

This distinction had a number of interesting creative consequences. Firstly, there seemed to be a more realistic placement of the writer at the top of the artistic food chain. As well, actors had more power in the scheme of things. Their contribution was acknowledged and fostered in quite a different way from what I'd been used to.

I enjoyed the adventure of living and working in another culture. Even so, after three and a half years in the States, more primal imperatives loomed large – I fell pregnant with our second child – so we decided to come home to the bosom of the extended family.

After years of working 14-hour days, I was more than ready to take a step back. I just didn't anticipate the kind of step it turned out to be. As I'd shifted my focus to home and hearth, it was actually a good while before I realised I'd spent a considerable time in the wings. What I had considered to be healthy expectations proved unrealistic. I had fallen into the standard actor's typecasting rabbit hole. I didn't seem to embody the '90s new-wave sensibility and I admit the ensuing fallow period was confronting.

Somehow, the mainstream success I had previously enjoyed served to exacerbate the situation. In a filmmaking period distinguished by its idiosyncratic output, an actor associated with conventional popularity was anathema. I was an unfashionable casting choice.

During this enforced break, I worked on a handful of contemporary TV movies, but by the time my next creative breakthrough emerged, I was champing at the bit.

I had heard of an ABC project about a city lawyer who dropped out of urban alienation and into a seaside community. It sounded a reasonable enough foundation for a TV series.

But as soon as I read Andrew Knight and Deb Cox's marvellous pilot script, I was transported. I was very keen to be considered for the central role of Laura Gibson – damaged, self-centred, neurotic, but redeemed just frequently enough as she reveals her conflicted but open and decent core.

It does require a certain boldness of imagination for a producer or director to see the possibilities in giving an actor an opportunity to reinvent herself. Deadlocked producers were concerned that I was too recognisable as belonging to another milieu. I auditioned for *SeaChange* four times before Andrew and Deb gave me my chance. But an actor must keep moving forward – keep regenerating. Live theatre helped me do that. Simon Phillips's inspired production of David Hare's *The Blue Room* fast tracked me to another reinvention. Prior to my work with the Melbourne Theatre Company, I hadn't properly experienced the joy of an extended rehearsal period, luxuriating over text – the wonderful atmosphere of genuine play, working up a production, doing it organically from the ground up, unencumbered by the exigencies of the film set.

In terms of film performance, I like to think that theatre has made me more inventive, a little more responsive and flexible as an actor. Michael Rymer's *Face to Face*, which has been in cinemas recently, is a case in point. With no real rehearsal, and shot – like a play – over 12 consecutive days, the actor was required in this adaptation of David Williamson to bring this kind of flexibility to the table.

I never thought I'd get to do a musical, so Steven Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* was a gift. It came to me through director Stuart Maunder and Opera Australia. Stuart cast me as Desiree – arguably one of the finest female roles in music theatre – before we had even met. The show introduced me to the adventures of music theatre and in many ways it was the most challenging project I've ever worked on.

We all need to take risks; we all need to think outside the square. I found

myself involved in film-industry advocacy by default. It is not a role I chose or one I relish but I do believe that if we want to effect change, we must engage in the political process. Our film and TV industry is too valuable to be taken for granted.

So where do we find ourselves now?

We have a free-trade agreement, with ratchet provisions, convergence of platforms, a convergence review, a cultural policy in the wings and a sense that lobbying to dilute, modify or replace content quotas is in train.

We have two industries operating in tandem: one offshore, the other local. The offshore industry creates valuable jobs and training, but with no cultural or intellectual copyright accruing to Australians. The local industry, on the other hand, generates and retains the ownership of the intellectual property. Government subsidises our television and film industry primarily for cultural reasons. Actual market returns don't bear much scrutiny but Australian taxpayers are prepared to underwrite the production of Australian stories in order to see their characters reflected on their screens. We should resist the increasing demands to populate our Australian landscape with imported actors, or repackage overseas content using Australian taxpayers' money.

It's worth noting here that, in most instances, films contrived for the international marketplace fall between two stools and fail in both local and international environments.

We are rightly very proud of our actors, directors and crews who are punching well above their weight in the international arena. But are we so keen to accommodate the world that we are frightened to represent where we are? Cultural diversity, both in and outside our own country, is a powerful stimulus to imagination and creativity – they are two key elements in fostering an engaged, responsive and proactive community.

When I chaired the 2000 Victorian Film and TV Industry Taskforce, we considered it critical to nurture and develop ideas for film, TV and online – to nourish intellectual capital. And this is where the tangible financial returns are.

It is encouraging to see our producers now selling Australian formats like *Wilfred* and *Kath and Kim* to the US and other foreign territories.

The taskforce also recognised that local television is the engine room. It has the potential for a far greater audience reach than film, and if we're to have a successful local film industry and export offshore opportunities, we need a thriving TV-drama sector.

Today, the offset rebate is a very positive mechanism in giving producers equity in their projects. But industry and government need to be vigilant and exercise care in defining the elements that are to constitute an Australian film for the rebate. The push to dilute and erode Australian cast and writer involvement in 'eligible' projects could undermine the integrity and legitimacy of productions.

I believe we also need to consider the potential value of ramping up production to produce more stories on lower budgets, using the same funding pool and mechanisms. Increased output could be underpinned by quotas for the ABC and SBS, and increased quotas for subscription TV. The road ahead is full of obstacles and challenges, but actors have always been prepared to jump off the cliff – to take any kinds of risks, fuelled by the belief that they might have something unique to offer. I am proud to be part of that unpredictable tribe.

Edited extract of the Longford Lyell Lecture delivered by Sigrid Thornton on November 28 2011 at the ACMI in Melbourne. The Longford Lyell Lecture is an initiative of the National Film and Sound Archive. The full speech is available at nfsa.gov.au/about/awards-and-lectures/longford-lyell-lecture/

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