



BEHIND THE SCREENS

FROM THE AGE OF 13, SIGRID THORNTON HAS BEEN A NEAR-CONSTANT PRESENCE ON OUR BIG AND SMALL SCREENS. IN THIS EDITED EXTRACT FROM HER 2011 LONGFORD LYELL LECTURE, SHE CHARTS THE FORTUNES OF HER CAREER AND THOSE OF THE AUSTRALIAN INDUSTRY

I'm humbled and proud to be the first person to deliver the Longford Lyell Lecture from a performer's perspective. When the NFSA asked me to speak, they reminded me that since I had been working as an actor in Australia for most of my life, the trajectory of my career lines up with the varied fortunes of the film and TV industry over that period. My career began at the age of 13, when I was auditioned by in Brisbane by Loretta Crawford from Crawford productions. At that time, the three major entities producing TV drama were the ABC, Grundys and Crawfords, all based in Melbourne or Sydney. There was certainly no possibility of forging a career as a performer in Brisbane.

Crawfords gave me the opportunity to learn the principles of filmmaking in an exciting, sometimes even experimental environment, which was also fun. The new mandatory-content regulations had created a demand for product and expertise, and because there was only a small practitioner base, many like me were thrown in the deep end to learn on the job. Reflecting on my own earlier work and that of the industry generally, I feel bound to contextualise in terms of both performance style and, more generally, the filmic style of the period. Take two of the Crawford Productions I appeared in.

Division Four, amusing as it looks to us now, was the product of writers, producers and directors who were just beginning to flex their creative muscles under the strong influence of US television productions like *Kojak* and *Hawaii Five-0*.

All the Rivers Run shows different influences – those of period British dramas like *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *The Forsyte Saga*, with their tight focus on class and manners.

Output derivative of both the US and the UK eventually opened the way for a new and genuine confidence in our unique national character – an understanding of our hybrid origins and an embracing of the more complex mongrel we were in fact becoming and learning to love.

The 1982 version of *The Man from Snowy River* was made by a team of graduates from the Crawford stable who had developed their skills on series TV. It was unashamedly pitched at a general public audience. Shunned by the serious critics, it became the highest-grossing Australian film up to that time.

There was a sizable media furore over Kirk Douglas being imported as the star, and his involvement in *Snowy* is a kind of emblem of a

debate which continues today. Do imported artists boost the box-office potential of local films? In the case of Douglas, and I suspect with most comparable examples since, I think it's unlikely. Most Australian box-office hits have broken through on the basis of qualities not enhanced or influenced by the casting of international stars.

After *Snowy*, my career took a new and exhilarating direction. The '80s was the period during which government actively intervened to encourage filmmakers to move away from ocker comedies in favour of what were considered to be uplifting reflections of our past. With the introduction of 10BA, the opportunity for Australian-English co-productions opened up and our output was dominated by period product. I found myself in the centre of the convicts, corsets and crinolines period, and I'm sure I'm associated by some with that phase to this day. Although I've worked on a long list of contemporary projects, many were overshadowed by the mainstream success of my period projects.

Somewhere in the middle of this period, I received a call from US TV producer David Jacobs, whom I later discovered was the creator of *Dallas* and *Knots Landing*. He knew my work from productions which had crossed over to international recognition, like *Snowy*, *Rivers* and *1915*, and he'd created an Australian role for me in a pilot for a period Western called *Paradise*.

I liked the script, took the role and ended up in southern California with my partner and three-year-old son, playing an Australian banker, Amelia Lawson, in post-goldrush USA. Same, same ... but different.

Until that time, I'd never had anything like that long a run in an ongoing series. It was a revelation from a number of perspectives. Firstly, I had no idea in advance of the extent to which series work would enhance my approach to craft and technique as an actor. Television gives the actor the luxury of the slow leak. I found a sort of freedom in that – a freedom to experiment. To play.

I also discovered that the differences between the US and Australian TV-making environments were few but fundamental, and they all came down to one factor: dollars. In Australia, the survival of our domestic product is determined by local-content regulations, whereas the US industry is a gargantuan money-making machine. It's a matter of protectionism versus the open market.