounds such as Ernie Dingo, Rachel Berger, Austen Tayshus (Sandy Gutman), Hung Le, and George Smilovic. They have all used humour to combat stereotyping and attack assimilationist attitudes. Vince Sorrenti tells a story about working in Italy, the homeland of his parents. He had a series of gigs, one of which was to an audience of Australian tourists. His opening line was: "why don't you

all go back to where you came from?" He maintains he had been waiting thirty years to say that.

The argument often used by employers is that there are insufficient numbers of trained non-Anglo performers, and to some extent this is true. Not surprising considering that the training institutions are themselves Anglo-centric. And as is the case in many other professions and trades, overseas qualifications are not always recognised. I am also aware that in the performing arts the supply of performers always greatly outweighs the demand. Nevertheless, non-Anglo performers are under represented, and there are too many artists of excellence working as cleaners and dishwashers simply because of their ethnicity. Take the case of Dr. Chandrabhanu a dancer/choreographer/educator, born in Malaysia of mixed Eastern ancestry. For more than a decade he has been producing cross-cultural work of sustained excellence by any criteria and yet, to my knowledge, has never been invited to work for any of our mainstream performing companies. This highlights a common problem. As long as multicultural arts are seen as colourful exotica and minority cultural maintenance they absolve the mainstream companies from having to do anything about the situation. Our society and cultural life are the poorer for it.

Let me finish with a couple of anecdotes. The first concerns the Australian movie, **Phar Lap**. When it was being cast an actress with a recognisably ethnic name was submitted for consideration. She was told not to bother because the part was for an 'Australian'. The actress Anglicised her name, reapplied, and was granted an audition. She landed the part, although the screen credits used her Anglicised name. After that she reverted to her real name and happily is enjoying a very successful career. Her name is Gia Carides. Or Georgia Carr if you see **Phar Lap**.

The second concerns an actor who couldn't even get into drama school here. Undeterred, he went to America where he trained and now has

such a successful career that he is wooed by local producers for their movies. Not only is he good, but he is also bankable. His name is Anthony La Paglia.

So, what sort of career would Robert De Niro have had in Australia? He would probably have done some community theatre, some commercials for pasta and Mafia send-ups, a stint in a soap as a fruiterer, and an occasional role as a taxi driver. He would probably have had to supplement his meagre income by being a taxi driver. I doubt that he would ever have played the lead in **Taxi Driver**.