

Commentary text

Disc B (CULTURE)

A Festival of the Arts

Screen

People

Does a different background mean extra hurdles to getting screen work?

It's not easy to get into making television - as this group is doing, for the SBS series Paul Davies - the Big Questions. Television and film hold a particular fascination for many people and the industry is very competitive - everyone on the set, from the person who loads and unloads sets and props, to the on-air personalities, would have worked hard to finally get their names in the credits.

If an actor, director, or writer happens to be of non-English speaking background (NESB), it seems to be even harder. Many accomplished practitioners in the field today faced major obstacles when they started out.

Some, like Anna Maria Monticelli, who you can see elsewhere on this screen accepting an AFI award, felt her real name was a handicap in breaking into the industry. Others speak of agents refusing to list them on their books because of their different background. When she was at film school, film-maker Monica Pellizzari had to fight her teachers to complete a short with subtitles - a film which went on to international acclaim and awards.

Things have improved little since then. Director Clara Law says she was under pressure to increase the amount of English in her 1996 film Floating Life, as funding bodies believed a film with subtitles would be too hard to distribute. As actor/director Pauline Chan, who had trouble getting listed by an agency when she

first arrived, says in describing her career since migrating to Australia “.it's one step forward and two back.” (Monticelli, 1994, p 6)

Perhaps the most galling aspect for actors is the fact that any role not written specifically for someone of foreign background is too often automatically assumed by casting agents, directors and producers to be reserved for a person who fits some stereotypical idea of what an Aussie should look like - even if the mix in the streets would indicate a typical Aussie is no longer the blond, blue-eyed, European image that appears so regularly on our screens.

Some critics of current practices believe participation by NESB representatives at decision making levels - in funding bodies, hiring agencies, and television networks - is the only way to change the situation. Others are working to change the attitudes of those already in the industry - NESB or not.

Race Against Primetime (1996) is a film by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance addressed to those who make or influence casting decisions. It shows actors of a great variety of backgrounds acting out snippets of the same script. Not only do all the actors do a competent job of it, but the different interpretations of each of the parts demonstrate how each actor brings something unique to a role. Different accents provide no obstacle, perceptions of inferior training in other countries fall by the wayside. It is a powerful argument in favour of taking full advantage of the great breadth of talent that comes from a diverse society such as ours.

There is guarded optimism for the future. Pauline Chan believes Australian writers are becoming more interested in “ethnic issues or characters, because we are in the society, mixing a lot more...”.

Film director Franco di Chiera says if you really believe in what you're trying to say, you'll find an audience. "I think you have to follow your passion because it's only those unique views that are going to tap into somebody else's soul."

Further reference:

Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance Race Against Primetime (video), Sydney, MEAA, 1996.

Monticelli, Anna Maria "Pauline Chan - 'Traps' and the problems of an NESB artist - with both a wider audience and her own community", Artitude (Multicultural Arts Alliance), (5), 1994, pp 6-7.